



Family's Land Donations Help Preserve Critical Pond, Woodland Habitat 10 November 2021

By: Jennifer Sexton-Riley

Back in 1962, Jake Brown, a self-described “ocean person,” and his wife Barbara purchased their first parcel of land in Harwich, a hillside between rolling woodland and Hinckleys Pond. Their new haven was not oceanfront property, but its location overlooking the freshwater pond captured the Browns’ imagination and their hearts.

“I had always loved the ocean, and I admit I was hesitant at first, because a pond was not the water I’d had in mind, but I certainly became deeply interested in this land,” Jake laughed.

Old Cape Cod

To reach the Brown family’s neck of the woods, you first drive through a well-populated Harwich neighborhood and then wave the pavement goodbye when turning onto a serpentine dirt road. It’s easy to feel that you’ve left the hustle and bustle of houses and humanity far behind. After only a few leafy curves, there isn’t a house in sight.

When the trees finally part and reveal the sweeping view of an 11-acre cranberry bog surrounded by forest, birds wheeling above and a small red cottage perched next to Hinckleys Pond, it really is a breathtaking arrival into another world. Anyone who yearns for the quiet loveliness and wild Cape Cod landscapes of days gone by would be forgiven for thinking they had stepped into a time machine.

“This is the bald eagle’s favorite perch,” Brown said, indicating a dead tree near the front of the house.

Eagles and ospreys fish in the pond, providing endless fascination for anyone who cares to sit quietly and watch. The land is home to just about every local creature that walks, flies or swims along the pond shore, including deer, foxes, otters, fishers, muskrats, coyotes, and turtles.

When the season calls them, river herring make their way into the pond to spawn. In time, their offspring will make their way back downstream through the aptly-named Herring River. Kingfishers fill the air with their distinctive voices while egrets step gracefully in the shallows. In the evenings, great horned and screech owls take to their silent wings in search of prey.

Turning The Page To Preservation

In 1972-1973, the Browns acquired the adjacent cranberry bog, which they leased to an Ocean Spray grower. The family purchased additional acres of adjoining woodland landscape in 1976, ultimately creating a 40-acre summer sanctuary for their three children and five grandchildren and to share with others who also appreciate the tranquility of this unique location.

After decades of enjoying the natural beauty of the area and its wildlife with family and friends, the Browns have partnered with the Harwich Conservation Trust (HCT) over the past few years to preserve their key woodland parcels.

In 2017, the family began their open space preservation odyssey by donating 7.2 acres to HCT to ensure that it will be protected in perpetuity. By preserving the land, the Browns helped to protect the water quality of Hinckleys Pond and the Herring River as it travels from the pond to Nantucket Sound. In 2018, the HCT board of trustees named Jake and Barbara Brown and their family the HCT Conservationists of the Year following their donation, which included 346 feet of shoreline on Hinckleys Pond.

“The Brown family truly understands that the best way to protect pond health is to preserve surrounding watershed lands,” said HCT Executive Director Michael Lach. “Their forward-thinking gift of pond-front acreage helps HCT advance its Priority Ponds Project, the goal of which is to save these priority pond-front and watershed lands to enhance water quality and wildlife habitat.”

The 174-acre Hinckleys Pond is the primary surface source water for the Herring River, the second longest river system on the Cape and one of New England’s most significant river herring migration routes.

In December 2020, to increase watershed protection, the family donated an additional 6.65 wooded acres on the border of Harwich and Brewster to HCT. In 2021, they’re donating four adjacent acres they own in Brewster to HCT’s sister land trust, the Brewster Conservation Trust.

Holistic Eco-Restoration For Hinckleys Pond

Next on the Browns’ land and water protection list is working with HCT on a holistic, watershed-scale ecological restoration project centered on a plan to re-wild the retired cranberry bogs bracketing the pond. The larger bog site along the Cape Cod Rail Trail near Cape Tech was owned by the Jenkins family, who decided to hold their final harvest in 2020 and retire their bog. They chose to work with HCT on preserving their land for trails, wildlife habitat, scenic views, and pond protection.

An over-supply of cranberries from the Midwest, Canada, and other large-scale growing locations has pushed down cranberry prices, thereby causing local farmers a substantial loss in revenue over the years. Farmers looking to exit the industry can either sell their upland for development or conservation. HCT has welcomed opportunities to collaborate with local growers on purchasing their lands. HCT and the Brown family are working together toward an eco-restoration future by sharing research at their respective sites on opposite sides of the pond.

To assist with eco-restoration planning, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Southeast New England Program recently selected HCT as one of five grant recipients in Massachusetts. The \$146,700 grant will fund phase one planning including data collection, eco-restoration design and permitting, all of which will inform the scope of work for phase two, the actual eco-restoration construction.

Ultimately, after HCT completes phase one and two, about 30 acres of wetland habitat and 500 feet of pond shoreline will be restored. There will be public trails and student learning opportunities. Residents and seasonal visitors who use the Cape Cod Rail Trail bike path to cycle and walk will also benefit from enhanced scenic vistas.

Giving To Future Generations

Through their donation of key upland parcels, and eventually the re-wilding of former bogs into vibrant wetlands, Jake and Barbara Brown are giving back to the land that has given so much to them, to their children, and to their grandchildren over the decades.

The landscape will be preserved in perpetuity, helping to protect the water quality of Hinckleys Pond and the Herring River in its journey to Nantucket Sound.

“I have worked with the extended Brown-Welch family for 20 years on their land-saving mission in Harwich and Brewster,” said Mark Robinson of The Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts, Inc., a regional land trust service center that provides technical assistance to land trusts across southeastern Massachusetts including the Cape. “As a family, they truly get it: they are borrowing the land from their children. They are working hard to make sure the Cape Cod experience they have enjoyed in the woods by the pond will be available for more generations.”

As we move into the future, every spring the herring will travel upstream to spawn again in Hinckleys Pond, where they will have over 300 more feet of protected shoreline habitat thanks to the Browns and Harwich Conservation Trust. The Browns have not only protected the setting of so many treasured family memories from development, they’ve also ensured that the local wildlife can continue to dwell in these scenic pond, woodland and shoreline habitats.

“It’s so important to protect Hinckleys Pond and the watershed,” said Melissa Brown, daughter of Jake and Barbara Brown. Clearly the environmental ethic espoused by Jake and Barbara also resides in their three children Melissa, Cassie, and Jake, Jr.

“The children and grandchildren are the next generations of stewards that will care for the land and water around us,” Melissa added, underscoring the importance of teaching our kids about the link between preserving land to protect water.