



SOUTH HERO LAND TRUST

Newsletter

Spring 2022



Photo credit: Grand Isle County Natural Resources Conservation District

A Common Goal for Keeler Bay

Scientists and Locals Working Together on a Lake & Watershed Action Plan

Water Connects Us

From the dramatic peaks of the Green Mountains and Adirondacks to the rolling hills of the Champlain Islands, water flows across and through the land surrounding Lake Champlain. As it travels from the clouds to the Lake, water collects evidence of the land it flows over and through. Unlike much of the Lake Champlain Basin, the Islands are surrounded by the lake. Walk in any direction in South Hero, and you'll eventually find Lake Champlain. This makes our ties to the lake unusually close—whether you swim, paddle, fish, skip rocks, or simply enjoy being near the water, chances are you have a relationship with Lake Champlain.

A Common Goal for Keeler Bay

Human land use, including development, forestry, roads, and farming all impact Lake Champlain. One of the most pressing challenges for the Basin currently is high levels of phosphorus resulting from runoff. According to the Lake Champlain Basin Program's 2021 State of the Lake Report, phosphorus levels are particularly high in the shallow bays.

South Hero's Keeler Bay is one such shallow body of water. In response to the pressing challenges faced by the bay, the Grand Isle County Natural Resources Conservation District (GICNRCD) teamed up with South Hero Land Trust, local stakeholders, and environmental consultants to develop a "Lake & Watershed Action Plan" for Keeler Bay, with funding and support from the Lake Champlain Basin Program (LCBP).

The connection is more than physical or economical... generational land users, farmers, tourists and seasonal workers all tell stories about the lake's influence on their lives.

~Molly Varner, GICNRCD

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a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting the farmland, woodland, natural and recreational areas, and open spaces which give South Hero its distinctive quality of life

PO Box 455
South Hero, VT 05486
tel: (802) 372-3786
www.shlt.org

email: info@shlt.org
emily@shlt.org
guy@shlt.org
eileen@shlt.org

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AmeriCorps Community Conservation Coordinator

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Work has just begun on this project to identify, and prioritize potential projects that will reduce phosphorus and other pollutants entering Keeler Bay, and educate the community on water quality. Projects might include planting trees along streams or the lakeshore, repairing failing culverts or replacing them with bridges, constructing rain gardens or bioswales, and more.

Locals Working Together

The team of stakeholders leading the project represent local shoreline landowners and business owners, farmers, fishers, and scientists, who are working together toward the common goal of improving water quality in Keeler Bay. They have come together because of their shared love of the Lake.

A Farmer's Perspective

Farmer Steve Robinson loves “everything” about Lake Champlain. For Steve, the health of the land and the lake supports his farm and the community of South Hero. “We get our drinking water from the lake, we draw water for our cows from the lake.” Kelly Robinson, Steve’s wife, is an avid kayaker. She adds that Keeler Bay is an important place for fishing and recreation.

Steve believes that incentives that help farmers and other landowners maintain forested buffers along streams and the lakeshore, plant cover crops on fields to reduce erosion and build soil fertility, and redesign ditches to slow water down on its journey to the lake are important. These are all practices that he and Kelly have done at Islandacres Farm. Steve will bring his family’s multi-generational history of farming in South Hero to the stakeholder group providing guidance for this project.

At Home on Keeler Bay

Carrie Bryan, who lives on the shore of Keeler Bay, appreciates how the lake changes with the seasons.

“I love the endless beauty of the lake...Spring brings an awakening with the return of the birds and the budding leaves on the trees. Summer is spectacular! The fall is colorful and crisp. Even winter has a quiet beauty when the lake freezes over and you hear faint noises below and the crackling of ice.”

The lake is home to her family. But even as she appreciates its natural beauty, she is worried about its health. Over the last few years, Carrie and her family have seen the invasive milfoil plant take over the bay, making it hard to enjoy recreational activities, especially swimming.

Milfoil is an invasive aquatic plant that can grow in thick mats on water and choke out other aquatic life. This leads to stagnant water and cyanobacteria blooms (blue-green algae), which are also a symptom of excess phosphorus. The projects identified by the Keeler Bay Action Plan will reduce the amount of phosphorus entering the bay, eventually decreasing milfoil and cyanobacteria.



Kelly Robinson showing a picture taken while kayaking on Keeler Bay, looking up at their farm.

The Economics of a Clean Lake Matter Too

Milfoil is also a major concern for Michele Gammal, owner of Keeler Bay Marina. The top question she gets asked every summer is “how are the weeds?” Her life and work are closely tied to the bay, so for her, there are many reasons to protect the lake. “It’s our drinking water, our livelihood, and our home. We live and work here because of the lake. It’s beautiful and our business relies on it.” Michele loves to help people get out of the water for recreation. “I love watching people fish, swim, paddle, and ice fish. There are so many ways for people to enjoy the lake [...] the marina gives people who don’t live on the water the opportunity to do so.”

“It’s our drinking water, our livelihood, and our home. We live and work here because of the lake.”

~Michele Gammal, Keeler Bay Marina

Molly Varner, the project lead from GICNRCD, is impressed by the community’s awareness and appreciation for the lake: “The connection is more than physical or economical... generational land users, farmers, tourists and seasonal workers all tell stories about the lake’s influence on their lives, and it’s these stories that are the impetus to this action plan.”

As the stakeholder team and consultants develop a list of potential water quality projects with willing landowners, they will also create partial designs on the ones most likely to move forward. This will allow the team a leg up in applying for future implementation grants to install some of the projects mentioned above. In the meantime, South Hero Land Trust will be working with Molly to organize a public outreach campaign to learn about the bay, foster appreciation for its health, and share ideas big and small that we all can do to clean up Keeler Bay.

This project has been funded wholly or in part by the United States Environmental Protection Agency under assistance agreement (LC-00.A00695-0) to NEIWPCC in partnership with the Lake Champlain Basin Program.

Afterschool Adventures

Folsom Students Explore What it Means to Steward the Land

One of the South Hero Land Trust programs disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 was our first after-school club for students at Folsom Education & Community Center, which is why we were so excited to relaunch this program with two new clubs this past fall. Harvesting and preparing cultivated and wild plants in the Learning Garden and Outdoor Classroom, learning to build shelters, and talking about how to care for the land and water brought the students into closer relationship with the natural world right outside the doors of the school.



First, students got hands-on experience of growing, harvesting, and preparing their own food in the Folsom Learning Garden through our Farm & Garden Club. Students made sauteed kale with garlic, roasted root vegetables, and wild salads using garden weeds like purslane and sorrel. They visited Hackett’s Orchard and Islandacres Farm to talk with the farmers about their role in the food system.

We followed this with our Fall Nature Club. We spent 8 Thursday afternoons exploring and connecting with the woods and meadows in the South Hero Recreation Park. Students learned to build a survival shelter, make fire, and track animals, as well as which edible plants to harvest for tea and food.

As one parent said, “when my boys were young, we would drive all the way to the Huntington Audubon or Shelburne Farms camps to do similar activities. Winter tracking and such. So glad that this has started in South Hero!” We are thrilled to bring programming like this to Folsom and South Hero year round.

Gardeners and Farmers Feeding Families Together Building Food Sovereignty and Community in South Hero

A key aspect of food sovereignty is community. We all have a responsibility to make sure the most vulnerable people in our community are cared for, with food to eat, warmth in winter, and a safe place to live, learn, and grow. This work goes beyond self-sufficiency and making sure that each individual has what they need. This work asks us to actively care for each other as a community. When we teach students to grow their own vegetables *and* share them with others, work together to provide culturally relevant food to families who need a helping hand, or share seeds with friends and neighbors—we are building food sovereignty.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, food supply chain disruption and lost wages due to the spring shut-down exposed long-term and deeply rooted issues in the food system, and many families in Grand Isle County and across Vermont still face insecure access to food. South Hero Land Trust's food sovereignty projects are focused on helping feel this gap through community. There are many ways that you can participate in this important work, we've gathered a few opportunities here:

Join us on the Farm

South Hero Land Trust is a member of the Healthy Roots Collaborative, a collective organization dedicated to strengthening the food system of Northwest Vermont. Part of this work is their gleaning program, where volunteers harvest unmarketable vegetables and fruits from local farms and redistribute them to charitable food sites. If you would like to help, sign up at www.vermontgleaningcollective.org or email Peter at healthyrootsgleans@gmail.com to learn more.

Grow with Us

South Hero Land Trust works with local volunteers to maintain two gardens in South Hero: the Folsom Learning Garden and the Community Gleaning Garden. The Folsom Learning Garden is a living laboratory where students grow food, cultivate self-reliance, and build relationships with each other and the earth. In the Community Gleaning Garden staff and volunteer gardeners grow food bound for local food shelves and meal programs. If you'd like to get your hands in the soil with us, please email eileen@shlt.org.

Share Your Harvest

If you love to garden at home and would like to grow an extra row, or just always end up with a little more than you can eat, consider donating fruit and vegetables to any of the local food shelves and meal programs in the Champlain Islands. We've developed a spreadsheet to help you know when, where, and how. Check it out at www.shlt.org/grow-for-a-neighbor. We are so grateful to the amazing folks at Food for Thought, the Grand Isle Food Shelf, Islands in the Sun, and St. Amadeus Church for their commitment to making sure everyone is fed.

Sow Some Seeds from the South Hero Seed Library

We've worked with the Worthen Library and local businesses to develop a "library" of free seeds, from leafy greens to climbing beans, root veggies to herbs, flowers and more. Stop by the library to "check out" some seeds to plant in your own garden, and drop off any extras you have for others to "borrow." The Seed Library lowers the barrier of entry for home growers and gives everyone with some soil the opportunity to grow their own food and practice self-reliance.

Thank you for being part of our local food system, and supporting food security and food sovereignty in our town.



Students harvest tomatoes in the Folsom Learning Garden. The harvest is shared with Food for Thought

The Sound of Planting Trees Reflections on Community and Stewardship from an AmeriCorps Service Member

By Eileen Fitzgerald

"Trees fall with spectacular crashes. But planting is silent, and growth is invisible."

~ From *The Overstory* by Richard Powers



Students from SBHS plant trees on Arbor Day with SHLT

Despite what the character in *The Overstory* observes, planting is not always silent. Laughter and chatter filled the air next to South Hero Fire and Rescue on Arbor Day, a sunny Friday in early May. A total of 46 volunteers planted 122 native trees and shrubs with South Hero Land Trust and the South Hero Congregational Church (SHCC) along the creek that flows between the Worthen Library and the new Two Heroes brewpub. Students and teachers from Folsom Education & Community Center and South Burlington High School volunteered in the morning. Adult community members wrapped up the project in the afternoon.

As an AmeriCorps service member, one part of fulfilling my term is to complete an independent service project. I knew from the beginning I wanted to do something related to water quality. From working on the Keeler Bay Action Plan project (see page

1), I knew that the Bay faces many challenges. Between Community Lane and the new brewpub is a slow, unnamed stream where Since I am volunteering as a citizen scientist to collect water samples this summer, an idea began to emerge that would connect my interest in water quality with the Community Lane development. I wanted to do a project that improved wildlife habitat, engaged the community, and would leave a space that could be enjoyed by the people visiting, working, and living at Community Lane. What better way to somehow accomplish all of this at once than to plant some trees?

After spending the winter planning, fundraising, and coordinating logistics, we took to the stream bank and planted trees. On May 6. With help from Molly Varner from the Grand Isle Natural Resources Conservation District (GICNRCD), we taught volunteers how trees help water quality by slowing the flow of stormwater runoff and preventing erosion into the stream. We also talked about how trees contributes to better air quality, carbon sequestration, bird and wildlife habitat, and more.

As we dispersed to plant trees, groans and giggles about the muddy ground and tough sod replaced our ecological discussion. We dug holes, cleared invasive grass, planted trees, wrapped each trunk to protect it, and mulched. The students started out skeptical about their tasks, but by the end of the morning they were celebrating having the muddiest shoes and how many trees they each planted.

Planting the trees was not silent, but there was still a meditative quality to the repetitive action of digging each hole and planting each tree. The

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Elderberry sapling planted on Arbor day leafing out with the under-construction Two Heroes brewery behind



A livestake willow tree begins to leaf out after planting

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vibrations of sound were made in air that was ever so slightly more oxygenated than when we found it. Planting trees invites so much potential, and I look forward to seeing what our sapling patch becomes!

I am so grateful for the help of all the volunteers, to Molly from GICNRCD; and to Mark Kennedy & the South Hero Congregational Church Board of Missions, members, and friends for generously spearheading the fundraising campaign, and to all those who contributed.

Eileen is an AmeriCorps Service Member serving a one-year term with South Hero Land Trust through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board's AmeriCorps Program. It's been wonderful to see her grow to love our community over the past 9 months as our Community Conservation Coordinator, and we are excited for the work she will be doing to steward our natural spaces this summer. We hope you will join her at one of our many upcoming events and volunteer work parties.

If you are interested in being a part of the South Hero Land Trust team as an AmeriCorps Service Member, contact Emily at emily@shlt.org as soon as possible. We are starting the hiring process for our next Community Conservation Coordinator this June. Cheers!

Students Visit Islandacres Farm during Farm & Garden Afterschool Club



Students in the Farm & Garden Afterschool Club walked the fields of Islandacres Farm with farmer Steve Robinson. Steve and Kelly Robinson have welcomed students to visit since they bought the conserved farm from Steve's parents in 2009. We are so grateful to the farmers and conserved land owners in our community who make it possible for kids and adults to connect with the land and this place we call home.

Connect to Nature with South Hero Land Trust Upcoming Events, Volunteer Opportunities, and More

Starting a New Tradition with Volunteer Tuesdays

As stewards of natural areas and trails, board members, gardeners growing food for our neighbors in need, and more—volunteers are the backbone of South Hero Land Trust.

This year, we have even more ways to get involved and help your community than ever before! We are launching “Volunteer Tuesdays,” a regular weekly volunteer opportunity at the trails and gardens we maintain. Every Tuesday this summer, we'll meet at a predetermined location for work ranging from trail maintenance, invasive species removal, community garden upkeep, and even minor construction projects.

Volunteering with SHLT is a great way to get outside, be among the community, and engage in work that keeps South Hero vibrant. No experience is necessary, and all are welcome. We provide all the tools and training needed (not to mention weekly snacks). We hope you can join us! Visit www.shlt.org/events to see the next upcoming work parties, or email eileen@shlt.org to be added to the volunteer email list!



Volunteers building boardwalks along the trail at the conserved Tracy Woods

Join us for a Nature Rambles or other Event

This summer SHLT has lots of opportunities for all ages to get outside and connect to the land and community. Our monthly nature ramble series will take us to natural areas across South Hero and the Islands, and we have special guests coming to teach us about a range of topics, including ladybugs, trees and more!

Visit www.shlt.org/events to learn more.

Winter Wednesdays 2022 Recordings Available on YouTube!

2022 marked our third year hosting the Winter Wednesdays speaker series with the Worthen Library. Our original hope was to provide inspiration and engagement with the natural world through the cold winter months. We have been thrilled to expand the depth and breadth of speakers over the three years, and see thoughtful dialogue and discussion arising from the presentations.

This year we hosted a variety of speakers on topics ranging from rare natural communities of the Islands to the local effects of climate change on humans, plants, and animals, and more. While the pandemic continued to force us to hold these events virtually most of this year, the silver lining is that almost every event we hosted during the last two years was recorded and is available to watch anytime! Visit www.shlt.org/winterwednesdays to see the videos, and stay tuned for another round of speakers next winter.



Walkers enjoy the annual spring array of wildflowers on the Landon Community Trail during our first Nature Ramble of the year

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Shop Locally at the Champlain Islands Farmers' Market!



Wednesdays 3-6 PM, St Rose of Lima Church, South Hero
Saturdays 10 AM-2 PM, St. Joseph's Church, Grand Isle

www.champlainislandsfarmersmarket.org