



A PUBLIC BEACH IN A NATURAL AREA – PART ONE

June 2, 2024 David Smith Alliance Historical 4 comments

From the Archives: A Public Beach in a Natural Area

Introduction

Ossipee Lake Natural Area has always drawn boaters. Set apart from everyone and everything, the wild, undeveloped stretch of land west of the Long Sands residential community has gorgeous mountain views and a shoreline with shallow water and a sandy bottom. Rumors about quicksand and ghosts add to its mystique.

Boaters made it a playground as the lake was developed for summer cottages and family resorts in the 1940s and '50s, and their number grew after a second building wave brought condos and campgrounds in the 1980s.

In 1993, the legislature's decision to mandate unlimited no-cost boat access to state lakes through unstaffed public ramps marked the end of several promising state initiatives to establish benchmarks for responsible levels of boat traffic to protect the quality of recreation and the environment.

By the end of the 1990s, as many as 3,000 boaters could be found at the Natural Area on holiday weekends. Tents, lawn chairs and portable grills dotted the beach, and there was trash, loud music, human excrement, unleashed dogs and open fires.

The property had become a public nuisance. Not just to abutting property owners, but to local police and Marine Patrol officers, who viewed the combination of large crowds, drinking and a remote location as potential trouble.

Biologists who studied the Natural Area had a different set of concerns. Boaters were unknowingly grinding the property's unique environmental assets into oblivion, killing rare plants and destroying natural communities that are found there and nowhere else.

Everyone agreed something needed to be done, but year after year nothing changed. As the summer of 2000 approached, the Natural Area was in an environmental death spiral. How it was brought back from the brink is a story worth retelling.

Part I: The Beginning

Picture the lake a century ago. In the early 1900s, the Natural Area was part of a huge parcel of undeveloped land running from the Ossipee River through Leavitt Bay and Broad Bay and on to Pine River.



Post card, likely from the 1920s, shows the lake prior to being extensively developed for cottages, children's camps and family resorts. Alliance Collection

For years this giant land buffer protected the water supply for a succession of water power companies. But the profitability of water power declined as cheaper sources came to market, and by the end of the 1930s the last water power company closed shop and put its land on the market.

The Developers

Most of the undeveloped land was purchased by White & Sawyer, an Ossipee real estate development firm. From the 1940s into the 1960s, the company developed and sold hundreds of shorefront lots for seasonal camps and cottages, including the land where the Long Sands residential community is today.

Left untouched, however, were 400 acres of rough terrain and dense wetlands next to Long Sands.

In the late 1960s the partners decided to sell that acreage to the State of New Hampshire. The state paid \$320,000 and agreed to a covenant that the property be used solely for education or recreation.

What the state thought it might do with the land is lost to time. But from the start it was clear it lacked a plan to manage it while it considered the options. An orphan among state properties, its stewardship fell to the Department of Resources and Economic Development, known as DRED.

The Biologists

At the time of the state's purchase of the property, Barre Hellquist was a graduate biology student at the University of New Hampshire who worked during summers at Deer Cove Lodge, a popular family resort on the lake. On his days off he would canoe from his parents' cottage to the Natural Area to document the site for his dissertation.

What he found there was eye-opening. Peat mats extended into the lake from the shore through soft, multi-colored sands. Along the shoreline were plants with poetic names like Mermaid Weed, Virginia Beauty and Euthamia.

Most of what he documented was unusual, and some of it was rare. Plus, by growing together the plants formed unique plant communities that Hellquist had never seen.

After he published his findings, other biologists took note. One of them was Dan Sperduto, who in 1984 wrote for the University of Vermont that the Natural Area had the largest collection of rare plants found in New Hampshire's "sandy pondshore" ecosystems, and contained an "inland beach strand community" of a type not known to exist anywhere else.



Biologist Barre Hellquist was the first to publish articles about the Natural Area's uniqueness. Alliance Photo

More than a decade would pass before Sperduto was able to return to the site, this time on behalf of DRED's Natural Heritage Bureau, the state's custodian of the property.

Sperduto reported that the unique environmental assets he had previously written about were in "a steep decline" from damage by boaters, and he called on DRED and local officials to "make a more concerted effort" to balance preservation and recreation.

But nothing happened, and another decade would pass before the Natural Heritage Bureau returned. In a 2003 report, the researchers said recreation by boaters and erosion from high water had wiped out or severely degraded four rare plant species and the rare coastal sand plain pondshore natural communities.

In addition to before-and-after pictures of plant destruction, the report contained photos of litter, human waste, fire pits and vandalized signs. A canoe was shown padlocked to a tree, and there was a storage bin filled with beach chairs and grills hidden in the woods.

Appealing to DRED's leaders, the researchers said controlling recreation and implementing an "immediate restoration plan" was the only hope of preventing the loss of the remaining rare plants. But, once again, DRED did nothing.

DRED

Consider the state agency that was DRED. For years it was an umbrella organization for four important state government functions. One recruited new business to the state, while another managed state parks for recreation. A third function focused on attracting tourists, and a fourth oversaw state-owned forests and lands. Each function had an executive leader who reported to DRED's Commissioner.

In theory, DRED's structure provided a single marketing platform to attract people and commerce to the state by leveraging its scenic beauty and quality of life. In reality, it was a portfolio of competing interests and priorities led by a succession of political appointees plucked from wildly different backgrounds.

In March, 2004, Republican Governor Craig Benson tapped career hotel executive Sean O'Kane to become DRED's commissioner, replacing George Bald, who was appointed by the previous governor, Democrat Jeanne Shaheen.

At the time of his recruitment, O'Kane was general manager of the Center of New Hampshire Holiday Inn, described in a DRED press release as "the largest convention hotel north of Boston."

The appointment of O'Kane at DRED barely made a news ripple on the lake, where property owners and town officials were just beginning to realize that they, and not the state, were going to have to pay to control the lake's growing number of milfoil infestations.

But it wasn't long before O'Kane made a splash. Seven months into his new job, the former hotelier shook hands with State Representative and Ossipee Selectman Harry Merrow on an agreement for DRED to lease part of the Natural Area to Ossipee for a town beach for \$1 per year.

It was handshake that would roil the lake community for the next four years.

Next: Ossipee officials line up voter support for a Natural Area beach.

4 COMMENTS

MARTHA COUTURE 3 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 3, 2024

Best article I have read on this site! I will definitely support OLA!

REPLY

MEGAN F 3 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 3, 2024

Wow. I love the cliff hanger ...and half way through the article, I spent 30 min googling everything about Ossipee Lake. Looking forward to Part II.

REPLY

RICHARD LOVER 3 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 3, 2024

Excellent report David and a great beginning of what is still to come! Can't wait to read more.

REPLY

STEVE FOLEY 3 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 3, 2024

I will surely forward your series to our neighbors not so much a reminder of all the attention to detail needed to preserve our Lake showing pressures of activities but as historic facts which clearly shows stewardship is the means of preservation.

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A PUBLIC BEACH IN A NATURAL AREA – PART TWO

June 3, 2024 David Smith Alliance Historical 2 comments

From the Archives: A Public Beach in a Natural Area

Part Two: Ossipee Makes its Case for a Beach

Ossipee has always wanted a town beach on its namesake lake. But when money was plentiful, shorefront property wasn't available, and vice versa. Small wonder that State Representative Harry Merrow's November 2004 announcement of a beach deal with DRED was cheered by town officials and residents alike.

Not so conservationists and lake organizations, which had been lobbying DRED for years to protect the Natural Area property from ongoing destruction. One organization, Green Mountain Conservation Group, knew the property well, having convinced DRED's former commissioner, George Bald, to deny a previous Ossipee proposal for a town beach on the property.

In his rejection of that proposal, Bald wrote that a beach would be an "incompatible use" of the Natural Area, adding that the site "deserved to be protected."

That was in 1999. Five year later, Bald was out, hotel executive Sean O'Kane was in, and another Ossipee beach proposal was on the table. Green Mountain's Executive Director, Blair Folts, realized the fight to protect the Natural Area from development would have to be waged all over again.

The Experts

By January, 2005, planning for a beach was in full swing at Ossipee Town Hall, with Select Board members working on warrant articles for a vote at the March 9 Town Meeting.

At DRED, meanwhile, the beach idea was making the rounds with the agency's decision-makers. One of them was Allison McLean, a 15-year DRED veteran who had worked her way up to become Director of Parks and Recreation in October, 2004. A few weeks later, the beach proposal landed on her desk.

Lionel Chute was another department head. Chute held advanced degrees in forestry and ran DRED's Natural Heritage Bureau, whose staff had been unsuccessfully raising alarms about the Natural Area site for years. Also on the evaluation team was State Archeologist Dr. Richard Boisvert, who headed the agency's Division of Historical Resources.



A collage of some of the pictures reviewed by state and local officials after repeated pleas from state biologists to restrict recreation at the Natural Area. Alliance Photos

Merrow's pitch for the project was straight forward. In a newspaper interview he summed up the Natural Area situation as: People are urinating in the water and defecating in the bushes and there are problems with trash.

But, "with properly run facilities at a town beach...at least that section of the beach would be kept in better shape than it is."

Parks and Recreation Director McLean liked Merrow's thinking and told a reporter that "Anything's got to be better than what's currently going on."

"Now there is no control, no management [and] people are doing whatever they want," she said, apparently forgetting that her agency was responsible for managing the property.

While McLean pressed the proposal's accelerator, Chute and Boisvert pumped the brakes. Chute's biologists worried that bringing in more people would destroy the remaining rare plants, while Boisvert's archeologists fretted that the site's documented historical artifacts would be plundered if the site were made easier to access.

In a joint letter, Chute and Boisvert advised Ossipee that it would have to conduct two studies—an environmental impact study and an archeological study. The studies would be expensive, they said, and either one might produce a finding that doomed the beach proposal, meaning the money would be a sunk cost to the town.

That same week, the Carroll County Independent reported that even if Ossipee could meet the state's technical and regulatory requirements for a beach, the facility could not be limited to town residents. It would have to be a state public beach funded and managed by the Town of Ossipee.

Town Meeting

Harry Merrow made his case at Town Meeting in March 2005. A \$1 per year lease with DRED would give Ossipee 600 feet of shoreline and land access from Route 25. The town would construct a parking lot off the highway and build a boardwalk to the lake over the wetlands. Swim lines would keep boaters away from bathers, and portable toilets would be rented annually.

Merrow emphasized the low cost to the town. He said Ossipee's Highway Department would build the parking lot and access road, and volunteers would fund and build the boardwalk, much as they had done at near-by Constitution Park.

He downplayed the possibility that the required impact studies might scuttle the project, and said it was fine if non-residents used the beach because their entrance fees would help the town cover operating costs.

"I would expect the beach to be self-funded," he said.

Town residents spoke mainly in favor, while non-resident taxpayers, conservationists and lake organizations largely objected.

Bob McDonald of Long Sands Association said he supported Ossipee having a beach on the lake, but said the Natural Area plan was "too uncertain at this point for people to support it with a vote." Blair Folts of Green Mountain Conservation Group pointed to the rare plant species and offered to work with the town to find a different beach site on the lake.

Despite the opposition and financial uncertainties, town voters approved the beach proposal by a wide margin, earmarking \$20,000 for construction costs provided that the lease with DRED was no more than \$100 annually.

Escalating Uncertainties

In Concord, meanwhile, DRED did not share Merrow's rosy financial picture. The agency had warned town officials that the required impact studies could be expensive for the town, and now the bill was coming due.

As a State Representative as well as an Ossipee Selectman, Merrow had a formidable voice. He argued that the agency should pay for the studies because the state owned the land. DRED countered that the beach was Ossipee's idea so the town should pay. DRED prevailed on the point.

There was more. In July, the Select Board met with Edna Feighner, an archeologist with Dick Boisvert's group. Emptying a bag of dusty stone chips on a table in Town Hall, she told the board the chips were evidence that the Natural Area was occupied more than 10,000 years ago—long before the Abenakis are known to have settled there.

The chips meant that an archeological dig would be needed to determine the Natural Area's cultural value. A dig could take months, she said, and the more they found, the longer the process and the greater the cost.

"I have no idea how much it might cost," she told the Select Board. "But it's up to the Town of Ossipee to foot the bill."

July also brought a letter from Natural Heritage Bureau Administrator Lionel Chute. Before the archeology study could begin, he wrote, the site's rare plants and plant communities would have to be mapped to protect them from the archeological dig. The cost of the maps would be in addition to the required environmental impact studies.

What's more, Chute wrote, since the beach could potentially attract large crowds, Ossipee would be expected to develop "a comprehensive strategy" and provide "staff enforcement" to keep beachgoers out of the rest of the Natural Area property.

Ominous signs also emanated from Parks and Recreation, where Allison McLean's happy talk about the beach had cooled after Merrow tried to push the project's costs onto her department.

In a newspaper interview, she conceded for the first time that the beach might place rare plants at risk, adding that only the required impact studies would tell the tale.

"State agencies are willing to work with the town if it goes through with the extensive studies," she said through a spokesperson in what may have been an oblique suggestion that Ossipee consider withdrawing from the project if it wasn't willing to pay the costs.

Then she dropped a bombshell. Elaborating on what Chute had alluded to the previous week, she said that if the project went forward, the town would need more than a strategy to keep people inside the "beach bubble." DRED expected the town to manage the entire 400-acre Natural Area property.

Next: Proponents and opponents dig in, and the discussion turns heated.



One of the state's original signs at the site. The number of staples suggests how often they were ripped down and replaced. Alliance Photo

2 COMMENTS

RON LARRIVEE 3 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 4, 2024

Very interesting article that explains a lot of issues a lot of people didn't know. Thanks for sharing

REPLY

TIM OTTERBACH 3 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 4, 2024

Several years ago, while a member of the Ossipee Conservation Commission, I had a few discussions with a then member of the Select Board regarding the Town Beach proposal issues. In the town, there was a serious lack of concerns for the cited environmental issues surrounding both the Ossipee Lake Natural Area, as well as another potential site for a town beach. It is unfortunate that in the years past, the town did not have the foresight to acquire the then available land for a developed town beach.

With proper management of the OLN, with a joint effort of all concerned parties, the "stakeholders": State Agencies, the Town of Ossipee, Various Lake Associations, and local Conservation Groups, the continued use of the designated areas of the beach front and adjacent waters, will provide some access to local residents and visitors, to our lake.

However, many town residents who are not boaters cannot access this Lakefront area.

Perhaps with some long term planning both financially and logistically, the town will, in the future, be able to acquire property on the shores of our Lake or Bays for a viable town beach.

REPLY

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A PUBLIC BEACH IN A NATURAL AREA – PART THREE

June 4, 2024 David Smith Alliance Historical 1 Comment

From the Archives: A Public Beach in a Natural Area

Part Three: A War of Words

By Labor Day, 2005, supporters and opponents of a beach in the Natural Area had hardened their positions and frustration was in the air. Frustration would soon turn to harsh words.

DRED's statements about costs and responsibilities made it clear a beach in the Natural Area would not be the inexpensive proposition town officials had presented to voters in March.

Letters about costs appeared in the Carroll County Independent, and the newspaper itself questioned the expense, reminding the Select Board that the town already faced unbudgeted expenses of up to \$250,000 annually to comply with new environmental regulations for the town incinerator.

If there were financial doubts at Town Hall, however, they didn't show. The mood there was optimistic, with Selectman and State Representative Harry Merrow calling concerns about the beach "premature," and expressing doubts that the impact studies would produce anything to stop the development project. Pressing ahead, the town hired The Nature Conservancy to begin work on the required plant inventory.



Select Board member Joe Skehan conceded the town beach on Duncan Lake was little used. Merrow disagreed. Alliance Photo

Meanwhile, opponents of the beach began peppering state officials with questions. Ossipee Lake Alliance publicly asked DRED why it thought Ossipee needed a gift of state land for a beach when the town already had two underutilized public beaches and access to near-by White Lake State Park.

Seemingly surprised by the question, DRED threw it to Merrow, who said swimming at the town's Constitution Park shoreline was prohibited by the Marine Patrol, and White Lake was overcrowded and often turned away beachgoers on busy

weekends. State officials quickly shot down both of Merrow's claims.

As for the town beach on Duncan Lake, Select Board member Joe Skehan conceded that "very few people use it" after reviewing pictures showing the beach with only a handful of people on a hot August Saturday. Merrow, who was not at the meeting, later said he disagreed with Skehan's assessment.

Tempers flared. The Carroll County Independent published an aerial photo of hundreds of boaters at the Natural Area site and quoted Merrow asking "How come they [opponents of his plan] are so concerned about us using the beach when they [the opponents] don't do anything about those people?" [meaning the boaters].

In response, Ossipee Lake Alliance's David Smith pointed to the irony of a State Representative asking why local lake and conservation organizations had failed to solve a long-standing, well-documented state problem.

"Instead of working with the lake community and environmental groups on a solution, Merrow spent much of last year in private negotiations with [DRED Commissioner] Bald's successor to bring more people to the site," Smith said.

The aerial photo caused further friction after Merrow taped it to a Town Hall door with the caption: "This is the beach that some do not want the townspeople to use for fear they will damage the plants."



Controversy followed after Harry Merrow posted this picture and caption in a prominent location in Town Hall. Contributed Photo

Bob McDonald of Long Sands Association called the act gratuitously divisive. Addressing Merrow directly, he demanded equal time to post pictures of "other pet projects you have sponsored, such as Constitution Park Beach, to illustrate the town's poor track record in maintaining public recreational areas."

Merrow eventually took the picture down and said he had only posted it for the benefit of people who didn't know where the Natural Area was. But the reference to Constitution Park had hit a nerve.

Constitution Park abuts the Long Sands residential community and has wetlands, a small pond, sports fields and walking trails to the lake. It was the result of hundreds of hours of volunteer work, but in 2005 it was a mess.

Interpretive signs were broken or missing, boardwalk support posts were rotted, and ATVs raced around the property at night. Abutting property owner and Conservation Commission member Jean Hansen took pictures of the damage and submitted them to the Select Board.

From there, the pictures made their way to the Carroll County Independent, where they sparked an editorial scolding of the Select Board about its responsibilities. Not lost on anyone was that town officials had been using Constitution Park as evidence to DRED that it could manage the Natural Area.



In addition to vandalized signs and rotted boardwalk posts, Constitution Park was used as a dump for debris. Contributed Photo

With tension still in the air, the town released the initial plant survey in late October. The report said the beach site was a regionally rare sandy pondshore community system containing five distinct natural communities, four of which were rare in New Hampshire, and one of which was the state's only known example. Also found at the site was the endangered plant species Euthamia caroliniana.

Opponents of the beach said the report validated DRED's 1999 decision to prohibit development of the site. Merrow called the report inconclusive.

"You can read it three or four times and not be sure what it means," he said, adding that a plant community that is rare in New Hampshire might not necessarily be rare in another state.

He said further research was needed, and recommended that the Select Board proceed with the second phase of the plant inventory in the spring.

As boaters left the lake and the holidays approached, the Carroll County Independent named the beach-in-a-natural area its "story of the year." But in a matter of weeks, that story would be over and a new chapter would begin for the beleaguered property.

Next: A new governor changes everything.

1 COMMENT

RICHARD LOVER 3 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 5, 2024

Wow, the comment that Merrow only put the picture on the door to show people where Long Sands was located is like Justice Samuel Altio saying that it was his wife who put up the American flag flying upside down!!!!!! Harry give us a break.

Even though I was an active member of the committee appointed by the State for roughly 20 years.....reading the first two parts of this story has given me many new details and insights into this issue. Thanks David for putting this piece together for people to see.

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A PUBLIC BEACH IN A NATURAL AREA – PART FOUR

June 5, 2024 David Smith Alliance Historical 0 comments

From the Archives: A Public Beach in a Natural Area

Part 4: A Transition

"There's a time to hold 'em and a time to fold 'em, and now is the time to fold 'em," Harry Merrow told the Ossipee Select Board, channeling Kenny Rogers as he submitted a letter recommending that the town put the beach plan on hold.

It was February, 2006. The beach story had lasted 16 months and cost the town \$1,000, more or less. But it had been costly in other ways, pitting resident taxpayers against non-resident taxpayers, and conservation groups against state and local officials.

Ironically, the seeds of the demise of the beach proposal were sown the same month the plan was hatched—November, 2004. As Representative Merrow was announcing he had an agreement with DRED Commissioner O'Kane to lease land in the Natural Area, state voters were ending the tenure of Republican Governor Craig Benson after just two years in office.

Democrat John Lynch took over in January, 2005, and by the end of the year he had decided to replace O'Kane with George Bald—the commissioner whom Benson had replaced with O'Kane. The person who had rejected Ossipee's previous beach proposal.

Merrow was gracious in his comments about Bald, saying he had great personal respect for him and thought he was the right man for the job. But he said he had no illusions about the fate of the town's agreement with DRED. At Ossipee Town Hall the beach plan may have been officially on hold, but everyone knew it was dead.



Former DRED Commissioner George Bald is credited with mandating that the Natural Area be protected with a management plan to balance recreation and preservation. Contributed Photo

Bald took office in the spring of 2006, and immediately had Director of Forest and Lands Phil Bryce compile recommendations about the Natural Area. By August, the consensus at the agency was that closing the shoreline was the only way to protect the property until site-specific regulations could be written. Bald agreed, and said the closure would take place before the start of the summer of 2007.

Another Forum

But that didn't happen. Instead, DRED convened a local forum in the spring, and invited the public to discuss what should be done with the property. Predictably, the meeting was crowded and boisterous, reflecting the rancor that had led up to that point in time. In the end, it produced nothing new.

Lake and conservation groups were left wondering what had just happened. In theory, things were moving in the right direction under Bald. Yet it appeared the Natural Area shoreline might remain open for another summer despite consensus within the agency that doing so would result in further damage.

Green Mountain Conservation Group and Ossipee Lake Alliance privately worried that DRED's unexplained delay could mean the state would once again try to avoid making a tough decision.

There were similar concerns at the Ossipee and Effingham Conservation Commissions. Relatively muted voices in the debate to that point, they decided it was time to let DRED know what they thought.

Ossipee's chair Elizabeth Gillette honed-in on DRED's vague claim that it "couldn't do much" that summer because of "staff capacity issues" during "a busy time of the season."



A pre-season shot of Ossipee Lake Natural Area, prior to the arrival of summer boaters. GMCG Video Screen Grab

Making it clear that was unacceptable, she said twice-daily Ranger and Marine Patrol sweeps on busy weekends were the minimum the state needed to do if it wanted to be "taken seriously."

Effingham's chair Kamalendu Nath went further. In a letter to DRED's Phil Bryce, he excoriated the agency for the unexplained delay in closing the shoreline, and called for an easement or joint stewardship arrangement so the property could be turned over to The Nature Conservancy.

"An easement could ensure that the recurring failure and slow bleeding of our natural and cultural heritage comes to an end, once and for all," he wrote.

Despite the clamor, DRED remained silent. Inside the agency, however, it continued to be clear there was only one path forward. The data had been collected, the public had been given another chance to speak, and the facts were still the facts. It was time to pull the trigger and close the shoreline.

In mid-August the agency did so. With the exception of a small section of the shoreline, the property became off-limits until a management plan could be written and rolled-out the following summer. Park Rangers and Marine Patrol would ensure the closure order was followed.

The decision was logical, empirical and inevitable. But in retrospect, it could not have been easy for Bald to make, given the toxic stew of anger and power politics that had surrounded the issue for decades.

In the end, however, he made good on his 1999 declaration that the Natural Area property deserved to be protected. For the moment, at least, the Natural Area war was over. More good news would follow.

Next: Enter Don Kent.

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A PUBLIC BEACH IN A NATURAL AREA – PART FIVE

June 6, 2024 David Smith Alliance Historical 3 comments

From the Archives: A Public Beach in a Natural Area

Part 5: Managing Expectations

Anyone who has worked with state employees knows they come from a variety of backgrounds. Even in that diverse work environment, Don Kent stood out.

For a decade or more, Kent worked at Walt Disney Imagineering, where he was responsible for environmental research and planning for Disney's massive land holdings. Among his tasks was protecting more than 60 species during the construction of Walt Disney World and Disney's Animal Kingdom.

In November, 2007, Kent became Administrator of the Natural Heritage Bureau, making him the state's point person for juggling the competing interests of biologists, bureaucrats, elected officials, boaters, and conservationists.

To this potentially career-building or career-ending role was added the job of writing the Natural Area's first management plan. A briefing summary on the situation at that point might have read as follows:



Don Kent is credited with crafting the coalition that made the Natural Area management plan a reality. Photo: YouTube

"The state bought the property without a plan for it, and for 38 years allowed its irreplaceable environmental resources to be trashed. That failure resulted in public clashes between boaters and property owners, conservationists and local elected officials, and all of them against the state. The divisions among stakeholders are raw and deep, and a solution is nowhere in sight."

In Concord and on the lake, the consensus was that the Natural Area problems would never be solved, no matter who was in charge. Kent was determined to change that perception.

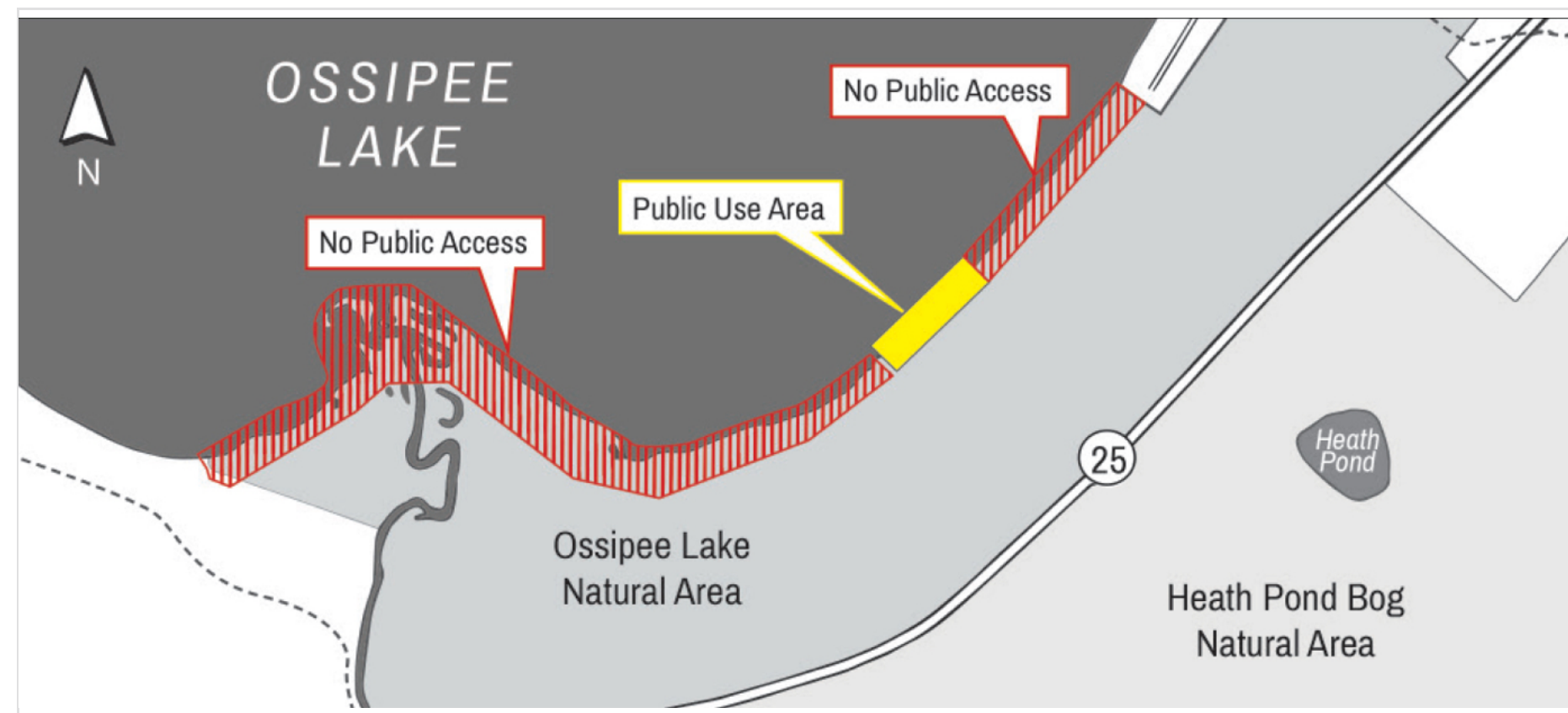
To dispel what he called "a lot of misinformation," he and State Environmental Specialist Melissa Coppola collated years of research to produce a definitive report documenting the site's "non-renewable, fragile and rare" natural resources.

Then, perhaps channeling marketing's "rule of three" from his private sector experience, he established three options for the management plan: Step away and do nothing, close the site permanently, or balance recreation and preservation. Predictably, consensus formed around the least extreme option of balancing competing interests, which became the goal.

Bringing the competing interests to the table, however, meant first getting them into the same room. To do that, Kent made an offer no one could refuse: Participate in a "Working Group" of lake stakeholders and help write the management plan, or sit it out on the sidelines. The gambit worked; all sides joined in.

In June, 2008, a draft management plan written by agency officials with stakeholder input was ready for release. But first, Kent gave everyone a dose of reality. No one would be getting everything they wanted, he said, and preservation, not recreation, was his agency's primary responsibility.

There was more. After an initial period during which the state would create wide public awareness of the plan, it would be up to local resources—meaning conservationists and boaters—to make it work.



The site's public use area was established in 2009 and remains the same today. Alliance/GMCG/DNCR pamphlet.

The gist of the plan was simple. Some 1,500 feet of shoreline would be open for low impact recreation, and the rest of the property would be off limits. The remainder of the document was largely boilerplate regulations pertaining to all public lands, including prohibitions against dogs, fires and camping.

Planning for implementation began on November 14 at Ossipee Town Hall, under Kent's direction. DRED was well-represented, as were Marine Patrol and various departments of DES.

Representing the boating community were Richard Lover of Milton, Allen McKenney of Hudson, and John Panagiotakos of Freedom. Also in the room were representatives of Ossipee Lake Alliance, Green Mountain Conservation Group, Long Sands Association and the three local town conservation commissions.

Lakefront Landing Marina and Campground represented the business community, and John Shipman and Sheila Jones represented the towns of Freedom and Effingham. Ossipee was represented by Harry Merrow.

It was a battle-scarred group reflecting the diversity of opinions that had steered the debate to that point. As they eyed one another warily across the meeting room tables, they got to work.

Many issues received quick top-line resolution, and then foundered. For example, it was easy to get consensus that boaters who violated the site rules should be held to account. But by whom?

DRED's Forest Rangers and Marine Patrol officers agreed they were the logical candidates, but both groups came prepared with a list of role conflicts, staffing issues and legal constraints that ensured neither could be fully counted on.

Swimmer safety? Water quality? The role of local officials? The questions to be addressed were logical and obvious, but solutions were as hard to come by as state funding.

When frustrations boiled over, Kent reminded the group that "all eyes were on the project," as the state's first such effort.

"We're not here to look backward and assign blame to boaters or to the state for the damage that has already been done," he said. "Our job is to look forward and make this plan work."



State officials and local volunteers celebrated completion of the Natural Area's first management plan with a clean-up day on May 15, 2009. Alliance Photo

With failure not an option, hardened positions gradually softened, aided by Kent's regular reminders to the group that success required boaters and conservationists to find common ground and work together. The meetings continued through the winter.

By the spring of 2009, they began to wind down. That May, Kent led DRED employees and Working Group members on a boat trip to pick up litter and haul away winter debris from the site. Then in June, the property's first-ever management plan went into effect.

At its core was the premise that boaters would self-monitor and encourage others to comply with the site regulations in order to keep the shoreline partially open for recreation. It was a kind of state-sponsored Hail Mary Pass.

No one was sure it would work, but there was a sense of accomplishment and optimism among the Working Group participants. With Commissioner Bald's commitment and Kent's leadership, they had seemingly accomplished the impossible.

Documenting the moment, Ossipee Lake Alliance took a picture of the clean-up team at the site, and devoted an entire issue of its newsletter to salute the groups that had participated.

Ironically, that month, June 2009, marked the 40th anniversary of the state's purchase of the property from White & Sawyer.

Next: Keeping the Management Plan Afloat

3 COMMENTS

TJ236 2 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 7, 2024

"At its core was the premise that boaters would self-monitor and encourage others to comply with the site regulations in order to keep the shoreline partially open for recreation. It was a kind of state-sponsored Hail Mary Pass."

Really? ...it's no wonder there is such little faith in government.

REPLY

TIM OTTERBACH 2 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 7, 2024

As noted in the discussion phase of developing this Management Plan, access to the selected shoreline of the OLN is a State granted privilege, not a right, and as part of the allowance of this privilege, it is the obligation and responsibility of the users to follow the established use regulations, basically self policing. When this is not accomplished, certain privileges will be rescinded.

REPLY

TJ236 2 WEEKS AGO

JUNE 7, 2024

Knowing human nature, the notion that self-policing would ever work is naive. Drive on any freeway at any time of the day to understand the inability of people to follow rules. If there is no system in place to enforce regulations, then there is little hope of compliance. Rescinding access to the beach is meaningless without enforcement.

REPLY

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A PUBLIC BEACH IN A NATURAL AREA – PART SIX

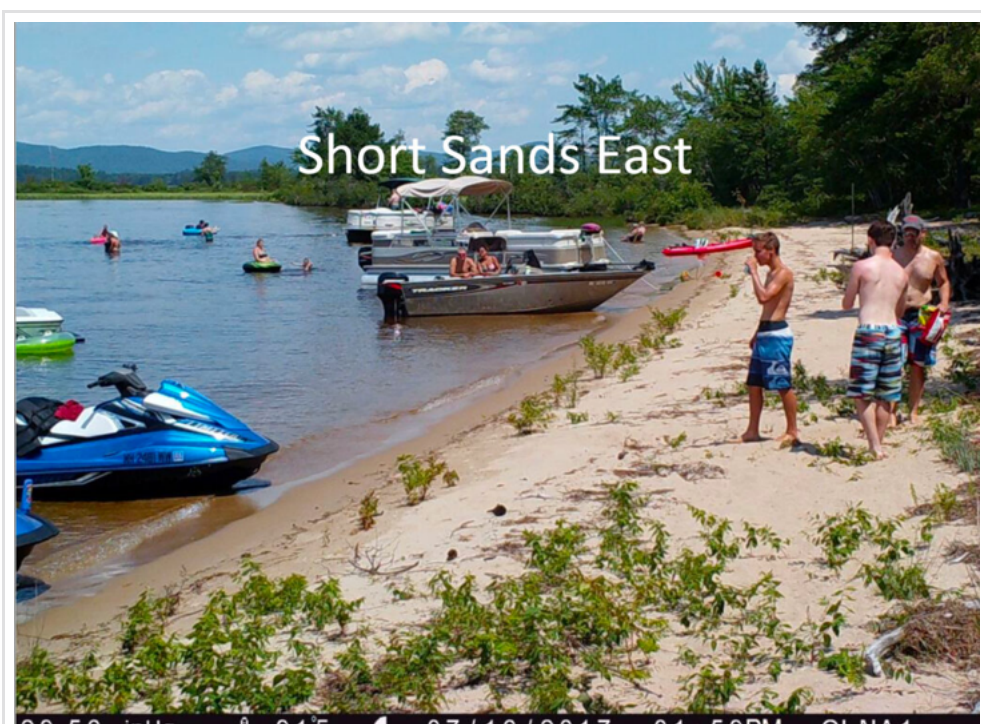
June 7, 2024 David Smith Alliance Historical 1 Comment

From the Archives: A Public Beach in a Natural Area

Part Six: A Continuing Challenge

Fifteen years after the Natural Area management plan went into effect, it is fair to say that it has accomplished most of what it set out to achieve. It is also fair to say that it remains a work in progress, with the final outcome always in doubt because the state lacks the resources to make it otherwise.

Rare plants and plant communities in the closed portion of the preserve have made a comeback and continue to be studied and documented. Although some rare species were lost over time, a previously undocumented rarity was found several years ago, lifting the spirits of biologists.



The use of technology, including cameras, began in 2017 and showed promise before being canceled during the pandemic. Source: N.H. Department of Forests and Lands

The public section of shoreline has remained open for low impact recreation by boaters, but respect for the principle of self-monitoring compliance declined during the Pandemic summer of 2020 and has worsened since then.

The disdain for authority and lack of civility that characterize our times have made life on Ossipee Lake a lot different from what it once was, and the lake community continues to consider what that means for the future.

On a positive note, DRED is gone—split into parts by Republican Governor Chris

Sununu in 2017. The Natural Area is now under the control of the Division of Forest and Lands, which has new leadership and is part of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, which reports to the Governor.

On the downside, staffing and funding shortages, and a lack of inter-agency coordination, are continued reminders of Don Kent's warning not to rely too much on Concord.

For years, volunteer boaters working with Ossipee Lake Alliance and Green Mountain Conservation Group helped keep things right-side-up at the site, including educating boaters and conducting an annual site clean-up.

But that work relied on the cooperation of boaters, and all but one of the boater-influencers in the Working Group have quit, citing the state's continued unwillingness to revitalize the stakeholders' forum and its inability to enforce the site regulations. None of the boaters who resigned were replaced.

Lessons Learned

The Natural Area story offers a few instructive lessons, the main one being that finding common ground to achieve mutually beneficial goals is always a winning strategy.

The adoption of the Natural Area Management Plan remains a source of pride among those who participated in the process, and Don Kent and George Bald continue to be remembered by boaters and conservationists alike as inspiring leaders and drivers of success.

There is also a darker lesson. From the start, the beach-in-a-natural-area idea was illogical and unworkable, and its no-cost financial proposition was a fiction. To deflect from that reality, local officials cynically promoted the plan as a wedge issue, generating a measure of public support by ensuring a public fight between factions that prevented compromise.

So poisonous was the atmosphere that when lake property owners and conservationists offered to help the town find an alternative beach site on the lake, Town Hall declined the offer. How different the Natural Area story might have been had the parties worked together from the start of the process.

A Beach Coda

The determination of Ossipee officials to have a town beach on Ossipee Lake outlasted the Natural Area story. In August, 2017, then-Select Board Chair Rick Morgan announced he had an agreement to purchase Camp Sokosis for \$1.2 million from long-time property owners Bill and Dianne Sheehan.

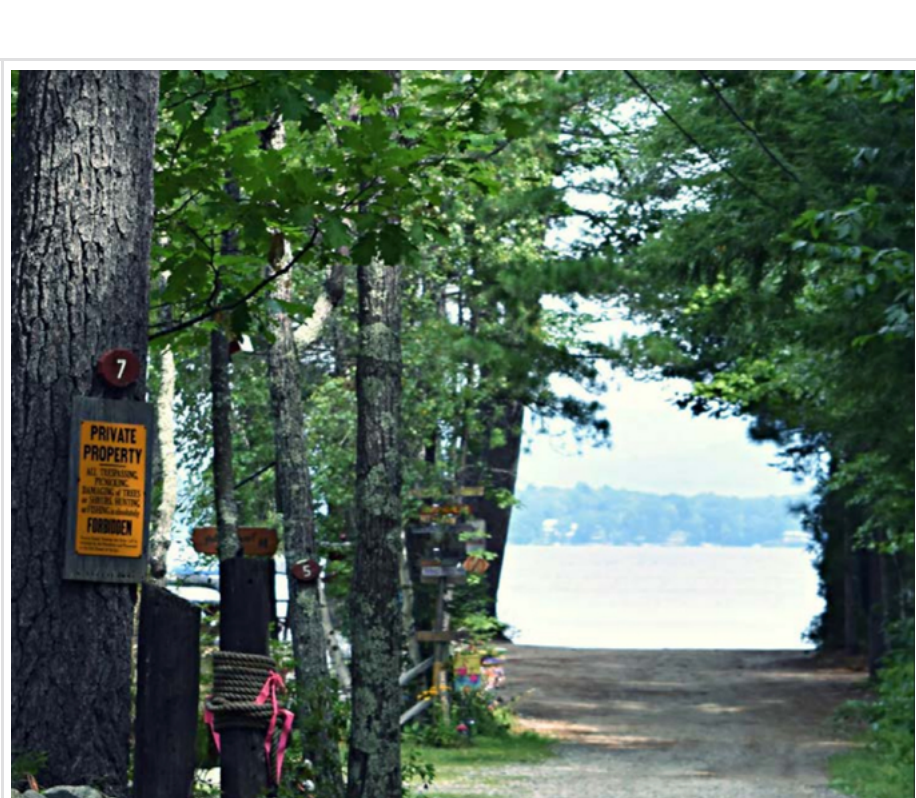
The 52-acre Ossipee Lake property had a campground, boat slips and enough beach for campers and townspeople alike. Morgan said the town could afford the down payment, and he projected revenue from the business would pay for the bond.

"It's a perfect opportunity for the Town of Ossipee to have a beach on Ossipee Lake without the taxpayers having to pay for it," Morgan told the Carroll County Independent, echoing Harry Merrow's Natural Area sales pitch.

Since there were no environmental issues, it would be a straight up or down town vote on value vs. cost.

Morgan worked the deal hard as Ossipee's "last opportunity" for a beach on the lake, but the proposal quickly became contentious. Financial questions arose about how the property would be managed, and by whom, and how the town would address the loss of \$25,000 in annual property tax revenue.

Long-time Camp Sokosis campers made it known they were unhappy with the Town's plan to eliminate one-third of the campsites. Yet the momentum appeared to be with Town Hall until the property owners developed cold feet.



Ossipee's agreement to buy the big lake's Camp Sokosis as a town beach was a good news story that quickly turned sour. Photo: Carroll County Independent.

In a newspaper interview, Bill Sheehan said Selectman Morgan had pressured the couple to sell, and another potential buyer was waiting in the wings who would donate 90 feet of shoreline to the Town at no cost, relieving it from having to manage a commercial business and preserving the annual tax revenue.

Morgan pushed back, saying the Sheehans had plenty of time to consider their options. He conceded that a free beach offer had been made, but said the town had already decided to purchase the entire property and the new offer lacked adequate parking.

Opponents of the purchase had a field day, plastering the town with "Do the Math" lawn signs mocking Morgan's rejection of a potential deal for a beach at no cost in favor of spending \$1.2 million to obtain the same thing.

Ossipee Select Board members responded to the criticism by publicly calling opponents of their purchase plan "arrogant," "pathetic," "un-American," and "cowardly."

Then, in a baffling turn, Morgan announced that the town would close the campground entirely if it became the new owner—a move that would have violated the purchase agreement and eliminated the revenue needed to pay for the bond.

The vote on the purchase took place on November 28, 2017, following a noisy public debate. In the end, a majority of the attendees approved buying Camp Sokosis, but the total fell short of the required two-thirds majority.

The following day the Sheehans signed an agreement to sell the business to two long-time campers. Despite the failure of the town vote, Ossipee sought an injunction to block the sale. It sued the Sheehans for breach of contract and fraud, and the Sheehans counter-sued, claiming fraudulent and negligent misrepresentation.

Ossipee residents Joy Gagnon and Joshua Arnold piled on with a civil complaint arguing that the vote was compromised by the town's failure to meet the open meeting provisions of the state's Right to Know Law. They asked the court to require a new vote.

It would take until February for a Superior Court Judge to sort things out, but in the end the situation remained as it was after the November 28 vote. Ossipee's beach plan was dead, and Camp Sokosis remained in private hands.

These Days

George Bald left DRED in 2012 but continues to work for the state as Chairman of the Lakeshore Redevelopment Planning Commission. He is also on the Board of Directors of the New Hampshire Center for Public Interest Journalism.

After leaving DRED in 2008, Sean O'Kane worked briefly as a political volunteer for Democrat Jeanne Shaheen, then became an independent business advisor and consultant, most recently as managing director of Stratoge Partners in Portsmouth, and Advisor to Global Citizens Circle.

Parks & Recreation executive Allison McLane joined Eversource Energy in 2008 after ending a 19-year run at DRED. Her current job at Eversource is Manager of Community Relations and Economic Development, according to her LinkedIn profile.

Dick Boisvert retired as New Hampshire State Archeologist in 2018 after 30 years of state service. His DRED colleague, Natural Heritage Bureau's Lionel Chute, left DRED in 2006 and is Director of Natural Resources for Sullivan County, New Hampshire.

Don Kent remained at DRED until 2012, then worked for environmental organizations in Virginia and Maine. His current title is Research Director for the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation.

Ossipee official Harry Merrow ended a six-year run as State Representative in 2008, then served again from 2010-14, at which point he stepped down and also resigned from the Select Board. He was honored as Ossipee's Citizen of the Year in 2015 and remains active in community affairs.

After completing his term on the Ossipee Select Board, Rick Morgan took a year off, then ran unsuccessfully to return to the Board in 2020. He continues to live and work in Ossipee.

Editor's Notes: Our thanks to Jean Marshall for her extensive research on the early days of the Natural Area prior to the state's purchase. News stories by Terry Leavitt, then-editor of the Carroll County Independent, and by Conway Daily Sun reporters Nate Giarnese and Daymond Steer helped us expand our own reporting to create this series. We are grateful for their work.

1 COMMENT

DAVID CANADA 2 WEEKS AGO
JUNE 8, 2024

Great series; very informative. My family's association with Ossipee Lake started with day trips to "Lone Pine", so this was especially meaningful. Thank you.

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