

# VINEYARD CONSERVATION

WINTER 2024



Inside: Beach BeFriends, Fertilizer & Ponds, Ecosystem Resilience, Tap Map Update, Winter Walks & Much More

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# Seasons of Change



Change. We are in the heart of one of its seasons. The fresh longing for green leaves is my daily reminder. My first thought is that the transition to winter is *the* season of change, as the color slowly, and then quickly, fades from our landscape. But in truth, here in New England we bravely face a steady diet of variation. We settle into the rhythm of one season only to have it begin its prelude to the next.

This is even more striking on the Island, where climatic transitions are overlaid with the busy season. Summer is not just warmer weather and lush vegetation, but also an intense seven-days-a-week carnival of fantasies and frustrations. This is why early winter, with the clarity of the stark, low-angled light, feels particularly profound to me. Maybe it is the natural pause after the crash of the summer season giving space for reflection – or, maybe it's just because I am not a natural fan of the cold – but there is a potency to this time.

Change has been in the wind at VCS as well, as we move through our first seasons without 38-year Executive Director Brendan O'Neill. Though his are impossibly big shoes to fill, Brendan has left us a varied roadmap for how to shape the work of the organization, and his example of what it means to be a force for the protection of this beloved Island. Having grown up here, I feel a particular gratitude for the work he has done with VCS. The sharp thinking, and the dogged persistence, that went into every conservation project during his tenure has left an indelible mark on what the Island is today.

I was lucky enough to grow up when the Vineyard was just a little wilder, and when roaming as a child was more the norm. Back then, the freedom to explore was based on neighbor kindness – and a more casual sense of private property. But neither the protection of these habitats nor this open access was guaranteed on our rapidly changing Island. It took foresight and hard work to preserve these places and the experience of knowing them.

Thanks to VCS, colleague organizations, and the generosity of individuals and families, many of these wild places have been saved. Their protection provides space for nature, and secures the pastoral, rural character valued by so many. Conservation has allowed some wildness to remain as a neighbor – for our benefit, and nature's.

Yet over this time, I have also watched farmland turn into commercial space, native woodlands cleared for housing developments, and sleepy roads grow to resemble highways. In my childhood, the greatest danger from summer pond explorations was the occasional shoe sucked off in the mud. Today, my children are barred from those adventures for much of the summer due to toxic water quality.

All of this change – the victories for conservation and the defeats – is to some degree the give and take of a growing community. Compromise, even. But there must be a point we recognize as too far. I am hopeful that our advocacy at VCS will clarify what our ecosystems are telling us – they are struggling, and we should be concerned for the health of our support system. For too long, our narrative has been of separate fates for humans and nature. But this notion of separation is not accurate, and it has not served either well.

We must instead recognize that our fates are one messy and beautiful thread and that, simply put, we need to take care of this place. While change is a given, change of any particular kind is not – we can, and must, take an active role in shaping the future of the Island. There is no need to stand witness to the failure of ecosystems, or to continue the heart-aching calculus that trades the natural riches of the Island for personal wants and needs.

I believe that change is the result of the decisions that we actively – or passively – make as a community. So I choose to stand with optimism, because I believe we are up to the task. When I lose faith, I seek out Waskosims Rock, or Short Cove, or any number of other favorite spots, where I find the sense of possibility restored in the rhythm of my walking steps. I see the hard work and wise decision-making (and, occasionally, sacrifice), evidenced in these conserved places. It is our very good fortune to know this special Island – and by that very fact we are responsible. It is now our turn to make the right choices, to take meaningful action, to consciously shape the change that lies ahead.

**Samantha Look, Executive Director**

*For more on my view of how VCS is leading the way in this work, please see my remarks from this past June's Annual Meeting (pp. 8-9), where we celebrated Brendan's retirement, and I came into the role of Executive Director.*

## Welcome Aboard!

*Please welcome two strong additions to the VCS Board of Directors:*



**Lisa Foster** has been an Island homeowner for over twenty years and is currently a resident of Aquinnah. As an entrepreneur,

she founded 1 Bag at a Time, a first-to-market reusable grocery bag company in 2005, becoming a top supplier of reusable bags in the USA and a pioneer in the fight against single-use plastic. She sold her business in 2017 and today works as a business coach, with a mission to help managers become better leaders. As a coach, she shares her expertise in leadership and emotional intelligence to create the conditions for high performance and to inspire others to make a difference in their communities and organizations. Lisa also serves on the Board of Directors for Sheriff's Meadow Foundation.



**Sarah Glazer** is a journalist who has been coming to Martha's Vineyard since 1984 and is now a year-round resident of Chilmark. Early in her career

she covered energy and environmental legislation for a bipartisan environmental caucus in Congress, and later worked as a staffer for two congressional committees on energy conservation legislation. She has written about health issues for the *Washington Post* and is currently a Contributing Writer for *CQ Researcher*, where she writes about environmental and health policy, among other subjects. She is a member of the Chilmark Conservation Commission and the Abel's Hill Pond Committee, where she helped organize a campaign to persuade homeowners to desist from using lawn fertilizer to protect the health of Chilmark Pond. As a cyclist, she feels a particular debt of gratitude to VCS for protecting Lambert's Cove Road – one of her favorite riding spots.

## December Fields

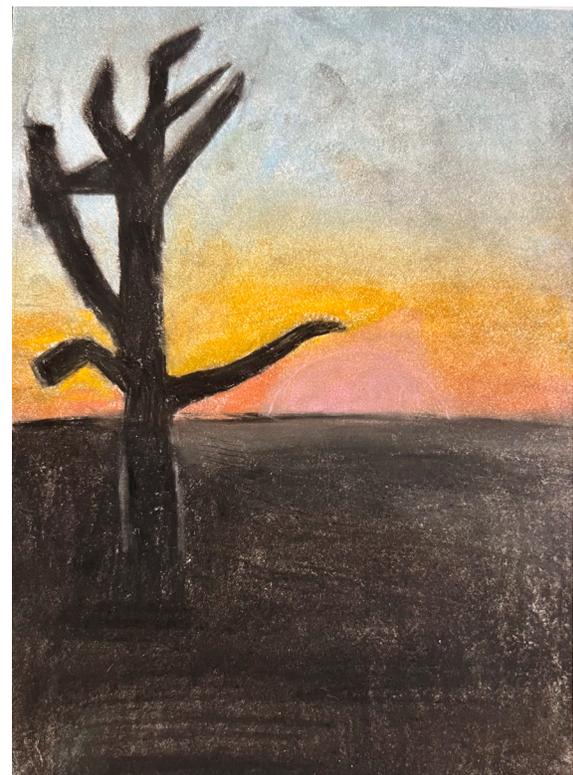
*by Warren Woessner*

In the arctic light  
the brown land is reduced  
to essentials: fences,  
bushes, become monumental.  
and while the birches  
sycamores, hold a hint  
of coming winter—across the fields  
come grackles, ripening like black fruit  
On all the starving branches.

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

*Left: "Lone Tree" by Nate Larkin, a First Place winner in the 2023 Art of Conservation student art contest.*

*Opposite: Lucy Vincent Beach (photo by Signe Benjamin)*



# VCS News Round-Up

## THE ART OF CONSERVATION: CLIMATE HOPE

We anticipated that the theme for this year's student art and writing contest, "Hope and Climate Action," would be a tall ask – especially of a generation who will live with the consequences of climate change. But, as always, the Island's students were more than up to the task. In fact, the 2023 Art of Conservation saw an unprecedented number of submissions (especially in the poetry category), and the quality of the work was truly phenomenal. Choosing just a few pieces to share in these pages was not easy, so please see our website for more selections from this beautiful and thought-provoking collection of poetry, essays, paintings, photographs, drawings, digital design, and more.

Taking home honors for visual arts were Parker Bradlee (featured on our back cover), Izzy Colon, Ava Fisher, Tegan Gale, Anina Garvin, Emily Gilley (front cover), Jonathan King, Matthew King, Nate Larkin (p. 3), Rose Levesque, Teagan Myers, Mya O'Neill, Bryan Sornas, Freya Stearns, Natalie Wambui, and Sam Warren; in addition, Matilda Backus-Clement, Grace Cotton, Jack Gallagher, Penny Haddad, Ronan Kelly, Hannah McCormick, Nick Merriam, Karla Robadel, Nola Savard, Claus Smith, and Adriana Young received awards for writing. Finally, extra congratulations are in order for Kamar Dehaney, Ayla Strom, and Tasman Strom who were awarded for both!

Every year, the Art of Conservation owes its success to a committed team of supporters. Thank you to MVRHS teachers Chris Baer, Emily Cavanagh, Brendan Coogan, Christine Ferrone, Katherine Hennigan, and Tiffney Shoquist for your dedicated work in guiding the students to success, and to our contest judges Ollie Becker, Wenonah Madison, Hillary Noyes-Keene, and Michael West for their keen eyes and ears. Thanks also to Featherstone Center for the Arts and the MV Film Society for hosting the show in their Feldman Family Artspace, and to the MV Cultural Council for financial support.

## TAP MAP ADDS EIGHT NEW REFILL STATIONS

It was a productive year for the Take Back the Tap program, our long-running effort to reduce plastic waste caused by disposable water bottles. We are excited to announce the addition of eight new locations to the ever-growing network of water bottle refill stations: Chicken Alley Thrift Shop, MV Chamber of Commerce, Vineyard Haven Library, Memorial Wharf in Edgartown, the soccer fields at West Tisbury School, and Healey Square, Penn Field, and Veira Park in Oak Bluffs.

As of now, VCS has created 30 stations in public locations across the Island, including at least one in every school, with two more soon



Congrats to Ayla Strom, whose "Lady of the Leaves" earned two First Place awards—one for the photo, and one for the accompanying poem.

to come (Chilmark Town Hall and Menemsha). Many thanks are due to our donors and community partners (most recently, MV Chamber of Commerce, MV Community Services, MV Little League, the Memorial Wharf Committee, West Tisbury School, and the Vineyard Haven Library) for collaborating on installation of the units. For the full list of stations, along with partner businesses who offer tap water for refilling, check out the MV Tap Map at our website – and make sure to bookmark it, so you're always prepared to Take Back the Tap!

*p.s. Outdoor refill stations are the most expensive part of the Take Back the Tap initiative, at \$6,500 each fully installed. We are currently seeking donor support for units at Niantic Park (Oak Bluffs), Robinson Road Recreation Area (Edgartown), and the athletic fields at the High School – VCS will display your name proudly on the refill station!*

## ISLAND EATS TAKES OFF

Two years ago, observing the booming business of restaurant takeout on-Island, Chilmark resident Jessica Mason brought to VCS her vision for a new venture that could reduce the associated waste problem. Launched as a pilot program in 2022, and then a full-scale deployment in 2023, Island Eats offers a simple but powerful proposition: zero-waste takeout, facilitated by a centralized system for distributing, collecting, and washing reusable stainless steel containers. After generating plenty of buzz in its first year, 2023 saw great strides in the number of participating restaurants and development of a smartphone app. Now 2024 promises possibly the most exciting addition of all, a new free membership tier! At that price, why not give it a try?

## ECOSYSTEM RESILIENCE GRANT AWARDED

In 2022, the Martha's Vineyard Commission (MVC) convened a diverse group of local stakeholders to develop the Island's first comprehensive climate action plan: "The Vineyard Way." The plan, organized into six broad thematic areas, charts a much-needed path forward, both in reducing our carbon footprint and adapting to the changes already underway. VCS was honored to be invited to lead the working group responsible for the Land Use, Natural Resources, and Biodiversity section of the document.

One of the top goals identified in that section is to ensure that "*land use decision-making prioritizes public safety and ecosystem values potentially impacted by climate change.*" One of the most important steps in achieving that goal will be improving community understanding of the reciprocal relationship between climate change and ecosystem health – both the threats posed by climate change, and the benefits to climate resilience conferred by properly functioning ecosystems. To that end, we are thrilled to announce the recent award of an Ecosystem Resilience grant (through the state Municipal Vulnerabilities Preparedness Action program) to the MVC and conservation nonprofits (including VCS), which will help fund this work.



Specifically, the Ecosystem Resilience grant will fund two timely projects. First, the MVC will be able to update the Island's vegetation mapping, which is currently very outdated (partly due to climate change, as well as habitat loss and invasive species). This work is critical to making informed land use decisions, including the consideration of climate impacts such as sea level rise, drought, wildfire, and increased precipitation. In addition, the grant will fund new aquatic mapping, with one benefit being the identification of appropriate sites for aquaculture projects.

Second, the grant will support the creation of a public education campaign around sustainable landscaping. With the Vineyard's land and waters already stressed by climate change, landscaping decisions must be undertaken with climate resilience in mind. Truly sustainable landscaping can protect the natural environment by conserving biodiversity and improving water quality – and it is something that anyone with a yard can participate in.

The highly collaborative campaign will bring together Island nonprofits with existing programs in this area – VCS (Vineyard Lawns), BiodiversityWorks (Natural Neighbors), and Polly Hill Arboretum (native plant propagation and education) – and Vineyard Vision Fellow Sakiko Isomichi, who is conducting community research for the project. We are very excited to work together with our conservation colleagues on this inspiring project to help the Island better steward the nature living right in our backyard.

## LOVE SONGS FOR VINEYARD LAWNS

Less is more! Embracing the Vineyard Lawn aesthetic – reducing watering, eliminating fertilizer, and shrinking the total lawn area in favor of native plants – is a powerful way to safeguard the health of our coastal ponds while strengthening the Island's climate resilience. Vineyard Lawns support pollinators, add color and biodiversity to the landscape, and – unlike the expensive technology needed to address nitrogen from wastewater – they are free!

To help spread the message, we have been bringing our “Love Song for the Vineyard Lawn” presentation and Q&A event to as many venues as possible. The tour continues in 2024, with a series of monthly

(January – May) presentations at Island libraries (check our website for details). We also are happy to schedule

Summer intern Maya Eberstadt led the team behind this year's Ag Fair display, helping to build enthusiasm for Vineyard Lawns. Thank you Maya, and congrats on the blue ribbon!

Other VCS activities at this year's Fair included decorating reusable bags to take home, and creating Beach BeFriender kits to be distributed through local libraries (see next page).

## CLIMATE ACTION FAIR 2024

*Resilient Landscapes*

MAY 19<sup>th</sup> AT THE AG HALL

Featuring the Art of Conservation Opening Show

presentations for neighborhood/homeowners' associations and other community groups – please email us if you are interested.

## 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 November 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 December's 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. We hope you will join us in the new year, as we venture on to Squibnocket Ridge (Jan. 13), Quenames Farm (Feb. 10), and Slough Farm (March 9).

One interesting development in the Winter Walks program is that, after holding steady for many years, attendance has skyrocketed in the two most recent seasons. We are thrilled that the conservation message is reaching a larger audience, but this popularity has made it necessary to institute an online registration system so that we can better plan for the event, and, when necessary, cap the total number of attendees. Make sure to visit our website and register early so you don't miss out!

*Because parking is often the limiting factor, please consider carpooling or biking if you are able – and let us know so that we can open up a space for someone else.*

## BIG HOUSE BYLAW UPDATE

In 2022, VCS helped win passage at the West Tisbury Annual Town Meeting of new limits on the size of residential development. This year, we have been tracking the effects of what is commonly known as the “Big House Bylaw” and, where appropriate, weighing in on the early permit reviews. We are happy to share that, according to feedback from builders, architects, conservationists, and surveyors, the new measure is already making an important difference. The bylaw has given the planning board a much-needed tool to limit the scale of the built environment, and keep development from overwhelming the town's rural character, habitat, and quality of life.



# Beach BeFriends

*Make every day Earth Day — join the Island's new community clean-up crew*

**L**aunched in 2023, Beach BeFriends offers two great ways to get involved in protecting the Island's beaches from plastic pollution. Join the growing community of volunteers at one of our monthly gatherings (check website for details), or befriend a beach on your own by picking up a clean-up kit (featuring a sticker for free disposal) at your local library. Why not do both!

The new collaborative initiative is the brainchild of longtime VCS supporter Laurisa Rich. This fall, we asked Laurisa to reflect on the first of many seasons to come of befriending Island beaches.

## Where did you get the idea for Beach BeFriends?

Beach BeFriends was conceived in January 2023, at Moshup's Beach on the morning after a three-day nor'easter pulled away. I found myself surrounded by a trillion little pieces of shredded plastic trash, just gleaming in the sun. These small pieces were only a few tide cycles away from becoming microplastics. With a turtle-shaped mylar balloon as my collecting bag, I began feeding it bits of rope, chunks from buoys, and shards of plastic bottles – all while envisioning what must be on the rest of our Island's 120+ miles of beach. I was feeling sad, and mad, and overwhelmed, but I also knew that I was not really alone – I knew **lots** of folks were doing just this, quietly collecting beach trash on their own, all year round. So it was at that moment that I imagined a community built around a beach clean-up!

I first approached Tracy Thorpe at the Chilmark Library, and we brainstormed the clean-up kits as a way to support folks with free "dump" stickers for beach trash. Then we drafted a proposal for VCS about a monthly clean-up concept. Their Earth Day event has long been a highlight of my year, so I knew their expertise would be crucial. It turns out that VCS was very receptive, having had that idea in their mind already! We then approached the rest of the Island libraries and the Town Public Works Depts and other committees. It all came together quickly, and Beach Befrienders was born on Earth Day, 2023.

## What inspires you to befriend our Island's beaches?

Trash on the beach is beauty interrupted! Picking it up is beauty restored. Collecting plastic and transporting it off the beach feels good and is such a simple way to be a helpful human and practice reciprocity to the places we love.

When I envision the lifecycle of our human-made debris — the pumping of the oil, the creation of the polymers, the molding of

the plastic, often all for a very short lifespan before showing up as litter – it's distressing. Microplastics infiltrate the food chain, while macroplastics harm life through ingestion, entanglement, and the leaching of hazardous chemicals.

But the positive changes to waste management practices on the Vineyard are so encouraging. Bravo to the plastics reduction measures like the bans on bags, bottles, and nips, the food waste diversion work now happening, the Island Eats reusable bowls – those are huge steps toward reducing trash at the source.

## You've been participating in beach clean-ups for a while now. Is it getting better out there or worse?

Well, I certainly find fewer plastic straws, nips and water bottles, but unfortunately there's also more beach trash overall. Data suggests that some of it is left by careless beachgoers, or washed down our storm drains, but most is from boats and distant watersheds, coming to our shores twice a day on the tides.

Fortunately, there are more and more people involved in cleaning it up, both globally and locally. So far, more than 350 beach kits have been taken out of the libraries, and turnout for the monthly gatherings has been growing steadily, led by a stalwart core crew of Bruce Golden, Jennifer Blum, Jodi Baron Blair, Lisa Smiley, and Mary Morro. A highlight has been the three expeditions on board Captain Chris Murphy's boat, where we collected huge loads of trash from the shores of Menemsha Pond.

## For those who prefer to go out on their own, are there places that really need some TLC from a BBF?

Yes, every Island beach needs befriending! Usually folks adopt and clean the beaches they love, and can access. Lambert's Cove, Lucy, Menemsha, Moshup, Squibby, South and State beaches all have many devoted friends. But the harbors and commercial zones, along with the remote, rocky, and often private beaches don't get the love they need, especially in the off-season. We hope folks can get creative and find their way (with permission of course) onto these less-visited beaches and fill up some bags!

## What's next for Beach BeFriends? Are there plans to grow the program?

I see us growing the number of volunteers so we can cover more beaches each month. We also hope to work with homeowner associations and private beach managers to allow groups access to their beaches. I envision field trips through the schools, trash art shows, other events. I want to see boaters scouting pond shores for debris and dropping passengers ashore to collect the trash and bring it back aboard.

## What is it about the Island that you are especially passionate about?

Like many, I find our Island's diversity – biological, geological, cultural – utterly fascinating. As a bona fide

The Beach BeFrienders crew at Squibnocket (photo by Laurisa Rich)



tree-hugger, I am deeply nourished every day by our caring community of people, plants, creatures, and the very land itself. Woods walks are lovely, pond shores are sublime, but the ocean beaches give one special access to a true wilderness. To quote my hero Rachel Carson:

*“Here is a beyondness...that one can only achieve through total immersion in the elements – through the eyes, then the senses, the intellect. The winds and currents can do more than cool the land; they can warm the Soul.”*

Beach combing has always been a beloved activity for my family. My father was an Alaskan salmon fisherman and airline pilot. Mom was a crafter and adventurer, descended from a long line of New England seafarers. Childhood summers were spent in a remote bay of Kodiak Island, picking gill nets, berry bushes, and rocky beaches of their treasures. The years when the fishing season was cut short we

visited our family’s summer cottages near Lagoon Pond in Oak Bluffs, and off Moshup Trail in Aquinnah.



### Are there other challenges to the Island that you are concerned about?

I am most worried about declining water quality, and the loss of habitat – human and otherwise. Someone recently shared an analogy with me, comparing the effects of excess nitrogen in our salt ponds with the effects of excess wealth "over-fertilizing" the Island community – to the point of making it impossible for some to live here. Protecting our water and natural ecosystems requires careful and considered planning. I'm grateful so many bright minds are devoted to finding solutions.

*Top right: A former boat captain and preschool teacher, Laurisa Rich is an organic gardener, forager, herbalist, and zero-waste practitioner. She is active in the MV Garden Club, Lagoon Pond Association, the Brouhaha Herbal Group and serves on the Chilmark Cemetery Commission (Photo by Mary Morro).*

*Left: Summer beachcombers on Uganik Bay, Kodiak Island (Video still courtesy Brandon Jones).*



## Abel’s Hill Neighbors Organize to Reduce Nitrogen Pollution

by Sarah Glazer

Over the past few summers, an unwelcome visitor has been arriving on Chilmark Pond with increasing frequency. Cyanobacteria, an ordinarily beneficial part of the ecosystem, has been “blooming” on the pond – growing at an explosive, unhealthy rate, resulting in a visible blue-green scum on the water. More important, when cyanobacteria blooms it produces toxins, rendering the water unsafe for people and pets.

Scientists have long told us that nitrogen pollution is a primary contributor to these algal blooms. Last year, a new report by the Marine Biological Lab in Woods Hole (along with our colleagues at the Great Pond Foundation) added specificity to its sources. They pinpointed fertilizer as the second leading cause (after wastewater from septic systems) of nitrogen pollution in Chilmark Pond, accounting for almost a quarter of the total.

Dismayed that the pond had become increasingly off-limits because of this pollution, a group of families in the neighborhood decided this year to make a commitment to not use any fertilizer on their lawns. The Abel’s Hill Association (AHA) is composed of 61 homeowners. All have houses near the pond, and many remember childhoods when the pond was clean enough for swimming, crabbing, and fishing.

As a member of the AHA Pond Committee, I reached out to VCS for help in drafting a voluntary pledge to refrain from using fertilizer. VCS staffers Jeremy Houser and Samantha Look joined with our members for two presentations, explaining the science behind cyanobacteria and nitrogen, and answering questions about the role that fertilizer was playing. Their input was invaluable to the Pond Committee in making sure the proposed pledge had a solid scientific basis, as well as useful tips on how to care for a lawn in an environmentally friendly way.

Those meetings also revealed that, while most were enthusiastic about taking action to improve the pond’s water quality, there would be some resistance to the pledge. When it was put to the full membership in January, 72% responded to the poll, with 86% of those agreeing to this statement:

*“Out of concern for the health of Chilmark Pond, I wish to join the Abel’s Hill community in this voluntary, non-binding effort to eliminate the use of nitrogen-based fertilizer, organic or inorganic, on our Abel’s Hill lawn.”*

Those of us who took part in creating and advocating for this commitment know that we still have a lot of education work ahead of us. For example, the Pond Committee has drafted a short letter for members to give to landscapers that explains why they no longer want fertilizer to be used on their lawn. While the work is far from done, we know that our community has taken an important first step to improving the health of the pond.

*Sarah Glazer joined the VCS Board of Directors in June 2023 (p. 3)*



# Penning the Next Chapter of Vineyard Conservation

It was an inspirational evening last June when the Membership of the Vineyard Conservation Society came together at the historic Grange Hall in West Tisbury to celebrate the 38 years of service of outgoing Executive Director Brendan O'Neill, and to welcome Samantha Look (then VCS Director of Advocacy and Education), into the role. Fitting for the occasion, Brendan shared his perspective on the history of the organization he led for a majority of its years: the big wins, the occasional setbacks, and, in his characteristic self-deprecating humor, that most quintessential of conservation achievements: the “less bad outcome.”

Following Brendan's remarks, Samantha took to the podium to share her vision for the future of VCS and the Island – a vision drawn from her passion to protect this special place for future generations. As Brendan concluded, “VCS is in good hands – over to you, Sam!”

*Excerpted from Samantha's comments at the 2023 Annual Meeting, following her recap of the year's activities:*

The fact that we embody a multitude of skills is one of the things that I love about this organization. In a single day, we might start in a classroom answering the sweet and eager questions of second graders about plastic in the ocean, and then be at a meeting with colleagues strategizing about raising awareness and improving resilience to climate change, and then finish the day speaking at a Planning Board or MVC hearing to advocate strongly for the environment in the face of the Island's rapid growth. We are writers and educators, planners and visionaries, scientists and land stewards. We are technical and legal advisors, community organizers and event planners, regulatory authors and most importantly, lovers of this particular place.



VCS is a beautiful, critical, and in some respects challenging organization. Our mission is broad, and by necessity, some of our best and most impactful work is invisible to the public eye. Our work can also be incredibly visible and, honestly, sometimes uncomfortable, when we tackle thorny issues and hold potentially contentious positions on issues like slowing growth, banning single-use plastics, deflecting plastic playing fields, and curtailing large houses. In short, this work is not for the faint of heart.

Yet, it is with great excitement, and some bravery, that I welcome the honor and opportunity to lead this organization in its next chapter.

And it is with huge thanks to Brendan and the Board for putting their faith in me. Whatever metaphor you prefer...shoes to fill, footsteps to follow...Brendan will not be replicated. His are impossible shoes to fill or footsteps to trace, and I don't think he, or you, would want us to take that approach. Luckily, between myself, Signe, and Jeremy we have a combined 37 years working under Brendan's leadership.



We also all bring our own flavor and talents to the work, which now, coming to the fore, will give VCS a new energy and direction – while referential to the spirit that Brendan has fostered.

As far as what this next chapter might look like, I see land and biodiversity protection remaining the heart of our efforts. We are not a land trust, although we do own land, and as you heard tonight, some of our most important work and many of the treasures of Brendan's legacy are incredibly special places that have been protected under his watch.

We have amazing land trust colleagues and the Land Bank and I hope our work will support and expand their efforts. Our support may take many forms. It may be regulatory changes that help slow development and buy time for open space protection, or advocacy and education that helps support best practices on developed land – advancing a desirability for smaller houses and lawns, more reliance on native plants, and more understanding of what is lost every time we reshape and replant the Island lot by lot, rewriting the natural and cultural history expressed on this land.

This work will continue to mean advocating for landowners to place conservation restrictions on their property and nurturing relationships and providing resources to anyone hoping to learn more about the conservation process. It will also include looking for new opportunities to advance the pace of land protection against this backdrop of swift development pressure.

I hope we will also work with colleagues to grow a stronger land ethic for our community, a pride and sense of place that builds the political will for the critical, and often difficult, choices we will increasingly need to make to protect what's left of the nature of the Island.

We will keep, and even elevate, climate change as a priority issue. In today's world, particularly as an environmental organization, climate is implicit in everything. Our climate touches everything and the crisis of its health and stability is hardly only an environmental issue. But there are, and will be, increasingly massive costs borne by the planet if we cannot do more. For every organization, every individual, each



of us in this room tonight – this is our work. There are none of us who do not play a role. VCS is one of the founding and core members of the Island Climate Action Network, and we led the Land Use, Natural Resources, and Biodiversity section of the MV Commission’s new Climate Action Plan. We must now turn our attention to the work that we can do to accomplish the recommendations of that plan, amplify its progress and calls to action. In particular, we need to help our community understand how functional, thriving natural systems and wild places come to our rescue in this fight.

I hope to explore how our conservation work and affordable housing can find strength as allies. Too often, the local narrative pits these critical needs against one another. I am imagining there are opportunities where we could, together, be a powerful wave for change, united against the common challenges of second home development and skyrocketing cost of living and land prices. Sometimes affordable housing means new development, and there may be situations when our causes do not find alignment, but there may be many more when they do.

I plan to carry forward the important conversation that Brendan and the Board have begun around Indigenous rights, exploring how to incorporate cultural and harvesting practices into conservation restrictions. As well as learning what work we need to undertake as an organization to better understand the voices not currently included in our land conservation and decision making.

I would like VCS to help create forums that build a stronger sense of pride in place, and sense of self-determination as a community. I am often frustrated when I hear that we are making a particular decision to ensure that our visitors keep visiting. This is an upside-down understanding. We must build the community that we value. I am willing to bet that our visitors come for what we protect, not what we compromise.

This work can be hard, and even dispiriting, but only if we leave it there. I see our efforts, and this organization, as an incredible opportunity to come together around something so moving and important. Here we all are, lucky enough to have a strength of connection to each other and to the Vineyard, that finds us gathered tonight. The urgency and purpose of the work of this organization is an antidote to disconnection and losing heart. We care, deeply, and we are creating community and showing up together to make a difference.

I would like to underscore this last piece about togetherness, because I believe that despite the breadth of our VCS mission there is a sharp throughline: most powerfully, this work is successful because we are a strong and unflinching voice. Our voice consists of a small but passionate staff, and a dedicated



Former Board member Ginny Jones recounts significant conservation successes throughout Brendan’s tenure, while Board President and Annual Meeting emcee Jennifer Blum adds visual navigation.  
Opposite page: It was a packed house at the Grange.

board. But this voice is also all of you here tonight and hundreds more that read Jeremy’s thoughtful words in our *Conservation Almanac*. Our voice is everyone who shows up and votes at town meetings, writes letters to planning boards and newspaper editors, and carries reusable shopping bags and water bottles. Our voice is all those who make the choice to forgo fertilizers and understand that the perfection of a lawn is nothing compared to the protection of our ponds. It is families who make the heroic and generous choice to explore conservation restrictions for their land. Our voice is a beautiful reciprocity, a call and response, where your concerns alert us to causes, and our campaigns and calls to action hopefully activate and inspire you.

Despite worrying about the many issues we face, my dedication to this work is driven by hope. The ability to speak up about the Island and this organization that I feel so passionately about – this is how I want to use my voice, and it is how I aim to inspire all of you to use yours. It is by some incredible good fortune that we all have a connection to this special place. It is an uncommon privilege and an uncommon responsibility and we come to it at an uncommonly complex time.

It is my wish that VCS be a place you can find strength, inspiration, action, community and often enough, hope. I look forward to leading the way forward alongside all of you. Thank you!



### *Vineyard Conservation, then and now*

Left: Flanked by federal, state, and tribal officials, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall speaks at the August 1966 dedication of the Gay Head Cliffs (photo by Walter Delaney).  
Right: Moshup Trail Sanctuary today (photo by Mya O’Neill).

# Exit Interview



VCS mission is much broader. We're not a land trust. We're an environmental group, taking on the full range of sustainability issues for the Island. Recently, for example, we've put in a lot of work on reducing pollution from disposable plastics (an issue that wasn't so much on the radar 30-40 years ago, even if it should have been). We also sponsor a lot of community events to help raise awareness, like the Earth Day Beach Cleanup, the student art and writing contest, an annual environmental film festival, and so many more.

Before longtime Executive Director Brendan O'Neill could clock out for the final time this summer, he had one last assignment to complete. Our self-effacing leader, typically deferential in conversation despite possessing a mental warehouse of relevant information, was going to have to talk about...*himself*. We hope you enjoy the BON Exit Interview!

## What are your thoughts looking back on 38 years at the helm of VCS?

It has been an honor serving, and something I've very much enjoyed, despite the challenges. Of course, the challenges are what this environmental advocacy work is all about. We've accomplished some meaningful things that I think have made a real difference for Martha's Vineyard, things that have helped make it a better place.

The work has been a good fit for me and great fun, despite the hurdles. And the accomplishments – always in partnership with towns and individuals and agencies and colleague groups – speak for themselves.

I think VCS is one of several Island institutions (including the MV Commission and the Land Bank) that have changed our trajectory on MV for the better over the years.

So I'm proud of what's been done, and am excited about the good work continuing. I look forward to passing the torch and giving Sam and staff, our next generation of environmentalists, an opportunity to step up and shine. VCS is in good hands. The community can expect good things!

## What do you think the future looks like?

The hurdles aren't insignificant. Some of our biggest challenges remain – climate impacts loom large, and there remains a need to bring more sustainable practices to the Island across a wide range of sectors.

The issues are serious, but so are the people working on them.

The Island has been fortunate in having a core of environmental leaders who have served for decades and know the ropes, and are committed to the best interests of the Island. Sam exemplifies that tradition, having grown up here, and having worked for more than ten years as a VCS staff member.

## What is it about VCS that has engendered such loyal support over more than 50 years?

VCS is intriguing to many because of its multidisciplinary charge – of advocacy, education, and outreach to advance protection of the land and waters of MV. That's something I've very much enjoyed navigating over the years.

I think people appreciate that the Island has in VCS a strong organization focused on local environmental issues. The community relies on VCS to be the advocacy voice for Martha's Vineyard. The land can't speak for itself – so VCS is that voice, for the land and water, our habitats and natural assets.

That advocacy role is a powerful way for citizens to have a say in future land-use decisions here. It empowers people. They have a hand in shaping decisions about what kind of development is and isn't acceptable. I think VCS has contributed in a significant way to steering that conversation, and our members value that.

## What about your contribution to land conservation?

I'm proud of the land protection work, typically accomplished in collaboration with public and private partners and, of course, the landowners. The Moshup Trail Sanctuary is the flagship, and remains an active project. And conserving land in the watersheds of the Mill Brook and Tiasquam River – much-loved places like the Woods Preserve, Polly Hill Arboretum, Waskosims Rock, Mermaid and Brookside Farms – that has been particularly gratifying.

But it is important to say that, while land protection outcomes like those are often the go-to indicator of achievement for an organization like ours, the

## Can you speak more about the partnerships?

From the start, the theme of the organization was working together to serve the common good. Discussions about the shared responsibility for saving what is special about this place go back to 1956, when Chilmarker Dick Pough sat down with Roger Baldwin (of ACLU fame) and others. "Preserving the beauty of Martha's Vineyard" was the way they described the mission when the organization was launched in 1965, led by early members like Ann Simon, Michael Straight, Henry Beetle Hough, Leona Baumgartner, Allan Keith, Jerry Weisner, John Oakes, Ed Tyra, Ozzie and Arnie Fischer, Tom Benton, Kit Cornell, Julian Hill, Ed Logue, and others.

Within two years that group sponsored a partnership called the "Martha's Vineyard Conservation Council," which included VCS, Sheriff's Meadow, Felix Neck Wildlife Trust, Friends of Tisbury, and the East Chop Association, with the goal of coordinating the efforts of those early conservationists. Ten years later, five groups came together to build the Mary Wakeman Conservation Center, a practical measure to provide a shared workspace and reduce overhead. More recently, the Conservation Partnership was created to host regular roundtable meetings of the land protection organizations.

While VCS has always prided itself on being a generalist environmental group, one of the things that's been great to see in recent years is the proliferation of new organizations working on specific issues, for example in the areas of biodiversity, water quality, pond protection, food security, and energy. As in nature, diversity is strength!

## Any observations about your own journey throughout the years at VCS?

Being an environmentalist and a land conservation professional has been an ideal job for me – working to get land conserved, using litigation to defend it when necessary, teaching others about the importance of protected land and open space. And the flexibility in tackling the larger sustainability agenda has been



Photos, clockwise from top left: protection of the Lobsterville moors from unfettered development conservation restrictions at Brookside Farm, Woods, and Jones family properties together protect Nature of Change); Frances Newhall Woods Preserve, Dec. 2022 (Signe Benjamin); Waskosims

rewarding, as we face so many threats to our natural assets.

The Vineyard has clearly undergone rapid change during my time at VCS, not all for the good. Yet, a friend pointed out that the rate of change here has been much LESS steep than elsewhere in the northeast. Small comfort, but true. What we've tried to do is to be an effective player in mitigating the worst impacts – steering toward better outcomes.

Over the years, the particular environmental issues tend to shift in response to need – for example, from an emphasis on farmland protection in the 1970s and 80s, to land-use litigation in the 90s and 2000s, to advocacy around sustainability issues more recently.

My time at VCS coincided with a particular phase of the Island's growth and development story where legal defense was an essential tool for protecting the environment. Milestone legal disputes included the Nobnocket mall controversy, saving Herring Creek Farm, numerous private golf developments (at Lambert's Cove, Southern Woodlands, Meetinghouse, Vineyard Acres II, and Down-Island Golf), and, of course, the more than 20 years of Moshup Trail litigation. And then there were a whole host of amicus briefs across the years. I suspect there will be a continuing need for that.

#### How is it that you arrived on Martha's Vineyard?

I visited the Island with my family in 1971 and was impressed with its rural character – so completely different from my experience up to that time. Several years later at Williams College my roommate was Dana Gaines from Edgartown, so I got a chance to visit during breaks. Then another friend, Thom Mayhew from Vineyard Haven, alerted me to the opportunity to apply for the Executive Director position at VCS in 1985. I made the decision to do environmental protection work here both because there was a clear need, and because it was (and still is) a beautiful place to live.

I grew up in Yonkers, NY and went to secondary school at Fordham Prep in the Bronx, which has the Jesuit ethos of service for the greater good. So landing at VCS made sense to me.

As a kid, the Bronx River was within walking distance of my house, and I was very interested in understanding the reasons for its sorry state. I was also drawn to the protected lands surrounding a nearby public reservoir created by the 1885 construction of the Kensico Dam. Unfortunately, it turns out that the dam was part of the reason for the decline of the Mighty Bronx River.

I'm also interested in human behavior, and at Williams studied neuroscience along with environmental science. During law school I spent time living here on MV, driving cab for Jon's Taxi and Hathaway's Taxi, a good way to

learn the physical – and political – landscape.

After receiving special certification training at the Pace Center for Environmental Legal Studies, it was time to consider my post-law-school job prospects. It came down to two choices, working for Anne Gorsuch's EPA (in NY or DC) or leading the VCS – that was an easy one.

#### What unique attributes most strike you about this place?

Fortunately, throughout my time here, the Island has consistently had strong volunteer leadership in key roles, in both the public and private sectors. It's been a great experience working with colleagues and board members from many different generations, including some from the pre-WWII years. Though they often approached things from very different perspectives, what they shared in common was a deep love of this place, and a recognition of the need for action to protect it. Many were invaluable mentors, providing guidance and inspiration, and their experience and wisdom was a big part of our success.

Another fascinating dynamic is that we are six very independent towns, with a wide diversity of people and perspectives. But we all also acknowledge – and are fiercely defensive of the fact – that we're living together on an Island, committed to being one Island community. Not unrelated, if perhaps strangely, the thing I did with my first paycheck from VCS was to frame a photograph, the iconic "Blue Marble" image of the Earth taken on the Apollo 17 mission. That photo had a profound impact on me as a teen, and it still hangs in the VCS office.

#### Is there any particular advice you'd offer to your successor?

Being a good listener is essential. An early mentor provided the best advice – just listen for the first few years. Then when you have something to say, people will pay attention. Of course, keeping quiet wasn't



always possible with the challenges we were facing. But my preference is still to really listen to what people have to say rather than doing a lot of talking.

#### Any big picture final thoughts?

You do what you can. You work to the best of your ability using the skills you have, then step back. My goal has always been to serve – to try to make the Island a better place – through actions like conserving land and promoting sustainability.

As a community, we still have an opportunity – and I would argue an obligation – to protect the natural attributes of the land. Protecting ecological functionality is essential if we are to make the Island a sustainable place to live. The important point is to look forward – and for the VCS membership and board to support Sam and the staff as they continue this critical work. I trust the community will continue its strong support for VCS and the other Island institutions working on behalf of the Island's future.

#### Is there a "Next Act" in the works?

I hope to throttle back some, and look forward to having more time to tackle my wish list – which right now includes musical pursuits, kayaking, and travel with family. But I don't plan to go too far!

*Thank you Brendan, and enjoy retirement – you've earned it!*



was a formative accomplishment of a fledgling VCS (Brendan O'Neill); a significant portion of the Tiasquam watershed (MV Landscapes: The Rock Reservation, 1990 (Mark Lovewell)).



Post Office Box 2189  
Vineyard Haven, MA 02568  
(508) 693-9588  
vineyardconservation.org

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