

Four-mile Sweet Trail Open in Durham

Thursday, May 27, 2010

DURHAM — More than 60 nature lovers and outdoor enthusiasts recently joined the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, the Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, The Nature Conservancy, and the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership to celebrate the opening of the new Sweet Trail in Durham.

The four-mile-long Sweet Trail leads hikers by an array of forests, freshwater wetlands, and tidal salt marsh among 1,870 acres of conservation land. The trail was built by local volunteers with assistance from the Appalachian Mountain Club, and year-round volunteers help maintain and monitor the trail. A map of the complete trail can be downloaded at <http://forestsociety.org/pdf/sweet-trail-brochure.pdf>.

The Forest Society's Dame Forest reservation lies at the north end of the trail. Beaver have created dramatic wetlands that include stretches of open water — areas that provide habitat for waterfowl, wading birds, turtles, and amphibians. The Dame Forest and surrounding landscape are part of the larger Great Bay estuary watershed, which is recognized as an estuarine ecosystem of local, state, and national significance.

Great Bay has been a focus of New Hampshire's conservation planning and management since the 1940s. The five rivers flowing into Great Bay draw a tidal flush of salt water from the Atlantic Ocean nearly five miles east of the estuary itself. The mixing of fresh and salt water creates a rich aquatic habitat. The estuary's healthy salt and brackish marsh, eelgrass beds, and mud flats provide feeding, breeding, and nursery grounds for finfish, oysters, shellfish, waterfowl, wading birds, and shorebirds. The Great Bay estuary's inland location not only makes it unique both in terms of ecosystem and wildlife, but also exceptionally vulnerable to human pressures and threats.

In 1973 shipping and oil magnate Aristotle Onassis planned to build the world's largest oil refinery on these lands here on Durham Point, with a pipeline stretching all the way out to the Isles of Shoals. Had those plans materialized, they would have forever changed the nature of Great Bay and New Hampshire's coast. In 1974, however, the plans were defeated by well-organized local residents who understood these lands' value for nature, recreation, and beauty.

The Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership is a group of organizations committed to protecting the important habitats of the Great Bay Region. Since 1994, the Partnership has conserved 1,787 acres within the watershed. The Partnership's conservation efforts include science and research based decision making for land conservation actions, collaborative landscape scale stewardship and management, and providing recreation and education opportunities. For more information, visit www.greatbaypartnership.org or contact infogreatbaypartnership.org or 603-224-9945.