

VINEYARD CONSERVATION

SUMMER/FALL 2024



Inside: Art of Resilience, Vineyard Lawns, New Ponds Film, Tap Map Update, Beach BeFriends, & Much More

Vineyard Conservation Society

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Relationship Status: *It's Complicated*



Summer on the Vineyard. I have long been a lover of the warmer half of the year. I think my New England temperament – at least the stereotype of it – does well to be softened a bit by the heat. For me, summer is about the lushness of the sensory experience: the smells of the earth awakened from winter slumber, the kindness of the ocean on my skin, abundant life and the invitation to interact with nature, lingering there in the expanded length of days. These experiences are a daily celebration of place – this place – and what it gives to each of us, whether for a moment, a summer visit, or a lifetime. A drop of nature in the ocean, this Island both grounds and elevates our days, creating a connection to something bigger than ourselves.

We all have our own relationships with this iconic season, a connection that may track true as a compass point or evolve over time. Our relationships also have smaller undulations, vibrating through the course of a day, from the tranquility of a sunrise swim to the frustration of an afternoon errand foiled by impenetrable traffic.

Increasingly I am finding my relationship with the Vineyard summer, and even the Island in general, a bit complicated. Our gauzy summer days are now punctuated by whispers – and shouts – from an island straining under the weight of all of our love. Summer activity has already reached a level of density where the community is unsure about where to hold a wedding or play pickleball. More ominous and heartbreaking, recent large scars blight the roadsides, speaking to the consequences of creating space for the wants and needs of a growing population. The myriad problems associated with growth – compromised water quality, loss of biodiversity and habitat, traffic and jet noise, increasing house size and cost of living, and all the rest – are most obvious in the summer.

Or maybe that complicated feeling is because we live in complicated times. I want to protect the Island. But I also want everyone to love it and to have the benefit of all that it offers – to experience nature, to feel the comfort of its grandness and its intimacy. In a twist of irony, that love, and all that often goes along with it (houses, cars, expanded infrastructure), can chip away at the essence of what drew us here in the first place.

Top: "The Freshness of the Air"

Watercolor by Anecia Scarlet for the 2024 Art of Conservation

“It is time for a change” is a refrain echoed, and passed like a baton, from one generation to the next. It echoes through the nearly six decades of our advocacy work. But frankly, at this point, it is long past time.

For VCS, this means we accelerate our pursuit of tools to limit the scale of development through policy change. We support and celebrate our public Land Bank and private land trusts, and encourage landowners to consider conservation restrictions. We testify in support of open space protection and against inappropriate development proposals; we advocate for sustainable approaches to climate change mitigation and adaptation. In addition, VCS encourages us all to do what we can individually to better protect our Island environment, such as reducing our consumption of resources and energy, and reimagining how we care for lawns, keeping chemicals and fertilizers out of our watersheds. In short, VCS (alongside our colleagues) is calling for an era of heightened stewardship. I hope you enjoy reading about some of these efforts in the following pages.

Ultimately, I want to return to gratitude for you, the VCS Members and friends who contribute to this work. Whether you have joined a Beach BeFriends clean-up outing, used a water bottle refill station during a summer visit, turned to a chemical-free yard, worked with us or another organization to protect your land for the future, or attended local meetings to help chart a more sustainable future – thank you for adding to the Island’s environmental voice and joining in the effort to protect this special place.

And special it is. Deep in the latter half of these long summer days, I close my eyes and smell earth and vegetation, salt air. I picture twirls of feeding swallows, choreographing and corralling the latest hatching, curls of waves and bent, shining, sea-licked beach grass. While it is important to recognize the problems that need solving, it is even more important to recognize and celebrate our connection to the Island. That is what ignites the passion to know this place well enough to not just identify problems, but work to solve them.

Samantha Look, Executive Director

A Lawn Redrawn

Speaking of Vineyard relationships, one that could stand to be improved is the one between the Island’s natural environment and those spaces right around our houses. The suburban ideal of a lawn – a uniform, emerald green carpet stretching from one house to another – is an ecological dead zone. Habitat loss, declining biodiversity, and harmful algal blooms in our ponds are all consequences of the pursuit of that aesthetic. And why would we want the Island to look like everywhere else, anyway? Let’s instead make Island chic the Vineyard Lawn – smaller, chemical-free, and beautiful because of its diversity of life.

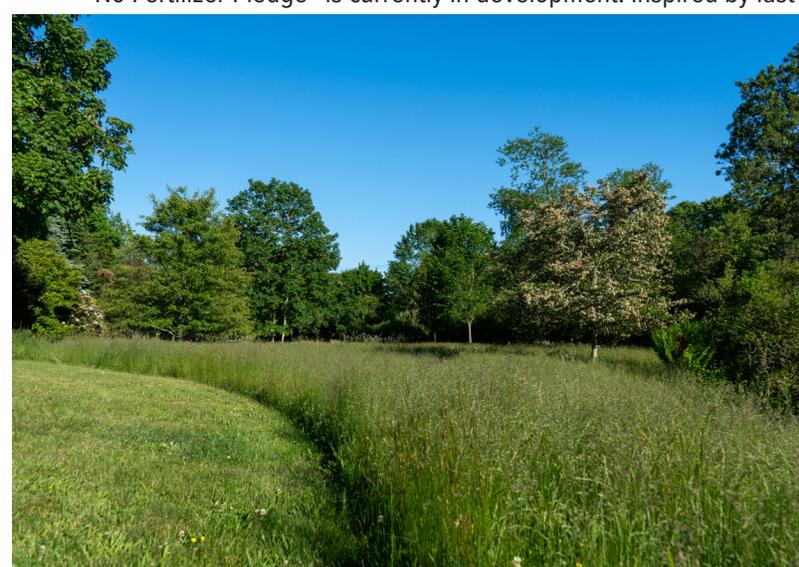
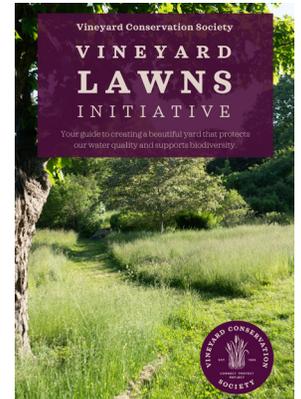
Thanks to funding from the Edey Foundation, our Vineyard Lawns initiative has been able to make a large leap forward in 2024, with a variety of new projects and strengthened programs helping build support for that vision. A wonderful new booklet (pictured at right) full of lawn care tips and more was just completed, and a “No Fertilizer Pledge” is currently in development. Inspired by last

year’s pioneering effort from the Abel’s Hill Association, the pledge is exactly as it sounds: to voluntarily agree, as individuals or a neighborhood, to use no fertilizer at all on our lawns. Because fertilizer is the second largest source (after wastewater) of the excess nitrogen contaminating our coastal ponds, simply doing without it is one of the most powerful actions we can take to improve their ecological health.

We are also bringing the message to the public directly. Events such as the Climate Action Fair are important opportunities to spread the word (special thanks to Andrew Wiley for being our guest expert for the “ask a landscaper” feature at our table). Our “Love Song for the Vineyard Lawn” presentation has been hosted by five Island libraries, and we are now taking it on a tour through homeowners’ and neighborhood associations across the Island. Please contact us if you or your organization would like to host a Vineyard Lawns talk – and thank you to everyone who already has!

On a parallel track, an exciting new project encouraging ecologically-minded landscaping more broadly is also in the works. Thanks to coordination by the MV Commission, and funding provided by the state Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness program and the Vineyard Vision Fellowship, VCS is collaborating with BiodiversityWorks, Polly Hill Arboretum, and MVC staff to develop new educational tools to promote the merits of native plants and smaller lawns. Materials will be available soon, so keep an eye out!

Photo by Zada Clarke



Finding a Better Balance

An interview with filmmaker Ollie Becker

Three years ago, Circuit Arts filmmaker Ollie Becker teamed up with VCS to tell the story of the Island's Great Ponds – their ecological and cultural significance, the threats they face, and what we must do to save them. One of the true highlights of 2024 was the release of the second installment of the series, *Finding a Better Balance*, which dives deeper into the work underway to begin restoring our coastal waters. With a two-part premiere event during the MV Film Festival in March, followed by numerous “pay-what-you-can” screenings throughout the summer and fall, the new film is certainly making an impact.

With Mr. Becker now a member of the VCS Board, it wasn't too much trouble to get an interview with the film's director – thanks Ollie!

In the opening of the first episode of the series, *On Our Watch*, you comment on how much the ponds had changed during the years you were away from the Vineyard. However, a lot else was changing during that time on the Island: bigger houses and lawns, more cars and heavy trucks, more jet noise ... the works, really. What was it about the ponds specifically that stood out over all the rest of those potentially jarring changes?

Most development in the past 20 years has happened on private property. With the ponds, it's an interesting intersection, where you have the impacts of how we use our private property directly affecting a public resource. So it seemed to me like a more interesting way to talk about the ways the Vineyard is being developed.

Why did you decide to partner with VCS on this project?

VCS was the only environmental organization I knew of that also has a strong track record in advocacy. We thought that they would be an ideal partner because they could lend that perspective to the film, and also, since they're always collaborating with other environmentalists, VCS could help us connect with the scientists and ecologists out there in the field doing the work.

What was the most surprising thing you learned through the process of making these films?

What surprised me most was how much the entire Island cares about the ponds. I thought the interest may just be from those who live on them, or work on them, but the response to these films has made it clear that concern about the health of the Great Ponds is truly Island wide.

Is there anything that you still wish you could learn – a hard question that the experts interviewed so far haven't been able to answer?

There are so many unanswered questions. These systems are infinitely complex (to me at least), but the various groups working on the



ponds daily are making real discoveries. They're finding answers, it just takes time.

Has the process of making the series made you more optimistic about the future of the ponds?

Yes and no ... it's given me a much closer perspective on how degraded they are, but I also learned that compared to many other communities, like those on the Cape, our ponds are in very good shape. But what leaves me with the most hope is seeing first-hand how many talented people are working to restore them.

Stepping back, what does “optimism” actually mean here? Do you think we can restore the ponds to their natural state, or something close to it, or are we just trying to keep things from getting worse?

I think restoration is absolutely possible. Even though it fluctuates a lot, Edgartown Great Pond has seen a major comeback. I think it will continue to improve as more studies are done, and more homeowners become aware of how they can help.

How do you respond to someone who says they wish they could do something to help, but since they don't own their home they don't really have much say over what happens with the lawn, much less how the wastewater is handled?

You can help spread the word to those who do, but more importantly, you can volunteer with organizations working directly on the issues. Try to get involved with habitat restoration efforts like planting eelgrass, which helps absorb nitrogen and sequester carbon. Or get involved with the advocacy around town bylaws or other measures aimed at solving the problem.

On a totally different note, about two years ago you joined the VCS Board of Directors. Nonprofits often struggle to recruit younger folks like yourself, people who are right there in the busy season of life ... has it been tough to juggle board service with all the other commitments?

Yes, I am definitely overcommitted, and often feel like I can't engage at the level I would like to. But I also know that doing something is better than nothing. I'm fortunate to have some flexibility in my

schedule, and that lets me attend most board meetings. One issue is that most nonprofits I'm aware of hold their meetings during traditional work hours, and that instantly rules out so many potential participants. That should be reevaluated if an organization is serious about recruiting a diverse board.



Top: A summer cut of Tisbury Great Pond opens the pond to the ocean, exchanging warmer, nitrogen-enriched water for cooler, cleaner seawater. (Photo by Ollie Becker)

Left: Screenings of *Finding a Better Balance* are followed by an audience Q&A with the film's director, along with guests from VCS and other organizations. (Photo by Tim Persinko, courtesy Circuit Arts. L-R: David Bouck of Great Pond Foundation, Ollie Becker, and Jeremy Houser of VCS)

Your passion for the health of the Island's ponds is expressed so well through the two films, and also in person, talking after the many screening events over these last two years. But while we've got you here, is there another environmental issue facing the Vineyard that is near the top of your concerns?

I think there are a handful. Clearly, the impacts of climate change are felt in so many ways here – storms, rising sea levels, etc. Also, the scale of the development of offshore wind is staggering when you see the maps and realize just how much change is happening off our

coast. The benefits of wind power are obvious, and transitioning to clean energy is crucial, but we need to watch this situation with a critical eye.

Maybe that's the next Circuit Films/VCS collab! What do you think?

I hope so! I think that this has been a really impactful collaboration, and there are so many more stories to tell about this Island and the environment and culture here – two things that VCS has been so instrumental in protecting.

Natural Wonders

by Jeff Scheuer

My floundering baseball team had the night off; but I'm also a fan of the Vineyard Conservation Society, and a film buff, so I had multiple reasons to head to the Martha's Vineyard Film Center to catch the Norwegian documentary *Songs of Earth*. The screening was part of the 10th annual "Nature as Inspiration" film festival, co-sponsored by VCS and the MV Film Society.

Afterwards, Samantha Look of VCS spoke about the natural beauty of the Vineyard and why we care about it. Sam made the usual plug for conservation, preservation, and stewardship. "Usual," only because those challenges haven't gone away. But one could be forgiven, at first, for sensing a slight disconnect.

Set amid the majestic snowfields, glaciers, and fjords of Norway, *Songs of Earth* is something of a *tour de force*: a meditation on the fragility of human life in the palm of nature, as well as on aging and coming to terms with it. The musical score is elegant, and the scenery over-the-top beautiful; drone photography affords a virtual glider-ride through nature in its rawest, in fact frozen, form.

Norway is amazing, and one day I'd like to go there. But for some reason, on the night in question I was on the Vineyard instead. And Sam Look's bold segue from Norway to the Vineyard got me thinking that maybe it's not all that far. Or maybe it's far but connected. Come to think of it, maybe everything's connected. I think that's one of the lessons of engaging with nature, even cinematically.

Most of us are hardwired to love nature in one way or another. *Songs of Earth* reminds us that nature doesn't return our love; it's indifferent – or worse. It sings its own songs and doesn't listen to ours. And yet, it's no accident that we tend to find beautiful whatever is unmarked by humanity. It takes luck and practice to make this natural aesthetic a lifestyle in the tradition of Thoreau and the like, but we're all potentially spiritual beings – that is, creatures who thrive on connections to what lies beyond the self. (Too much self can be a drag.) Nature is a big thing that lies beyond, and entwines, the self. On a smaller scale, there's also art, religion, family and friends, committee meetings, and baseball.

Not to get in too deep here, but this nature-loving business relates to the dichotomy

of Norway vs. the Vineyard. Here's how I understand it: there's uppercase Nature (awesome wilderness), and there's lowercase nature: the relative absence of buildings, cars, household pets, other people. And it's all important. We need both Nature (Norway's mountains and fjords), and nature (the Vineyard's ponds, sandplains, woodlands, and unspoiled beaches), and everything in between. Nature is a spectrum, ranging from the magnificent creations of a possibly vengeful deity, on an utterly inhuman scale, to whatever else there is that we humans haven't yet screwed up or paved over.

To complicate matters, sometimes we also need to accept crude compromises: forms of nature harnessed to our norms and technologies, such as lawns, playgrounds, swimming pools, ballfields, ski lifts, golf courses. Sometimes – and in some places. And don't forget affordable housing. I'm both an environmental radical and a pragmatist with other political goals.

But in the end, the point is simple enough: we must view nature through a series of lenses. We access it in different ways, and at different levels of wilderness, remoteness, danger, exoticism, reflecting our current needs and opportunities. Mountains and rainforests are nourishing; so are meadows and streams. It's okay if the sources of such nourishment remain obscure.

Songs of Earth underscored these points. So, on the following night at the Film Center, did *Giants Rising*, a documentary about the California redwoods. Once again drones brought us closer to Nature's majesty than we'd ever get otherwise.

As I grow older, I find that I'm developing a fondness for these uppercase Nature films. Maybe it's because visual media compensate for what we lack in our immediate experience, or realize we'll never get to see up close. Personally, I'm more of a small-n nature type. I like islands, places that are ideal for walking, reading, and writing. Places of quiet beauty rather than loud. Soft, embracing places. I wish I were also a world-class outdoorsman, but it wasn't my choice. I'm an indoorsman. It takes all kinds.

Jeff Scheuer lives in New York and West Tisbury.

We were honored this year to partner once again with the MV Film Society on the Nature as Inspiration film festival. Through the thoughtful curation of MVFS Executive Director Richard Paradise, this year's edition brought ten wonderful new films to the Island, along with post-screening discussions with filmmakers and local experts, and other special events. Long-time VCS member Jeff Scheuer was in attendance and shared with us the reflection above. Thank you Jeff, and thank you MV Film Society!

Right: Sam Look and Richard Paradise share the conservation message. (Photo courtesy MVFS)



VCS News Round-Up

NEW ENERGY AND RESOURCES FOR ICAN

The Island Climate Action Network (ICAN) is a volunteer Vineyard organization that provides information about local climate activities, advocates for local climate action, and provides information on ways Islanders can help. As one of ICAN's founders, and a long-time member of its steering committee, VCS is happy to announce that we have recently brought ICAN into the fold as part of our regular advocacy operations. This will provide the ICAN community with increased resources, including for the first time dedicated staffing in the person of our new Director of Advocacy and Community Organizing, Zada Clarke, who joined the VCS team this spring. Welcome ICAN, and welcome Zada!

TAP MAP ADDS OUTDOOR REFILL STATIONS

The Take Back the Tap initiative keeps rolling along, with an exciting set of three new water bottle refill stations installed this spring and summer. Outdoor units at the Menemsha comfort station, MV Regional High School, and Niantic Park in Oak Bluffs are sure to be quite popular, offering free hydration and refreshment while saving thousands of single-use water bottles from the trash. Seven additional stations are currently in the works, including Chilmark Town Hall, the public restrooms and Owen Park in Vineyard Haven, and five in Oak Bluffs: at the town info booth, the Pier Beach bathrooms, the bulkhead roundabout, Featherstone Center for the Arts, and the Shellfish Hatchery.

VCS has now created 37 locations (many with multiple refill units), but we still have a long "wish list" – including, as top priorities, the Flying Horses in Oak Bluffs, Crab Corner in Menemsha, and The Carnegie and Robinson Road Recreation Area in Edgartown. Help us make one or more of those materialize by donating to the Take Back the Tap Initiative! (Or are you a plumber who wants to donate some time? Call us please!)

For the full list of refill stations, along with partner businesses who offer tap water for refilling, check out the MV Tap Map on our website.

THE EARTH DAY BEACH CLEAN-UP

A giant thank-you is in order to the whole Island community for coming out in force to make this year's Earth Day Beach Clean-Up a smashing success. Over our 32 years(!) of organizing the event, we have seen participation grow and support deepen, bringing in more and more businesses, faith groups, scouting groups, colleague nonprofits, and other community organizations.

At its core, the day is only a success because of the hundreds of community members of all ages who head to their favorite beach and spend a morning cleaning up what storms, boats, and beachgoers have left behind. It's important work, and not just for the benefit to the beaches cleaned, but also for the impact it makes within each of us. As our former board president Mait Edey

once said, "A young person who spends the morning picking up trash on the beach is not going to leave their own trash there in the future."

Special recognition is due to all the generous businesses who donated food and drinks for the after-party, to the MV Museum for hosting us as part of the second annual Earth Day Conservation Festival, and to MV Bank Charitable Foundation for sponsorship. Thanks also to all the many helping hands, including the beach volunteer leaders, the VTA for offering free rides to beach cleaners, and the Town DPWs, Bruno's, and MV Refuse District for all the gratis trash hauling.

MAJOR MILESTONE FOR BEACH BEFRIENDERS

This year's Earth Day Festival also marked the one-year anniversary of the Beach BeFriends – and what a year it was! Initially conceived as a series of monthly gatherings to protect our beaches from pollution and nurture a growing conservation community, the new initiative quickly expanded to include special events and guest speakers, the creation of DIY beach kits so anyone can participate any time, and, following this winter's devastating series of storms, the formation of a Rapid Response Team ready to take on "pop-up clean-ups." All told, more than 25 beaches (including on Chappy and other remote locations) were cleaned in organized outings, more than 800 DIY kits were distributed through local libraries, and most important of all, thousands of pounds of trash were removed from Vineyard shores.

Following such a successful year, many thanks are due, including: our partners at the libraries, town DPWs, and the MV Refuse District; colleague conservation groups who pitched in and helped access some of the harder to reach locations; guest presenters from Biodiversity-Works and Laura Ludwig of Center for Coastal Studies; and, most of all, to volunteer organizer, and Beach BeFriends creator, Laurisa Rich and the entire BBF clean-up crew – thank you!

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH CLIMATE ACTION

The ever-evolving Climate Action Fair returned in 2024 with a renewed focus on building the Island's resilience in the face of climate change. The Fair, organized by a collaboration among the MV Commission, Wampanoag Tribe, VCS, and Vineyard Wind, brought over 40 local organizations together with the public to share in a day of workshops, demonstrations, and panel discussions, along with lots of games, music, and other fun activities.

THE ART OF CONSERVATION: RESILIENCE

First launched in 2014, the Art of Conservation contest encourages local students to reflect on the value of nature and what it means to them, and then express themselves through their art and writing. With its theme of Resilient Landscapes, the 2024 Climate Action Fair was the perfect venue to honor this year's winners and their vivid illustrations of Resilience – of animals, plants, people, and the Earth in general – in the face of climate change.

Taking home First Place awards in visual arts this year were Audrey Atkins (digital illustration),



Left: VCS Intern Rachel Salop tests the new refill station at Menemsha (Photo by Signe Benjamin)

Right: Beach BeFriends founder Laurisa Rich presents a found art prize to a happy Trash Contest winner, as Signe Benjamin and Sam Look disentangle the rest of the medals. Winning entries included a very old pocket watch, a monocular (that used to be binoculars) and two messages in bottles! (Photo by Sarah Glazer)



Camille Gagou (drawing), Emily Gilley (ink and watercolor), and Greyson Hartzband (photography); Special Distinctions were awarded to Syly Carroll (collage), Ana Paula Costa (ceramic), Paula Geschke (watercolor and collage), and Angelica MacFarland, Nazare McIntosh, and Madison Mello for photography; VCS Staff Picks included Anthony R. Smith (collage), Adriana Young (watercolor), and Nathalya DaSilva, Anina Garvin, and Broden Vincent for photography. This year's contest also produced an inspirational collection of poetry, with First Place awards going to Arianna Bonner, Sydney Emerson, and Brooke Ward; Special Distinctions to Nevah Fitzgerald, Rhys Floyd, Margaret Moehnke, and Zoe Treitman; and a VCS Staff Pick to Sol Donnelly.

Special thanks are due to: contest judges Randi Baird, Tuni Deignan, Janice Frame, JoAnn Fruchtman, Marianne Jorgenson, Clark Myers, and Nancy Tutko; MVRHS teachers Chris Baer, Brendan Coogan, Christine Ferrone, Kate Hennigan, and Tiffney Shoquist; guest mentor artist Doug Allen; the VCS AoC committee, Jeff Agnoli, Susan Feller, Joan Malkin, and Susie White; and the Martha's Vineyard Cultural Council for financial support.

RED CROSS BOX OFFERS EASY TEXTILE RECYCLING

In addition to the water bottle refill station installed last fall, the West Tisbury School has another exciting new addition: a textile recycling drop-off box, where collected items not only help conserve natural resources, but also benefit the relief efforts of the Red Cross! The new bin is the result of a collaboration between VCS and the Town of West Tisbury, who helped facilitate the connection between the school and the company who manages goods collection for the Red Cross, Windward Trading. The school will also receive a portion of the proceeds, helping to encourage students and the rest of the school community to get involved in the recycling program.

WINTER WALKS HIGHLIGHT POND PROTECTION

The Winter Walks program returned for the 2023-24 season with a new series focused on highlighting the critical connections between land use decisions and the ecological health of the Island's coastal ponds. A visit to the woodlands and farm fields surrounding West Tisbury's Town Cove, Pear Tree Cove, and Muddy Cove testified to the impact of development on the Tisbury Great Pond, while the trip to Lagoon Pond and tour of the MV Shellfish Group's Solar Hatchery spoke to how dedicated work can help to set right what went wrong. As always, the Winter Walks program also brought folks to some of the Island's beautiful, but hard-to-access locations, including Squibnocket Ridge, Quenames Farm, and Black Point Pond.

IN MEMORY: THREE CONSERVATION STALWARTS

With the passing of **Tad Crawford** last October, VCS lost one of its most dedicated and hard-working supporters. Tad joined the board in 2000 and served for twelve highly productive years, including as Vice President, Chair of the Nominating and Governance Committee, and as Chair of a working group tasked with formulating policy around VCS public advocacy positions.

In that latter capacity, Tad and his team were invaluable in shaping the VCS 40th Anniversary celebration at the Allen Sheep Farm, advocating for the Mass Estuaries Project, and for passage of the Community Preservation Act that funds so many good works on Island. He also helped craft a nuanced position on the Nantucket



Sound wind farm debate, and participated in the launch of programs ranging from promoting composting and improved recycling to less toxic lawn practices. Throughout, Tad projected unflappable determination and courage, always leading with good humor and collegiality.

Known to many for his remarkable paintings, **Rez Williams** contributed in so many ways to the Island's culture and quality of life, making an especially large contribution in the area of public service. Through his work on town boards and in the nonprofit sector (including being one of the longest-serving members of the VCS board), Rez left an immense mark on Vineyard conservation.

Rez began his twelve years on our board in 1992, when his strength of character helped steer the ship through a challenging period of particularly contentious disputes. When conservation work involves legal defense (and/or the anticipation of large profit), such as our efforts to fend off golf courses and protect Katama's 215-acre Herring Creek Farm from suburban development, it is not uncommon for emotions to run hot. Rez's quiet, kind demeanor expressed itself then as a calm courage, inspiring the rest of our board and keeping the organization strong, focused, and united.

Through this thoughtful, creative, and wise leadership, Rez contributed greatly to the preservation of the natural resources of the Island. As was recognized by the MV Foundation in their 2013 Creative Living Award, Rez Williams "helped the present inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard realize the value of their treasure."

With the passing this June of **Ron Rappaport**, the Vineyard lost an icon of local government – a steady hand on the tiller for over four decades. In his role as town counsel for five of six towns, he was intimately involved in nearly all the Island's most important decisions, whether providing on-the-spot legal interpretation in front of a packed Town Meeting, or, more often, through quiet work behind the scenes. Ron's unwavering commitment to advancing the best interests of the public played a large role in shaping the Island we see today.

As town counsel, Ron also made a large impact on all aspects of the VCS mission, from political advocacy work (Will this bylaw do in practice what it is intended to? Can it survive a court challenge?) to direct land protection work. (After all, a conservation restriction is fundamentally a legal agreement.) Most significant though was his critical role in several monumental conservation legal defense efforts.

In contrast to his mild-mannered public demeanor, Ron brought a fierce advocacy to the protection of Herring Creek Farm in Edgartown and the Moshup Trail heathlands in Aquinnah. (In their remembrance, the *Vineyard Gazette* quotes Ron saying of the Herring Creek Farm chapter, "... the Vineyard will stand and fight to protect our environment against anyone, no matter how well financed, aggressive or obnoxious.") At Moshup, he and the town recognized the ecological and cultural significance of protecting a place that is of great importance to the indigenous Wampanoag people, and also supports one of the last remaining vestiges of the Northeastern Coastal Heathland habitat remaining on the planet. The determination to fight back against repeated challenges from developers resulted in a two-decades-long legal defense campaign, in which Ron's dedication and perseverance played a critical role.

A hearty thank you is due to Tad, Rez, and Ron for all that each did to make the Vineyard a better place. We will miss them.

Thanks also to Brendan O'Neill for contributing so much to these remembrances.

Growing Pains

by Jeremy Houser

This spring's debate of the contentious issues before town meeting voters prompted reflection on what forces lie beneath our surface challenges. An earlier version was first published in the *Vineyard Gazette* and *MV Times*.

A largely unspoiled Martha's Vineyard, where natural and human communities thrive and flourish together with minimal conflict; a sustainable future ensured through preserved land, clean water and a protected biological heritage.

A few years ago, as part of an in-depth strategic planning exercise, VCS tasked itself with adding to its traditional mission statement (roughly, "What does VCS do?") a new vision statement ("Why do we do it?"). Informed by our long history in environmental advocacy, as well as more recent trends – in particular the explosive rate of growth that has put unprecedented pressure on both the Island's people and natural resources – the VCS staff and board together came up with the words above.

Key to that vision is one word: sustainable. It acknowledges that our fundamental goal – a better environment for all – is not so much an end state as it is a process. Working toward sustainability means charting a better path today, tomorrow, and the next day.

This year, annual town meetings across the Island provided ample opportunities for the voters to take a direct role in charting that path. Unlike in recent years, VCS did not directly sponsor or lead the advocacy for any specific warrant articles. However, we did weigh in on several issues, hoping that our perspective as the Island's environmental advocate might better inform debate, and ultimately steer us toward a more sustainable future.

Clear Benefits, Easy Calls

In surveying all six towns' warrants, we saw two easy calls. West Tisbury sought to implement the "Specialized Energy Code" for new construction. Passed with an overwhelming majority, this slightly stricter standard for efficiency is a reasonable way for the town to make progress toward its climate goals while reducing utility costs and improving comfort for its residents.

Second, Edgartown voters were given the opportunity to ban the commercial use of gas-powered leaf blowers. Everyone is aware of the aggravating din of commercial leaf blowing operations. Fewer may know that gas-powered lawn tools in general, and leaf blowers in particular, spew a truly shocking amount of air pollution – particulates, hydrocarbons, and nitrogen oxides – causing an outsized effect on human health. In addition, the primitive technology of the two-stroke engine is simply inefficient, wasting fuel and furthering climate change. The leaf blower bylaw was narrowly defeated, the margin plausibly explained by unfavorable circumstances for the vote (late at night after many citizens had gone home), suggesting that a similar measure may yet find success in the future.

These two articles stood out as particularly straightforward in presenting clear environmental benefits. They are also quite universal: improving energy efficiency and getting rid of gas-powered leaf blowers are good ideas everywhere, and at any time. However, the

rest of the questions affecting future sustainability that were put before voters this spring were neither simple nor universal. The thread uniting many of the most important (and at times controversial) proposals is that they were efforts to reckon, in more fundamental and expansive ways, with the consequences of the Island's overarching environmental, economic, and cultural issue: overly rapid growth and unsustainable development.

A Profound Distortion

Today's supercharged real estate market has caused one obvious problem: the affordability of housing. Less obvious, perhaps, is that the driver of this market, an insatiable appetite for vacation homes which are increasingly used as investments, has led not just to high prices but also a burgeoning demand for all the associated inputs: building materials, construction and related trades, landscaping work, septic pumping, waste hauling, "property management" services (caretaking, in the humble language of a bygone era), and more.

This has created a profound distortion in the Island economy, which now simultaneously has too many companies and workers providing these services and too few. We should think it strange that our narrow rural roads are patrolled daily by a brigade of commercial vans and heavy trucks, yet it can be so difficult to find someone to repair a broken window.

We should also question the underlying economic forces that make the circular argument that "we need more jobs in the trades because it's the only way to earn enough money to live here" sound sensible. We should consider that the most compelling case for growth, that "a rising tide lifts all boats," becomes less true as inequality increases. And, even if it holds true, we should be concerned that perpetual

growth is impossible on a finite island whose economic success (never mind quality of life) is directly tied to its natural environment.

Attempting to grapple with those questions, and the economic distortion behind them, was the thread uniting the most challenging issues at this year's town meetings. Some efforts focused on the demand side of the equation: placing limits on short-term rentals (West Tisbury and

Edgartown), banning new fractional ownership schemes (Oak Bluffs and Edgartown), and limiting the scale (if not the rate) of development through caps on building size and the amount of impervious surfaces on a property (Edgartown).

In contrast, Oak Bluffs tried to address the supply side by creating a more accommodating business environment for trades and professional services through expansion of its home business provisions and, perhaps the most contentious of this spring's proposals, the creation of zoning "overlay districts" in residential areas. Ultimately, all are responses to the problems and opportunities associated with today's real estate market.

Returning to Earth

In most of our living memories, the most important driving force for growth on Martha's Vineyard has been the market for vacation homes, whether to own or rent, short-term or long. That market has been flying high for so long, and with seemingly ever-increasing altitude, that it may be hard to imagine it ever coming back down to

We are engaged here in a sort of extraction economy, collectively exploiting a natural resource to make a living. It is possible to harvest the resource sustainably, but it is easier to mine it roughly.

Earth. But a tourism economy that is centered around enjoyment of a place's natural beauty or rural charm is inherently fragile. We are engaged here in a sort of extraction economy, collectively exploiting a natural resource to make a living. It is possible to harvest the resource sustainably, but it is easier to mine it roughly.

As we approach the limits of what this island can support, it seems inevitable that today's explosive growth will slow at some point. The real questions are, will it slow because we took active steps to rein it in, or because the market crashed from over-exploitation? And what will the Island look like when it happens? When the high-flying real estate market eventually returns to Earth, will it be with a soft landing or a crash?

Island Connection

by Rachel Salop

Hi — my name is Rachel, and I am lucky enough to be this year's summer intern for VCS! I am a rising senior at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C., where I am double majoring in Geography and Environmental Studies with a double minor in Geographic Information Systems and Creative Writing. I attribute my passion for studying the natural world to my experiences on Martha's Vineyard throughout my life.

I've had the privilege of growing up on this island and developing a deep understanding of the necessity of protecting this beautiful place that we call home. It is hard to spend any significant time on the Vineyard without falling in love with the unique natural and earthy magic that emanates from seemingly everywhere. I felt that connection throughout my childhood in a way that has deeply shaped me as a new adult.

I understand the importance of conserving this land because I grew up barefoot on Lambert's Cove Beach, hiking Waskosims Rock with my dogs, and swimming out to the depths of Icehouse Pond. A lifelong connection to the land, and the unique natural world of the Island, lives within me to this day. It calls me to protect my home.

Sepiessa Point in West Tisbury, essentially in my own backyard, was one of the first places where I was able to run free as a child. I grew up kayaking across the Tisbury Great Pond with my mother and walking the trails with my father and grandfather. As I got older, I would sit and meditate on the slice of beach at the end of the trail, staring out over the water. There is a specific sort of beauty to Sepiessa — the croak of tree frogs and the squawk of sea birds, and the rise and fall of the pond as the cut on the south shore opens and closes throughout the season. Horseshoe crabs and families of deer are separated by only a thin strip of land and shallow water. The regal osprey nests are incredible, as is the way the mossy sand is somehow always warm.

That Sepiessa is so beautifully preserved is why I find it powerful, knowing that my grandfather walked the same trails with his dog that I do now with mine, and that he felt that warm sand with his own two feet. I know that he heard the same birdsong I do, and somehow even saw the great-grandparents of the deer that I watch today delicately picking their way through the tall grass. To understand what makes a place like Sepiessa special is to know what it means to protect it. My experiences there may be my most profound interactions with a permanently protected area of land, and growing

VCS applauds the efforts of town boards, the MV Commission, and other concerned citizens who continue to do the heavy lifting of planning for a more sustainable future. But when it comes to up-or-down decisions on policy, we ordinary voters are often placed in the driver's seat. Town meeting asks all of us to participate in making specific decisions about the issues of today, from as simple as changing the power source of leaf blowers to as complex as zoning overlay districts. As we weigh these choices, it is critically important that we consider (as best we can without the benefit of a crystal ball) the long-term impacts of what is put before us. It's a big ask, but we know Vineyarders are up for it. There's too much at stake not to be.

up there instilled in me an understanding of the importance of conservation work and what it nurtures for the future of the Island.

There is no connection to any other place like there is to your own home. It is that connection to the Vineyard, and my life experience, that has drawn me to work at VCS. When I reached out to them this spring, it felt like a step in the right direction of what I want to do with my life. If I can start my career by protecting the place that is most important to me, I can continue to harness this passion as I go forth into the world.

There is no connection to any other place like there is to your own home.

Given the opportunity to work with VCS, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of conservation work and learn how to protect my home, developing real-world experiences with the methods and strategies of this field. Through learning how, why, and where to protect my own community, I want to also begin to comprehend how to uplift and reinforce similar processes across our country and planet. In an increasingly different world, it is often our hearts that lead us to understand what is important and what needs to be preserved. It is our responsibility to learn how to do so.

Growing up in this world and studying the way our environment changes can be disheartening and scary, the same way it can be frightening to watch the Island change as our community grows. But understanding that our world is changing also reinforces the necessity to protect what is irreplaceable, integral to the foundation of who and what we are as an Island community. The natural beauty, history, and environmental strength of the Vineyard is what calls people here to begin with, and the community that we've created on top of that is what calls people to stay. Be kind to one another, and to your Island — both for yourself and for all of us who hope to call this place home in the future, in the same way we have our whole lives.

Sepiessa boat launch, summer 2024 (photo by Rachel Salop)



Together We Keep



by Zada Clarke

I admit that I Googled “conservation” during the application process for my new job as Director of Advocacy and Community Organizing for VCS. But before you roll your eyes, I’ll tell you why.

When I imagine a “conservation society,” I see a club whose activities include strolling through pastures, hunting big game, and an affinity for pursing their lips and eating finger sandwiches. I knew this wasn’t what the VCS represented, but where did this imagery come from?

Google says conservation is the careful maintenance and upkeep of natural resources to prevent their disappearance. It isn’t necessarily preservation; it doesn’t ignore our need to work the land, hunt, cut down a tree, or carve a road through the woods.

The conservation movement in the United States kicked off in 1887 with the creation of the Boone & Crockett Club, the first wildlife and habitat conservation organization in North America. Founded by future President Teddy Roosevelt and pioneering conservationist George Bird Grinnell, it was a direct response to the growing impact of unregulated logging and market hunting of the time. Today, the Boone & Crockett Club still exists. Its slogan is “Pioneers of Conservation. Our Legacy for Generations”, its website boasts a partnership with the NRA, and its Instagram account highlights

paintings and quotes from Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and other rugged individuals. They post quotes like “I can’t say ever I was lost, but I was bewildered once for three days.” People comment, “Classic Boonie!”

While conservation has evolved and broadened from the days of the Boone & Crockett Club, including an acknowledgment of indigenous land rights, and the adoption of climate-related issues, it still feels siloed from our collective and individual decision-making. For me and my generation it can feel inaccessible, as if its purpose is to reserve land for the few who have historically had the means to afford large swaths of acreage, and the freedom and means to interact with it in a way that is purely recreational.

With this in mind, I move on to the dictionary definition. The root of conservation is “conserve,” and the Latin etymology is “together we keep.” But who has historically comprised “we?” What are we “keeping,” and for (or from) whom?



To answer this I fast-forward in time, getting to know the organization I now work for, including understanding its definition of conservation. VCS was founded in 1965, in the wake of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, the book that popularized modern ecology and fueled the environmental movement. It was an era influenced by the 60s counterculture and, locally, a time when suburban development, McDonald’s, and other corporate conglomerates threatened the Island’s “character.”

VCS had its work cut out for itself, evidenced by an office crammed with boxes of archives, maps, town meeting notes, and scientific data going back sixty years. It’s all organized into three-ring binders that predate computer files. Projects ranged from water testing to legal advocacy. Initiatives were formed to influence both town policy and individuals. It was a broad agenda, which would come to be supported by the network of local organizations that today specialize in water, biodiversity, and land preservation.



That sweeping agenda is inspiring, but also challenging. Discussing that breadth with my colleague in the next office, Jeremy remarked, “Fighting pollution from smokestacks means you’re going up against power and money, and fighting pollution from individual people’s overconsumption means going up against human nature. Both are very difficult.”

Fast forward to 2024, and that sentiment rings louder than ever in times that feel significant, fast, and dangerous. We are facing climate change, over-consumption, and ecological system breakdowns, along with fake news, political divides, and culture wars. While conservation will continue to evolve, moving forward it needs to do so not on the heels of policy, regulation, and social norms but in front of and in tandem with them. If conservation wasn’t seen as a threat, or the concern of the very few, but as a tool to strengthen infrastructure, save taxpayer dollars, and transition to building a renewable island – maybe it could join the decision-making roundtable in a seat front and center.

In short, conservation may need a rebrand.



I applied for this job after closing on a home and moving back to the Island full-time last year. Despite the challenges, my partner and I bought our house after a community member decided not to put it on the market, and instead to sell it slightly under the asking price to a young Island couple trying to build a life here. My ability to be here comes down to luck, good timing, a non-existent work/life balance throughout my 20s, privilege, and the ability to saddle a hefty amount of debt and anxiety with my partner.

I recognize the uniqueness of my situation and the reality that some of my peers, and the community in general, do not have the ability or desire to participate in conservation efforts when they do not have a reliable living situation. The integration of conservation into personal and municipal decision-making is not siloed from our economic and social reality; in fact, it is often defined by it. Wendell Berry observes in his essay on *Conservation and Local Economy* that:

“Land cannot be properly cared for by people who do not know it intimately, who do not know how to care for it, who are not strongly motivated to care for it, and who cannot afford to care for it.”

To build a sustainable community for our collective future, we must strengthen access to community housing, integrate nature-based learning into the development of school curricula, utilize conservation tools to inform local policy, land management, and infrastructure, and support an economy that isn’t entirely dependent on the development and manipulation of the land. We need our population to feel they have the time, space, and economic stability to know, love, and care for this place.

I believe we can create an island where conservation is not seen as the enemy but as the protector of our livelihoods, wants and needs, homes, stories, memories, and futures. It will just take imagination, work, vulnerability, and broadly inclusive involvement. It calls on us to listen, and to ask ourselves, “Why do we do it this way? And is this really the best way?”

A new neighbor gave me the Wendell Berry book I referenced earlier. He left it on the seat of my car after asking how the new job was going. Like us, they were looking for a house in Maine or New Hampshire until closing on a property here at the last second. His kids can often be seen running outside and walking the trails that abut the property. They remind me of myself years ago, traversing the woods behind my childhood home that was a jungle gym, a sanctuary, and a school. They will get to know the habitat intimately through play and unthreatened years spent watching wildlife, identifying mushrooms, experiencing seasonal changes, eating wintergreen berries, learning a beech from an oak tree, and what poison ivy is the hard way. They can plant a tree and watch it grow. This sense of place gives us familiarity and love – reasons to care about this island and to conserve it.

So, what is the role of the VCS Director of Advocacy and Community Organizing in 2024?

I don’t know the entire answer yet, but I am excited to find out.

I have, though, found my North Star. I will always return to the Latin etymology of conserve: “Together we keep.” I’ll return to this phrase with respect for the incredibly diverse realities, priorities, and experiences that make up this “we.” Only then can I get to work helping build a community that supports participation in the shared responsibility for “keeping” this one small island – for us all.

Life List

in memory of Gus Ben David

I saw a new bird today,
“Lifers” added to my list.
You’d be there to share
the “tick” but Death
checked you off
his life list like you were
an “accidental” species—
unexpected, rare,
but just passing through.

— Warren Woessner

VCS Poet Laureate Warren Woessner is a former member of our Board of Directors. His most recent book is Exit~Sky.





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Front cover: "Slow Escape" by Greyson Hartzband (First Place, Photography)
Below: "The Lost Piece" by Nathalya DaSilva (VCS Staff Pick, Photography)
Selections from the 2024 Art of Conservation: Resilience

