

VINEYARD CONSERVATION

SUMMER 2019

Inside: Take Back the Tap & Plastics Reduction • The Art of Conservation • Junior Bird Count • Katama Airpark History • Suburban Subdivisions Return



EST. 1965

VCS

CONNECT PROTECT
REFLECT

Reflections on a Year of Advancing Sustainability

Welcome to summer, members and friends of the Vineyard Conservation Society!

On behalf of the staff and board of VCS, I offer my sincere thanks to our members for their unwavering support in this shared endeavor, now more than fifty years in the running, to protect the land, water, and quality of life of Martha's Vineyard. And, if you are not yet a member (or missed last month's renewal letter), please consider joining with us — our voices are so much stronger together!

Reflecting on the year, I am struck by the sheer number of programs and activities VCS has pursued. We are building alliances with individuals, colleague organizations, and local government to advance shared goals in sustainability, such as improving our management of food waste, adapting to changes in the global recycling system, and addressing the present and future challenges of climate change. Much progress has been made in the area of waste reduction, in particular that associated with disposable plastic bottles, including: the expansion of a program to install water bottle refill stations in public places; our new online "Tap Map" showing their locations; and, in an exciting collaboration with the West Tisbury School, the passage of a bylaw banning single-use plastic bottles of water and soda. As reported on by the *Boston Globe* and Boston's NBC TV affiliate, it was a first-in-the-nation accomplishment for our Island's dedicated students!

More unusual (and concerning) this year have been the large number of growth-related issues where VCS has needed to step up in our environmental advocacy role. These include proposed expansions to the MV Airport and the Steamship Authority (both of the major sources of traffic on our Island), as well as the construction of a sports complex featuring plastic grass playing fields, and a proposal for dense, high-impact residential development near the Edgartown Great Pond. While we submit testimony on these issues, we are also working hard to develop strategies to address root causes. This involves building broad-based support for altering the fundamental imbalance on Martha's Vineyard, where rates of development far outpace rates of land protection. Without some kind of intervention, those trends spell trouble in the years ahead.

Finally, I am thrilled to report that we are on track to meet the \$2 million goal of our capital drive, the VCS Capacity Campaign. It is those resources that have allowed us to simultaneously advance our positive agenda while responding to the specific growth issues that pop up ever more frequently.

Read on to learn more about what has been happening in the world of Vineyard Conservation — and thank you again for your support!

Brendan O'Neill, *Executive Director*

A Growing Challenge

If we are to conserve the essential attributes of the natural and human communities on Martha's Vineyard, our present land-use trajectory is simply unsustainable. Almost ten years ago, the Martha's Vineyard Commission released their landmark *Island Plan*. Building on a large amount of data, this wide-ranging document had the ambitious task to, "Chart a course to the kind of future the Vineyard community wants." Implementation of many of the *Plan's* strategies has proven difficult; in contrast, though, few would dispute its description of the present situation or its goals for the future.

This stark prediction from the *Plan's* "Development and Growth" chapter weighs heavily on our mind:

Each year, about 600 additional acres of land are developed and 150 acres are protected as open space. If this trend continues, about 80% of the "available" land — 18,000 acres of woods or fields that we now take for granted as part of the Island's

open space — would end up being developed . . . The future of the Island depends on what happens to the land that is presently "available."

Over the past decade, that predicted ratio of development vs. land protection has largely borne out, at about 72% developed, 28% conserved. In contrast, the combination of the two, *i.e.* the total acreage finding its ultimate fate one way or the other, has been about half of what was predicted, presumably due to the global economic crisis and resulting pause in the real estate market. With no sign that the fundamental imbalance between development and conservation has shifted during the slowdown, the *Island Plan's* projection — or warning, as we see it — is more credible than ever, and should be taken seriously.

Appreciation of the value of open space, habitat, and biodiversity is high on our Island, as is the concern about the quality-of-life impacts of overdevelopment. So, what are we to make of the fact that we are still on track to

lose so much of our open space? The reasons for the imbalance have been understood for some time, and the challenge has only grown in recent years. The value of land as a real estate asset continues to soar. With that, charitable gifts of land and conservation restrictions drop off. Land Bank revenues are limited, and increasingly stretched to cover the management of property already under their stewardship. Outright purchases of land at full-market value are increasingly difficult, both for the public Land Bank and our private nonprofits.

A working group of the VCS board has been formed to weigh strategies to respond to this reality. Are there legally and politically tenable policy options for slowing development? Is there a way to tie the rate of new development to the provision of conservation offsets? Can we apply the brakes by rationing building permits? (This was tried in the past, though the limits were set so high it had little impact.) On the conservation side of the equation, can a new war chest for land protection help close the gap? Last year the Permanent Endowment launched just such a fund; please spread the word and inquire about how you can support it.

There is an important role for private property owners as well, acting on their own or with neighbors to advance their own interests while preventing the destruction of habitat. The recent acquisition of the Graham property at Mohu is a prime demonstration of how "enlightened self interest" may work to the benefit of the broader community. Be alert for opportunities to help in your neighborhood, because not every parcel, even those with vital and unique habitats, will fit within the budget or priorities of our Land Bank.

In all, two themes have emerged: (1) the urgency of the situation must be better communicated to voters and leadership, and (2) for conservation to compete in the current market, land protection work must be supplemented with more private dollars. The VCS working group is exploring how these can best be achieved.

The time for new ideas is now. Call or write us if you can help.

New Additions

VCS is growing too — welcome three new additions to the team!



Jennifer Blum's career in advertising and marketing led her to many homes around the world (New York, Chicago, Singapore, Hong Kong, California, Louisville) before becoming a Martha's Vineyard resident in 2013. As a hiking enthusiast who has been visiting the Vineyard since 1989, she has long had an appreciation for the wondrous diversity of the Island's conserved open space. Jennifer first became interested in the work of VCS through the plastic bag ban campaign, and has since taken a great interest in the "Take Back the Tap" project, climate change education, efforts to reduce waste and improve recycling, and advocacy to protect open space. Building on ten years of active work and leadership on the board of the Sheriff's Meadow Foundation and her current service on the MV Film Society board, Jennifer comes to VCS ready to contribute great energy and ideas to these and other initiatives.

Vineyard Conservation Society

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Shelley Edmundson is the Executive Director of the Martha's Vineyard Fishermen's Preservation Trust, a non-profit organization established to ensure the sustainability of the Vineyard's commercial fishing community, its heritage, and its access to local seafood for generations to come. Her relationship with the Island's fishing community began during her doctoral studies, which focused on the chan-

neled whelk (locally known as conch), a marine snail that supports one of the largest commercial fisheries on Martha's Vineyard. She continues to collaborate with local fishermen in support of the common goal to sustain healthy fish stocks and thriving fishermen, now and in the future. Our first multi-generational board member (grandfather Bud Vivian joined the VCS board in the mid-

1980s), Shelley brings a passion for open space preservation, plastics reduction, and a host of other issues.

Maisie Jarrell grew up on Martha's Vineyard, where the complex relationships between ocean and land sparked her curiosity about the natural environment. She is a rising senior at the University of Vermont, pursuing a B.S. in Environmental Studies. Passionate about finding ways to engage people of all ages in deepening their relationship with the environment, Maisie interned with a Farm to School program for elementary schools in Vermont. Returning home for the summer, she will now join VCS as an intern working in support of the Take Back the Tap initiative, in particular the rollout of the business program, as well as other projects to decrease the Island's reliance on single-use plastics.



Take Back the Tap

Progress continues on the Take Back the Tap initiative, an ongoing series of projects and educational programs to reduce the waste associated with bottled water. Our most visible effort has been the installation of water bottle refill stations across the Island, a project that is now moving into its second phase. Check out our online "Tap Map" at the VCS website to find the dozens of locations where you can now fill up with fresh, local water for free!

The new area of emphasis is on municipal buildings (libraries, Town Halls, and the Dukes County Courthouse), public parks, and other high-traffic areas. Four units are currently being installed in Oak Bluffs (thanks to a generous donation by O.B. resident Drew Newton), and two more are planned for Veteran's Park in Tisbury. Many of the recently installed and in-progress units are outdoors, which has raised additional technical challenges, but promises even greater rewards in terms of public usage. (Consider that one refill station installed last year at the Ag Hall saved over

2,800 plastic bottles across the four-day Fair. How many bottles could be saved by refill stations in town parks over the whole summer?)

This summer also marks the launch of our business outreach program, in which we are asking stores and restaurants to make tap water more accessible to customers. Those that participate will be given one of our new decals to display in their window, proudly proclaiming that they are helping make it more convenient to Take Back the Tap.

The other recent high-profile action on bottled water has been our collaboration with the students of "Plastic Free MV" in their effort to ban single-use plastic bottles. Led by faculty advisor Annemarie Ralph, the West Tisbury School students worked tirelessly, researching plastic pollution, educating the public, and creating a bylaw to be placed on the Town Meeting warrants in Aquinnah, Chilmark, and West Tisbury. Along the way, they enlisted the support of VCS. Drawing on our previous effort to ban plastic shopping bags, we offered legal, technical, and strategic assistance. It was a long campaign, but ultimately the bylaw won passage in all three towns, and the students now plan to take it before down-Island voters next year. Congratulations and good luck!

Why Take Back the Tap?

Visit our website for background on why VCS feels this is such an important issue, along with fun anecdotes like the "Tap Water Challenge" blind taste test!

West Tisbury: A First in the Nation Victory

This April, thanks to a bold and determined band of fifth and sixth graders, voters in West Tisbury had an opportunity to make history. While four other towns in Massachusetts had recently passed laws banning the sale of bottled water, the bylaw on West Tisbury's Annual Meeting warrant would be the first in the nation to extend the prohibition on single-use plastic bottles to other beverages, such as sweetened soda. Therefore, when the students of "Plastic Free MV" addressed a packed house of 352 voters, it was against a broader, even national, backdrop. Five members of the group alternated at the microphone to explain the purpose and mechanics of the bylaw:

Sixth-grader **Josie Powers** introduced the warrant article, describing the students' motivation: "It often feels like there's nothing we can do to help our environment, but limiting the amount of single-use plastic bottles is something we *can* do. When we first learned about what single-use plastic does to humans, fish, and seabirds, as well as its environmental impact and its role in climate change, we knew we had to take action."

Fifth-grader **Tasman Strom** added more background information on plastic pollution, noting the recent discovery that plastic had been found in organisms living in the very deepest parts of the world's oceans. Citing the prediction that by 2050 the ocean could contain more plastic than fish, he stated, "This is not the future we want."

Sixth-grader **Broden Vincent** then explained what exactly the bylaw would do: specifically prohibited from sale would be plastic bottles sized 34 ounces or smaller, of water or any beverage containing carbonated water, a sweetener, and/or a flavoring. The rationale for only banning smaller bottles was that many small bottles create more plastic pollution than a small number of larger bottles, and that there are readily available alternatives to single-serving bottles.

Though these students were much too young to vote, they made their impact felt on the democratic process. Prior to the introduction of an amendment to the article by **Emily Boyd** (developed through the group's discussions with local businesses), fellow fifth grader **Emma Bena** concluded the group's presentation with an impassioned plea to town voters to represent the children's interests: "We are looking to you to make a better future for us all."

As Town Meeting Moderator Dan Waters noted, it was a history-making night.

The students of Plastic Free MV learn about parliamentary procedure from West Tisbury Town Meeting Moderator Dan Waters. Photo by Samantha Look



Grace Under Fire: Plastic Free MV Face Their Toughest Challenge In Aquinnah

As they headed into the Old Town Hall in Aquinnah this May, the students of PFMV were as prepared as they could be. They had spent months researching, campaigning, and perfecting talking points. On top of that, they now had the experience of presenting at Town Meeting in West Tisbury and Chilmark — and the confidence earned from winning those votes handily. While the kids themselves were understandably nervous, many of us adults were confident this last vote would be a shoe-in.

This did not turn out to be the case.

As the kids distributed flyers on the steps of Town Hall, there was a nervous ripple in the air: one could feel that there would be real opposition here. Once inside, they met a capacity audience, unafraid to debate. The proposed bylaw was asking businesses to shoulder a significant change — and while it was broadly accepted that disposable plastics were harmful, when that change threatens harm to someone's business, their livelihood, it can be difficult to accept.

Despite being only the fifth article on the warrant, it was more than an hour before the bottle bylaw would come up. While waiting to be introduced by the moderator, the PFMV students witnessed contentious, sometimes heated debate over budget items and controversial changes in town government. When it was finally their time, the students filed in wearing their now-recognizable blue shirts and began their presentation. By this time, their remarks were well-honed, but they did add a unique closing pitch for Aquinnah, evoking the sweeping grandeur of the beach and cliffs, and making a plea to celebrate and protect this remarkable place.

After the students' presentation, the conversation opened to voters. Two business owners, worried about loss of profits, respectfully voiced opposition. Several voters had practical concerns, such as what types of alternative products were available, or technical questions, such as whether the prohibition on "distribution" would prevent someone from offering

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Katie Ruppel fills up at the new refill station outside the Chilmark Community Center. Look for more outdoor units across the Island as we continue the push to Take Back the Tap! Photo by Joan Malkin

A Living Museum: The Katama Airpark Story



In the 1980s, the specter of the South Shore Trust subdivision haunted — or motivated — conservation efforts at the Katama Plains.

then-existing rules), and create a contiguous block of public open space that would include Katama Farm and the state-owned South Beach. The initiative became known as the “Race to Save the Coastal Heathlands.”

In August of 1985, VCS presented a \$20,000 check to TNC on behalf of the Katama working committee; in November, VCS issued an additional \$60,000 check. In the end, it was the aggressive fundraising campaign conducted at that time, aimed at abutters and pilots who regularly used the airfield, that pushed the project over the top.

“A kind of Galapagos. The Katama Plains is something of a living museum.” Christopher Leahy, writing in 1983 for *Mass Audubon’s Sanctuary* magazine, encapsulated well ecologists’ feelings about one of our Island’s most precious habitats and its assemblage of rare plant and animal species. At that time however, the future of this area, in particular a small grass airfield called Katama Airpark, was in great jeopardy.

in 1979 through the joint efforts of town leaders, state agencies, and conservationists including VCS (which led the fundraising and temporarily held title), a long story for a future newsletter!

Beginning in 1924, decades of continuous use as a grass airstrip had allowed rare species — sun-dependent plants and grassland-dependent animals — to thrive. The Navy briefly took control of the airfield during the Second World War and constructed a gunnery practice range at South Beach. In 1944, the property was purchased by Edgartown resident Steven Gentle, who resumed its use as a civilian airpark, which continued for nearly four decades.

When the time came to move on, South Shore Trust offered one possible future for the land — potentially a very lucrative result for the long-time landowners. Instead, the Gentle family chose to work with conservationists. Building on their recent success at Katama Farm, that working committee (including Edo Potter, Bob Morgan, and many others) turned its attention to the airpark. The shared goal was to protect the rare habitat, fend off development (120 units were allowed under

In 1981, VCS secured a 12-month option from the Gentle family to purchase the airfield for \$1 million. The option expired before it could be exercised, but momentum for conservation was building. In September of 1982, a report on the ecological significance of the airpark was prepared by the Natural Heritage Program of the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. Based on these findings, the Nature Conservancy (TNC) became a partner the following year. TNC agreed to facilitate the purchase negotiations and temporarily take title, with the ultimate intention of transferring ownership to the town while retaining a management right.

But with land values on Martha’s Vineyard spiraling upward, the goalposts began to move. In just a few years, the price for the Gentle family interest had escalated to \$1.575 million, while the price to secure two additional airpark parcels (owned by Nickerson and Atwood, totaling about 68 acres) also rose. The total project cost to secure the land (i.e., exclusive of ongoing soft costs) had risen to approximately \$3 million.

The conservation team, working with the Town of Edgartown, prepared an application for a grant from the state Self-Help Program. Funded through the Division of Conservation Services of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), the grant would require local voters to approve a funding match equal to one-third of the total amount.

In early 1984, EOEA awarded the town a \$1.5 million grant towards purchase of the 190-acres of airpark holdings. But the conservation team needed to return to EOEA for additional funds, eventually securing what was at the time the largest Self-Help grant ever awarded at \$1.85 million. The town’s match was \$625,000.

Using a combination of grants and loans from the R.K. Mellon Foundation and the Goodhill Foundation, TNC placed \$1.575 million into an escrow account in January of 1985 to secure the larger Gentle parcel. To finish the project, though, the gap that needed to be covered by private fundraising was wide, some \$400,000.

In the final arrangement, the Town of Edgartown purchased the Nickerson and Atwood parcels outright. The Gentle parcel was conveyed to the town by TNC, who retained some of the Self-Help dollars as cost recovery for the project. The town granted TNC a conservation restriction on the parcel, assigning management rights; TNC has ably stewarded the land since.

Totaling 190 acres, the Katama Plains Conservation Area was officially dedicated in 1987. Among others involved in the project, Edo Potter helped lead the ceremony to commemorate this milestone of Vineyard conservation. Later that year, TNC prepared the first of their stewardship management reports for the airfield, including the recommendation that prescribed fire be employed to maintain the habitat in an open condition.

Postscript: Last summer, the grasshopper sparrow (Ammodramus savannarum), a protected rare species, was sighted at Katama for the first time in more than a decade. It demonstrates the importance of taking the long view in ecological conservation, and is a hopeful sign for the future of our local “Galapagos.”

(Grace Under Fire, Continued)

plastic bottles to guests in their own home. One suggested the vote be done by Australian (secret) ballot, saying “How could anyone vote against these cute kids and their hard work?” — a very fair point.

The majority, though, spoke of a deep-seated belief that it was the environment, not revenue, that was most at risk. One mom was visibly affected as she expressed gratitude to the students for taking action, and a sense of disappointment that her generation was not doing more.

In the end, when the vote was called it was nearly unanimous — the students had pulled off the hat trick, taking plastic bottles off the shelves across the western half of the Island. We are obviously proud of their success, but also truly happy that in this Town Meeting season — especially in Aquinnah, where they faced real adversity and handled it with grace — our Island’s students got an important lesson in civics and the power of perseverance. Now we hope that the resulting chorus of “ayes,” rolling down the hills from West Tisbury, Chilmark, and Aquinnah, will be loud enough to carry down-Island, a serenade for Town Meetings next year.

In 1978, Edgartown voters had approved a ballot referendum to withdraw from the protection of the regional planning agency, the MV Commission (MVC). The following year, as if on cue, a Connecticut-based developer named South Shore Trust pounced. By the time the town rejoined the MVC in 1984, the Trust’s planned 51-lot subdivision was a *fait accompli*. The development would go forward without Commission review (escaping the MVC’s power to impose limits or conditions), and within a few years the construction of dozens of large suburban-style houses, haphazardly arranged on the Katama Plains, was well underway.

In the intervening years, while Edgartown’s “living museum” of coastal habitat stood unprotected, conservationists were rightly concerned that the rest of our “Galapagos” would be lost. The specter of the imminent South Shore Trust project cast a long shadow over the larger tract of sandplain habitat to the east at the Katama Airpark. Just beyond the Airpark is Katama Farm, conserved

Flanked by Herring Creek Farm to the west and Katama Farm to the east, conservation of the Katama Airpark allowed for the creation of a large contiguous stretch of globally rare sandplain habitat. The South Shore Trust subdivision can be seen at the upper left, a triangular development between the airfield and the northern end of Herring Creek Farm. *Aerial photo by David Foster*



Meetinghouse Place

The Return of the Suburban Subdivision

A long-dormant threat has recently re-emerged: the development of suburban-style subdivisions. Perfectly timed to capitalize on (and exacerbate) the promised growth from plans to expand air travel and ferry service to the Island, “Meetinghouse Place” proposes to build 34 luxury homes on 54 acres near the Edgartown Great Pond. The proposal is currently under review by our regional planning agency, the Martha’s Vineyard Commission, as a Development of Regional Impact (DRI).

The purpose of DRI review is for the Commission to weigh project benefits against detriments, deciding whether to approve, disapprove, or approve with conditions a given proposal. The first of the public hearings on “DRI 682” occurred on February 7, and VCS was there, testifying in opposition to the plan (see box). Across subsequent hearings this spring, the project details have changed, generally becoming somewhat less egregious (for example, a reduction from seven bedrooms to five). Our primary concerns remain, however, including overall density, house size, energy and water consumption, wastewater, and, perhaps most important, biodiversity impacts due to the high level of habitat fragmentation proposed. We will continue to monitor this development proposal and update our testimony as necessary.

In the more recent context of second-home development, what Meetinghouse Place proposes — large, luxurious houses on small lots in a rural (for the time being) environment — is a bit unusual. Over the past few decades, land appraisers have determined that the “highest and best use” for most undeveloped land on Martha’s Vineyard was for creating large rural estates — so-called “kingdom lots.” On an island where privacy and appreciation of nature is paramount, creating fewer building sites could actually produce **more** real estate value than subdivision into as many lots as allowed under zoning, particularly when costs of improvements (road construction, sewage, power, etc.) are included. Only time will tell whether this particular proposal

is more of an aberration or a harbinger of things to come.

In many towns, zoning alone would prevent this proposed subdivision, due to the large minimum lot sizes required outside of town centers. But not so in Edgartown, where a diversity of zoning exists, intended to provide people of more modest means the opportunity to own a home. Zoning there ranges from a 3-acre minimum lot size down to one-half-acre, or 20,000 square feet, known as “R-20.” This zoning persists today in areas near the Edgartown Great Pond. However, instead of providing affordability, one of the last large R-20s in town was just acquired by this Utah-based developer for the purpose of building out luxury houses.

In the broader scope of the struggle to shape the future of the Vineyard, the debate over Meetinghouse Place feels a bit old fashioned, a flashback to the subdivision fights of the 1980s (e.g., the story of the Katama Plains on the previous page). Then, as now, we see a clash of priorities between those focused on the long-term, seeking to preserve shared natural resources and an Island way of life, and those focused on the immediate, working to feed new stock into a booming real estate market as quickly and efficiently as possible. Yet under that takeaway lies a message about our changing economy, conservation challenges, and human needs.

Simply put, times have changed. As compared to the subdivisions of the 1980s, including those at the Katama Plains (whether built or averted), the houses of this proposed development would be larger and more luxurious, and thus further out of the reach of year-round residents. We hope that our colleagues who have undertaken the noble challenge of advocating for and providing affordable housing will see the bigger picture beyond the substantial cash payment the MVC would exact from the developer (“off-site mitigation”) and join us in opposition. Building more luxury housing — the primary driver of our need for labor and resulting housing shortage — on the very land that was intended to provide affordability raises a painful

question: Where is the subsidized housing, whether paid for via development exactions, philanthropic giving, or new taxes, supposed to go?

Developments such as Meetinghouse Place suggest that, going forward, building single-family homes on undeveloped lots may be an impractical model for affordable housing, no matter the lot size allowed by zoning. Instead, VCS (and many others) have long advocated for creating more environmentally sustainable, and economically practical, housing by increasing density in town centers, building up where reasonable (“top-of-the-shop” is an excellent model

downtown), and the creative rehabilitation of existing housing. Sustaining our natural environment and our human population need not be mutually exclusive!

In an interesting historical footnote, Edgartown’s diverse zoning played a role in securing a landmark conservation outcome by insulating the town against legal attacks. During the 1990s battle over the fate of Herring Creek Farm (which ended well with the Nature Conservancy brokering a conservation sale), developers attacked town zoning as a deliberate effort to “zone-to-exclude.” The state’s high court rejected their argument, pointing to the existence of smaller lot sizes — such as the R-20 zoning on Meetinghouse Way.

Walking Through History

Keephikkon to Cape Higgon, Belgian Congo to Spring Point

On Martha’s Vineyard, success in land conservation very often relies on the collaboration of multiple organizations — public and private, small and large, local and global — with distinct missions and complementary strengths. This spirit of cooperation was reflected in our 2018-2019 Winter Walks. We kicked off the series in November with an exploration of the conservation lands around the Wakeman Center, home to the offices of VCS, Sheriff’s Meadow Foundation, and the Garden Club (with the building housing BiodiversityWorks just next door). Then in December we joined with the staff of the MV Land Bank for a hike through their Waskosims Rock Reservation, where VCS advocacy fended off multiple subdivision plans throughout the late 1970s and ‘80s, buying time for the Land Bank to ultimately conserve the property with a \$3.5 million purchase in 1990.

January’s walk took us to Island Grown Initiative’s Thimble Farm for a hike on nearby conservation land and to learn about IGI’s pilot projects in large-scale composting. Scaling up from this to an even larger composting system is an important next step in improving our Island’s management of food waste. We wrapped up in March with another great collaboration with Featherstone Center for the Arts (who also joined us at our Earth Day after party) in Oak Bluffs. After walking the nearby conservation lands owned by the MV Land Bank, we returned to the studio, where Featherstone’s Coral Shockey led kids and adults alike in a nature-based painting project.

In February, on a clear and cold morning, about forty intrepid hikers joined our guest leader Constance Messmer to walk the trails, cliffs, and beaches of Spring Point in Chilmark. Dovetailing with VCS’s recent initiatives in plastics waste reduction, trash bags were distributed to all. By the end of the afternoon, several large barrels of plastic debris were removed from the beaches.

Spring Point encompasses an area called Cape Higgon, which is steeped in both ancient and modern history. It is the heart of what the Wampanoag people called Keephikkon, an Algonquin

word meaning, “something that shuts in or encloses.” But shuts in what — or whom? And why? We may never know for certain.

Keephikkon’s “one-and-a-half English square mile” area described in 17th century deeds was bounded by the “Place called Weskeseems” in the center of the Island (today known as Waskosims Rock), where a stone wall was constructed running west (the “Middle Line”). Prior to the English predominance in that area, were the native people “shut in” to the north side of the stone wall enclosure? It would likely have been an alien concept for the Wampanoag residents of the time.

By the beginning of the 18th century, more than 500 acres of Keephikkon was in the ownership of the Tilton and Hammett families, who lived there for the next 200 years. By the mid-19th century, maps began labeling the nearby headland with the anglicized “Cape Higgon.”

In 1913, the land was sold to Charles Lowell Putnam, a pediatric surgeon from New York, who took up residence with his wife Angelica, their biological son Patrick and six adopted siblings, three governesses, and many animals (common and exotic), including ponies, horses, cows, goats, sheep, and monkeys. The Putnam Shetland Pony Farm was in operation up to the time of Angelica’s death in 1940. Patrick, a noted anthropologist who studied the Pygmy society in the Congo, died in Africa at age 49.

When Charles Putnam’s second wife Margot died in 1969, she left the land to Harvard Medical School, evidently with no clear directive toward conservation. Harvard subsequently sold it to the Boston real estate firm LandVest for \$620,000, who developed the land into approximately 40 house sites and renamed it “Spring Point.” Harvard and LandVest’s gain was not a total loss for conservation, at least as compared to subdivisions elsewhere on the Vineyard, as neighborhood covenants at Spring Point today protect 130 acres as Common Land.

*For further reading on the Wampanoag and early English history of Keephikkon, see Charles Banks (1911), *The History of Martha’s Vineyard, Volume II*.*

This is Where it Stops

“I am a resident of Edgartown, but I feel that I am more of a citizen of Martha’s Vineyard, the whole Island. The whole Island is my backyard and I care very much about it.

This is one subdivision, but not the only one. Taking the whole Island view, these subdivisions appear shoulder to shoulder. This is just one more of the tiny insults making us less of a ‘place apart.’

These subdivisions are symptoms. The cause is unchecked growth. The evidence is there: we need to do something about growth. Look at the Island Plan and its survey results: 95% of people asking for a future with more open space, 5% for more development.

It is the job of the MVC to act. Now is the time — do your job. This is where it stops.”

Testimony of VCS board president Jim Athearn on the Meetinghouse Way subdivision proposal

VCS News Round-Up

RECYCLING DEMYSTIFIED

When VCS helped establish the first recycling programs on Martha's Vineyard in the early 1970s, the concept was still relatively novel. But in the ensuing decades a global network of shipping, sorting, and processing developed, and by the early 2000s effective recycling programs were widespread across America. On our Island, residents and visitors had grown very comfortable with an easy single-stream system, and the overall participation rate is now very high.

Today that global system has broken down, and while the local participation rate remains high, many people are now struggling under new, more restrictive, and occasionally confusing or contradictory rules. Last fall a working group was formed, initially a VCS committee, but soon joined by leaders of the "Green Team" of the West Tisbury Congregational Church. This spring, we hosted a recycling presentation and Q&A, "Recycling Demystified," at the West Tisbury Library. While the event succeeded in sharing a great deal of information, due to the complexity of our current reality many attendees may have departed more, rather than less, "mystified." We are now working together to study the issue, provide education for the public, and ultimately create a more effective and sustainable recycling system for our Island. We know we can do better!

WELLNESS DAY & FIRST FRIDAY: BYOB TISBURY!

For this year's "Wellness Day" at the Tisbury School, six classes participated in a community service project in conjunction with our "Bring Your Own Bag" campaign. Students decorated canvas shopping bags with the end goal of sharing them — and an inspirational BYOB message — with the public. VCS staffers Signe Benjamin and Samantha Look began each class with the problems of single-use plastics and ocean pollution. Students then joined in a wide-ranging discussion about how young people across the globe have been participating in collective action like climate protests, and also how individual choices at home can add up to make an impact.

The following week, VCS joined in Vineyard Haven's "First Friday" event, held every June on Main Street, to distribute the bags. Apart from continuing to spread the word about plastic pollution, the specific message this time was to encourage shoppers to BYOB everywhere — not just to the grocery store, but to other retail stores and takeout restaurants.

THE EARTH DAY BEACH CLEAN-UP

Thanks to our friends at Featherstone Center for the Arts, this year's Earth Day Beach Clean-up featured something new: a crowd-sourced art project. Some

of the garbage collected during the clean-up was repurposed as art materials, escaping its dumpster destination to find a more meaningful end as part of a large collage. The sole of a shoe, tattered chip bags, tangled bits of rope, water bottles, and — of course — lots

Maisie Jarrell and Hazel Hearn spread the BYOB message at Vineyard Haven's "First Friday." The VCS table, covered with more than 100 canvas bags for giveaway, drew quite a crowd.



of ribbon and balloons, were arranged into a vibrant, textured, and appropriately trashy topographical map of Martha's Vineyard. Once the cerulean blue ocean was painted on, the result was *almost* pretty.

All of that garbage superimposed on the familiar silhouette of our Island was a powerful reminder of why we do this year after year. Many thanks are due to Coral Shockey and Posie Haeger of Featherstone for this fun addition to the party, as well as to our gracious hosts, Oak Bluffs' Sailing Camp Park, and our wonderful sponsors and supporters, Friends of Sengekontacket, The FARM Institute, Scottish Bakehouse, Sharky's Cantina, The Black Dog, MV Bank, MVY Radio, Bruno's, MV Refuse District, the town public works and highway departments, and all the beach team supervisors and individual volunteers who make it all happen. Thank you!

THE JUNIOR BIRD COUNT

A relatively young collaboration among BiodiversityWorks, Mass Audubon, Sheriff's Meadow Foundation, The Trustees, and VCS, this year's Junior Bird Count was marked by warm weather and bright sun. Inspired by the international Christmas Bird Count, our "junior" event was originally held around the same time. But after an inaugural year that found intrepid young birders enduring 10-degree temperatures, and a follow-up where they marched through snow waist-deep to the smaller of them, the decision was made to move the date to a more reasonable time.

The young birders certainly appreciated the change, as demonstrated by the discarded jackets and shoes and occasional breaks to roll around in the sand at the beach. A total of 215 birds were spotted, representing 28 species including killdeer, scoters, and loons. After a morning of hiking and crawling around the plains of Long Point, teams returned to the Visitor Center to tally up their finds, make suet bird feeders, and enjoy some well-deserved snacks.

NATURE AS INSPIRATION

This Memorial Day weekend marked the fifth year of a collaborative effort with the MV Film Society to bring to the Island thought-provoking films on humanity's relationship with the natural world. The festival featured eight new screenings, music, art, and panel discussions and Q&A sessions with filmmakers, guest experts, and community members. Our most sincere thanks to all of the attendees, guest speakers, and especially to Richard Paradise of the Film Society for making it all happen!

A unique addition to this year's festival was an in-depth climate change panel discussion, featuring State Representative Dylan Fernandes, Ben Robinson of the MV Commission, climate scientist Zach Zobel of the Woods Hole Research Center, Owen Favreau, high school junior and co-leader of this year's Youth Climate Summit, and moderated by our staffer Jeremy Houser. The discussion ranged from local efforts to raise awareness, to regional and



The "Trashy Island" project was just one of three recent collaborations with Featherstone. Our sincerest thanks are also in order to their talented arts educators for a wonderful conclusion to the March Winter Walk, and for assistance in presenting The Art of Conservation show, lending a truly professional touch to properly showcase the work of the students.



Embracing tranquility at the Junior Bird Count. When quiet of body and voice, the wildlife will come to you.

state-wide actions to address this existential threat, to a lighthearted aside on how best to invest one's retirement fund in such an uncertain world.

Dr. Zobel opened by framing the gravity of the challenge: because of the persistence of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, "Even if we went to zero-carbon today, climate impacts will be pronounced." Later, Dr. Zobel described his collaboration with the investment firm Wellington Management, where he develops quantitative models to improve risk assessment and better understand how climate change will impact global capital markets.

Demonstrating that he is anything but the cliché of a "light-on-the-details" politician, Rep. Fernandes offered considerable insight into how the legislative process works, where funding comes from and how it is apportioned, and the history and details of a host of measures that have positioned Massachusetts as a leader in renewable energy production and coastal resiliency planning.

Presenting an overview of the many signs of progress across the globe, Ben Robinson stressed the need for collective action to address a problem too large, and too systemic, to handle through individual action alone. Owen Favreau related his work with the Protect Your Environment (PYE) club at the high school, which he described as a vehicle for cultivating hope in the generation that will have to live with the impacts of a climate crisis. In the face of dire predictions, he sees a determination on the part of youth to engage and respond to challenges. For a topic that often seems overwhelming and grim, the afternoon ended on a note of something approaching optimism.

THE ART OF CONSERVATION: CONNECT

Now in its 6th year, the theme for this year's high school art contest represented a return to its roots. Encouraging students to reflect on the value of nature and what it means to them — to *connect* with their environment — has always been the guiding principle of The Art of Conservation.

Winners were honored with an awards ceremony held during the Nature as Inspiration film festival. An excellent crop of entries this year yielded five First Prizes, taken home by **Jenaleigh Griffin**, **Julianne Joseph**, and **Kyle Peters** for photography, and **Indigo Giambattista** and **Anabelle Cutrer** for paintings. In addition, Special Distinctions were awarded to **Rhanna De Oliveira**, **Kaleb Hatt**, **Anna Graham**, **Emma Van Lohuizen**, **Thea Keene**, **Kenny Cook**, and **Sky-la Harthcock**. After the judging, the staff at VCS also selected an additional favorite, a photograph by **Emily De Souza**. Winning works were displayed throughout the festival and for most of the following month at the Film



Nature as Inspiration climate change panel (L-R), Zach Zobel, Ben Robinson, Owen Favreau, Jeremy Houser, and Dylan Fernandes.

Center's Feldman Family Artspace. If you missed them, visit our website to view all of the wonderful work of our young artists!

Special thanks are due to: judges Cindy Kane, celebrated local artist, Monina von Opel, curator of the MV Hospital art collection, and Phil Wallis, director of the MV Museum; teachers Chris Baer and Tiffney Shoquist, along with others from the MVRHS Art Department; local artists Melissa Knowles and Susie White for working personally with students as they explored this year's theme; and the Martha's Vineyard Cultural Council for financial support.

YELLOW HOUSE CR

Not every form of land protection conserves vast expanses of open space and fragile habitat. This year, VCS has been working with the Town of Edgartown on a unique request, to permanently protect with a Conservation Restriction (CR) a tiny portion of an in-town parcel located next to the Town Hall.

Recording a CR on the "Yellow House" parcel is a requirement of the Community Preservation Act (CPA) funding used to purchase the property for public purposes. VCS assistance is needed because the town cannot legally own both the land and the restriction protecting it. The CPA grant requires that the CR "run to the benefit of a nonprofit organization selected by the town." The VCS decision to cooperate with the town offers an opportunity to sow goodwill, and to use the Main Street location to educate the public about CRs, CPA funds, and the work of VCS.

GREATER BALANCE NEEDED IN CPA FUNDING

The Community Preservation Act (CPA) is a Massachusetts law that enables towns to create a dedicated Community Preservation Fund by adding a surcharge of up to 3% on property tax bills; the state will then match the funds raised locally. More than 150 towns have adopted the CPA, including all six on Martha's Vineyard. Once adopted, a committee is tasked with making annual recommendations to voters at Town Meeting about how to spend funds.

CPA funds are spent in three core areas: open space preservation and recreation, affordable housing, and historic preservation. By law, each category receives a minimum allocation of 10% of the total fund each year, with the remaining 70% to be spent (or reserved for future spending) in any area. In recent years, very little CPA funding has gone toward conservation — typically the minimum 10% required. In practice, the CPA has often been utilized as a Town's *de facto* affordable housing fund (receiving up to 80% of the total). While this development is certainly understandable given the high cost of housing on the Island, we would like to see a more proportional amount designated for conservation.

THANK YOU JENNIFER!

Congratulations to VCS litigation counsel Jennifer Roberts, who was confirmed this winter to serve as Associate Justice of the Land Court Department of the Massachusetts Trial Court. For the last 20 years, Jennifer has helped lead the legal defense effort to protect the globally-imperiled heathlands at Moshup Trail in Aquinnah. VCS registered a major victory at the state Supreme Judicial Court in April of 2016, but skirmishes in that fight continue. Jennifer, thank you for your service to VCS, and best wishes in your new role!



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Front cover: North Shore painting by Danielle Middleton

Below: Photo collage by Rachel Salop

Two favorites from the 2019 Art of Conservation Contest (see pg. 11)

