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Local grassroots groups protect estuary

Partnership preserves and earns funds



Peter Wellenberger, of NH Fish and Game, left, Dea Brickner-Wood, and Duane Hyde of the Nature Conservancy stand on protected acreage around Great Bay in Newmarket. The Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership has protected 4,800 acres around the area.

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Thirty-four years ago, Great Bay caught the attention of shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, who wanted to build an oil refinery on Durham Point. Grassroots resistance stopped the refinery and, according to a spokesman for a protective partnership of Great Bay, galvanized efforts to protect the estuary that today has led to more than 6,000 acres preserved.

Nine organizations that make up the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership buy the land through funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Since forming in 1994, the partnership has gotten \$55 million in grants, bought 3,000 acres of land around Great Bay and protected 1,800 more acreage through easements, according to Eric Aldrich of the Nature Conservancy. Another 3,000 acres has been protected by individual, private funds.

"They're all private landowners, sometimes companies and trusts," said Duane Hyde, director of land protection for the Nature Conservancy, the agency that handles the acquisitions.. "Most people are very interested and supportive of conservation and in seeing their land protected. The only reason they may be developing the property is because it's a source of income for retirement. We've been able to offer them the alternative of conservation.

"It's a win-win," said Hyde. "The majority of lands protected is forested with large wetlands."

Much of the protected land is in Stratham, Newmarket, Durham and Madbury. The population of Rockingham and Strafford counties increased by 86 percent between 1970 and 2000, according to Aldrich.

"It's not cheap," said Aldrich. "This is one of the fastest growing places in the Northeast. Some of the most significant bio-diversity lies in Great Bay. Land protected now and in the next 10 years is going to define what this area is going to look like."

This spring, the Environmental Protection Agency recognized the partner's efforts by giving the group a 2007 EPA New England Environmental Merit Award at Faneuil Hall in Boston.

This is the second time the Great Bay partnership has earned EPA's merit award. The first time was in 1997, three years after its formation.

Most of the work has focused on property around Great and Little Bay and the rivers feeding them. The Lamprey, Swamscott and Winnicut rivers flow into Great Bay; the Bellamy, Cocheco, Oyster and Salmon Falls rivers flow into Little Bay and the Piscataqua River.

The Great Bay Resource Protective Partnership has protected an estimated 60 percent of its targeted area, said Hyde, such as 600 of the 900 acres that make up the Great Bog off of Route 33 in Portsmouth, and 1,500 acres of wetlands and beaver pools in Durham and Newmarket called the Crommet and Lubberland Creek Basins.

Most of the protected areas are open to the public. The partnership is in the process of outlining access areas on its Web site, said Hyde.

"I think it means a lot to the quality of life for people in the area," he said. "A lot of the properties conserved have road frontage and scenic roads, (such as) Newington Road in Greenland. From a boat you can see these wonderful places."

The ecological benefits drives the partnership's efforts. "Wildlife is one of the main driving forces behind the partnership," said Aldrich. "The places the partnership is protecting are places identified by biologists and scientists as having the best wildlife habitat value in the area."

High on the priority list is waterfowl such as black ducks; also reptiles and amphibians. Salamanders and other reptiles breed in vernal pools, small temporary pools that form in the spring.

Great Bay is saltwater and tidally influenced, connected to the ocean by the Piscataqua River. "The estuary is essentially a nursery for many commercial saltwater species," said Aldrich. "Other fish, rainbow smelt, herring, eels, migrate between the ocean and the freshwater rivers." The land supports white-tailed deer and the rare New England cottontail, among other wildlife.

The Nature Conservancy, after acquiring the land, often turns it over to the state Fish and Game Department.

Peter Wellenberger manages the Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve for state Fish and Game. The research reserve and its conservation education headquarters is the Great Bay Discovery Center in Greenland.

Senator Judd Gregg has been instrumental in getting funds for the research reserve, Wellenberger said.

"We had to do this now due to pressure of development in the area," said Wellenberger. The recent EPA award is testament to the success of the partnership and focuses, Wellenberger said, "on some of our accomplishments, protecting all of this wonderful land around Great Bay."

Dea Brickner-Wood oversees all nine partners as Great Bay coordinator. "It's a group that has put itself together, to be action oriented, to get results," she said. "Over the years we've really developed a model for making decisions."

The Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership includes Ducks Unlimited; Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve; state Fish and Game; The Nature Conservancy, New Hampshire chapter; the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests; the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge); New Hampshire Audubon; and the U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service.