

Bringing Back The Wetlands

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Craig Kessler of Ducks Unlimited, up to his elbows in mud from planting marsh grasses, pointed across the marshlands bordering Beaver Dam Creek in Brookhaven Hamlet.

“You can already see improvements in the ecology of this wetland. There’s an increase in use by waterfowl, native fish and blue claw crabs as tidal flow has returned to the marsh and natural plants have begun to take hold. We had to take over 10,000 cubic yards of fill out from this eight-acre parcel in order to return the marsh to its original elevation.”

Looking west across the wide tidal area it was apparent that this was no small task that DU had taken on with its community partners, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, the town of Brookhaven, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Suffolk County Parks, Suffolk County Office of Ecology, Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District, NY Sea Grant, the Post Morrow Foundation, Friends of Wurtheim and countless volunteers from local schools and the community. It takes a village, as they say. In this case, it takes a hamlet and a huge commitment from many sources to form something like the Beaver Dam Creek Task Force, dedicated to revitalizing this once pristine and productive estuary.

Like most tidal estuaries, Beaver Dam Creek has been dredged, filled and otherwise disturbed to the point that its productivity and ecological value as a tidal estuary have been greatly compromised. With dredge spoil and other fill piled high along its banks, natural tidal action along the bordering marshes has been eliminated in many areas along the creek, and invasive plants like Phragmites, or giant reed as it is also known, have smothered out native plants and productive nesting areas. Once productive tidal pools and drains have been filled, they decrease use of the marsh by native fish and wildlife.

In the 1600s it is estimated that there were some 220 million acres of wetlands in what was to become the lower contiguous 48 states. Since that time more than 50% of these original wetlands have been lost with some of the greatest losses occurring from the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s. While the losses have decreased since then due to protection by legislation and zoning, more than 58,000 acres continue to be lost annually in the U.S. These losses continue to occur due to a variety of factors, including continued encroachment from development, natural filling from sediment and runoff, growth of non-native plants, erosion, drought, hurricanes and a measurable rise in sea level.

Restoring a wetland is no small order, but for an important ecosystem like Beaver Dam Creek it is well worth the effort. Despite the modifications to it over the years, it is still a productive habitat. Development along its shores has been limited and it is one of the few South Shore creeks that still supports a healthy population of sea run brown trout.

Of course the people who own the property have to be willing to participate in the project. In this instance the property was owned by the Post Morrow Foundation, a private organization dedicated to maintaining the historical nature of Brookhaven Hamlet through preservation. Additionally, you have to form a plan with the assistance of professional ecologists and biologists to restore the area to its original condition.

In this project, once the original elevation of the marsh was restored, tidal channels and four tidal pools were constructed through careful planning. Finally, many hands make light work, and it has taken a swarm of volunteers to plant native salt marsh grasses and assure their protection from hungry geese and environmental degradation. This eight-acre restoration project is just the beginning.

Projects such as this one do more than just benefit the local ecology of an area. They also bring a sense of awareness and stewardship to an entire community and beyond. Students from as far away as the Bayview Elementary School in West Islip, under the guidance of Catherine McConnell, have raised funds through bake and craft sales, and have pitched in to plant grasses at the project site. In addition, these kids have adopted 63 acres of rain forest through a program with the Nature Conservancy. Teaching that kind of stewardship and environmental awareness should give all of us hope for the future, as should the return of this natural ecosystem in one of our important outdoor corners, along the shores of Beaver Dam Creek.

For information or to assist call Kenny Budny of the Post-Morrow Foundation at 631-286-0686 or visit the web at www.postmorrow.org

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