



SOUTH HERO LAND TRUST

Newsletter

Fall 2022



Where It All Comes Together: The South Hero Community Gleaning Garden

On a warm September afternoon, South Hero Land Trust staff, board members, and volunteers gathered at the new home of the South Hero Community Gleaning Garden for a good old fashioned barn raising. Or in this case, a shed raising.

As the work party got underway the garden buzzed with activity: measuring and cutting lumber, nailing and screwing together the framing, and even harvesting peppers and tomatoes bound for local food shelves. Pretty soon it was time to raise the last wall together.

The garden was started in response to growing food insecurity in the Islands exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then it has grown into a core land trust program, thanks to the collaboration of many partners: Kelsey and Phelan O'Connor of Pigasus Meats provide land and water for the garden (which is adjacent to the Landon Community Trail); grants from the Ben & Jerry's Foundation funded the garden's move to its new home; SHLT board member Bob Buermann was the lead engineer for shed construction; local volunteers Steve Robinson, Dave Hobbs and Ashley Williams have been essential in plowing, planting, and weeding this summer; Peter Jenkins from the Healthy Roots Collaborative coordinates distribution of the produce to regional food shelves, and the list goes on.



SOUTH HERO



LAND TRUST

A nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the farmland, woodland, natural and recreational areas, and open spaces which give South Hero its distinctive quality of life

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A Confluence on the Land

One of our goals at the land trust is to connect people to the land in ways that are meaningful to them, whether they enjoy recreating outdoors, work on a farm or in a woodlot, or eat local food. At a recent event at the garden, Emily Alger, SHLT Executive Director, opened her arms to encompass the land around her: “this is where all our programs come together.”

As she shared with the group, this place is a confluence of our programs and values. It is located on the conserved* Landon Farm (home of Pigasus Meats), next to the trailhead of the Landon Community Trail, with Round Pond State Park just across the road. The land here combines vital wildlife habitat, a thriving farm business, public access trails through the woods and to the shoreline, a large wetland complex contributing to flood resilience and water protection in Lake Champlain, and more.

Now home to our gleaning garden, it’s also a place where people come together to grow food for their neighbors and a lab space for outdoor education programs.

Community Conservation

Collaboration is a core value of SHLT, and the Gleaning Garden project is a great place to see that value in action. It’s a project that steps beyond a traditional conservation project, what we call Community Conservation. As a Community Conservation organization, we work with diverse partners to address the most pressing issues facing our community (like climate change, racial and socioeconomic inequity, mental health, and barriers to accessing healthy food) with land based solutions.

This month the garden team, including volunteers, partners, and SHLT staff, are back to harvest the final rows of cabbage and fall greens, bound for the Grand Isle Food Shelf, C.I.D.E.R, and migrant farmworker food boxes assembled by the Healthy Roots Collaborative. The new home for the gleaning garden at Pigasus Meats, and shed for tools, are already making it possible for us to grow more food and take better care of our public access trails. It may only be 60 square feet of land and a small shed, but with the help of our partners and volunteers, it’s enough to make a difference in our community.

**The Landon Farm was originally conserved in 2003 by four conservation partners: South Hero Land Trust, Vermont Land Trust, Lake Champlain Land Trust, and the Nature Conservancy, with funding from the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (and many others).*



SHLT board, staff and volunteers raising the shed at the new gleaning garden at Pigasus Meats.



Learn more about SHLT’s core values at shlt.org/about

Keeler Bay Action Plan Kicks Into High Gear

Underwater Forests

Margaret Murphy from Vermont Fish & Wildlife dipped her hand into the shallow water beneath her kayak, gently combing through the leaves of aquatic plants as her momentum carried her on. Unlike invasive Eurasian milfoil, these native plants actually benefit the lake, she explained to the group of paddlers gathered around her during the recent “Kayak the Bay” event at Keeler Bay with the Grand Isle County Natural Resources Conservation District.

Not only do they clean the water by filtering pollutants and uptaking excess nutrients, they also provide habitat for many species of native fish, mussels, insects, amphibians and other aquatic life that call the lake home. Rather than look at underwater vegetation as “weeds”, Margaret encouraged us to see instead a thriving underwater forest, an ecosystem that is perhaps just as beautiful and important as any forest on land.

Despite its beauty, the paddlers were also able to see up close some of the problems in Keeler Bay. As we crossed into deeper water, floating mats of detached Eurasian milfoil drifted by. This invasive plant thrives wherever native aquatic vegetation is disturbed or removed. It also grows where erosion from creeks causes rocky shallows to get covered in silt. Once it’s established, it can outcompete native vegetation, reducing diversity of aquatic plants, fish, and mollusks. When it gets dislodged, it can gather in huge floating mats that surround beaches, docks, and boat ramps, clogging access to the lake for everyone.

The good news is, by addressing streambank and shoreline erosion, we can not only keep invasive milfoil at bay, but also protect water quality. Throughout the paddle Margaret pointed out trees and shrubs along the shoreline and how they were anchoring the soil, preventing erosion that brings sedimentation and excess nutrients to the bay, such as phosphorus, the main culprit behind the cyanobacteria blooms of increasing frequency.



Margaret Murphy from VT F&W and paddlers at the recent “Kayak The Bay” event

It Takes a Village

The “kayak the bay” event was an outreach component of a larger project by South Hero Land Trust and the Grand Isle County Natural Resources Conservation District (GICNRCD). With funding and support from the Lake Champlain Basin program, the organizations are working together with state and regional water quality experts and local community members to assess water quality issues and identify potential solutions in Keeler Bay.

This past spring, GICNRCD & SHLT convened a local working group of residents, shoreline landowners, farmers, and business owners to lead the project. During the summer, the team hired Fitzgerald Environmental, a well-respected local water quality consulting firm, to begin gathering data and putting together a Watershed Action Plan for Keeler Bay. This plan will act as a guide as our community responds to the challenges facing the bay,



Rainbow over Keeler Bay

including excess phosphorus and other issues.

During the fall the team is reaching out to local landowners who may be interested in doing a potential water quality project on their land. Projects may include wetland restoration, road drainage improvements, buffer plantings, and more. Once we assemble a handful of preliminary project designs with landowners who are willing to partner with us, we'll have the necessary ingredients to seek grant funding to pursue some of these projects to clean up the bay. The great thing is that partnering landowners will not only benefit in terms of reducing property loss caused by erosion of streambanks or shorelines, but also know they are making a positive impact on the health of the lake.



Cathy Webster from the Northeast Disabled Athletics Association brought custom-made adaptive kayaks so that people of all abilities. SHLT is working with Cathy and NDAA to make future events similarly accessible!




Paddlers on Keeler Bay. Photo by Cathy Webster.

We All Play A Part

Back at the paddle, Margaret stressed the importance of everyone getting involved. Whether you own land in the watershed or not, she explained, anyone who cares about the lake can make a difference. She shared some easy tips we all can do, such as “raising the blade” when we mow so our lawns can filter rainwater more efficiently, and picking up our pet waste to prevent excess nutrients and pathogens from getting into the lake.

For those interested in learning more about the challenges Keeler Bay and what you can do to help, project lead Molly Varner at GICNRCD, with help from SHLT, put together an interactive online “storymap” of the project. This interactive web app will take you on a multimedia-fueled journey throughout the greater Lake Champlain watershed, with special focus on Keeler Bay in South Hero.



Looking for tips on how you can help Lake Champlain? Check out LCBP’s “Save the Lake” resource:

lcbp.org/get-involved/what-you-can-do/save-the-lake-tips/

>> Check out the Keeler Bay Storymap at: vacd.org/KeelerBayActionPlan

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

Fostering the Ornithologists, Ninjas, Farmers, and Chefs of the Future

2022 marked the 2nd year of summer camps in partnership with Folsom Education & Community Center, and once again it was a blast! South Hero Land Trust has engaged with Folsom in many capacities over the years, starting with “The Land, The Farms, and Me” over 20 years ago. As our newest program, these week-long summer camps have proved an exciting way to deepen students’ bonds to the natural world and local farms, as well as to each other and to the broader community.

During these camps we have the freedom to set our own schedule, and let our curiosities guide us. In our “Nature Detectives Camp” we used our powers of observation and imagination to explore the forests and meadows at the recreation park and get to know the insects, mammals, birds and amphibians that live there.

One highlight was our “secret mission” to deliver boxes of Folsom Garden-grown kale and peppers to the Food For Thought Summer Meal Program. Somehow we decided it would be fun to act as ninjas on our trek to the Congregational Church without being seen or heard by anyone. Safe to say, for a group of 12 kids to not get noticed is a tall order, so we had to bend the rules a bit (“there’s a bicyclist coming: touch the invisibility tree!”) but overall it was hilarious good fun, and also heartwarming to see the students get so excited about sharing food with fellow community members in need.

Next was our “Things with Wings” camp where we celebrated our flying friends with games, art projects, bird-box building, and more. And we finished the season with our “Growing Gardeners” camp where we spent the week singing songs, doing taste tests of garden veggies, making teas from wildcrafted ingredients we sustainably harvested, sowing seeds, harvesting garlic, cooking delicious meals, visiting local farms and more.

It was so much fun to do these camps again, and SHLT is so thankful to the administration and everyone at Folsom School for their partnership and support. But the fun doesn’t stop there! We are in the midst of our fall afterschool clubs and we have more in the works. Thanks also to educator Rachel Huff from Healthy Roots Collaborative, and Carrie Bryan and other parents who helped out!



Clockwise, from top left: Nature detectives with their bug nets at the Water Wiggles Trail; Growing gardeners sowing seeds in the Folsom Learning Garden; Campers relax with a story told by Eileen Fitzgerald, SHLT AmeriCorps; Campers enjoying a laugh in the garden.

The Future of our Forests

VT Foresters Convene in Grand Isle County

This fall Nancy Patch, the County Forester for Grand Isle and Franklin Counties, hosted the annual Vermont County Foresters Retreat in the Islands. She chose Grand Isle County to put the Emerald Ash Borer and its impending impact on our forests front and center. During the retreat, SHLT Programs Director Guy Maguire and AmeriCorps Community Conservation Coordinator Anna Johnson, gained newfound appreciation for the land and a sense of purpose in mitigating three forces threatening our Island forests right now: Emerald Ash Borer, invasive species, and overpopulation of deer.

Emerald Ash Borer Now Widespread

The first day was packed full of activity. We started off with a tour of an ash treatment project at Eagle Camp with local arborist Kris Dulmer. Emerald Ash Borer (EAB), which was first discovered in North America near Detroit in 2002, has already killed tens of millions of ash trees in the USA and Canada. It is now widespread in Vermont, with confirmed sightings in at least 8 out of 14 counties.

Unlike native ash borers found in the area, EAB has no predators living here, and local ash trees have not co-evolved with it. This means they lack the chemical defenses to keep it at bay. Nancy says that scientists are working on introducing wasps from Russia and China, where EAB is native. The wasps would parasitize EAB and hopefully slow its spread, giving ash trees more time to adapt. However, experts still expect EAB to kill at least 90% of ash trees in Vermont, a sobering realization. With ash trees comprising an estimated 30-60% of total tree cover in Grand Isle County, the forests in the Islands will be more affected than anywhere else in the state.

Abenaki and Black Ash

Later that day, we met Kerry Wood and her son Aaron Wood, local Abenaki basketmakers. For Abenaki people, the black ash is sacred, and the only species of ash suitable for making baskets. Unfortunately, EAB is more deadly for black ash than green or white ash, making the understanding and protection of black ash vitally important.

“For me, black ash started my journey home to my people. I now feel a strong personal responsibility to learn Alnôbainvi, the Abenaki way, so I can teach the next generations to pass on our intangible cultural heritage and provide them with a sense of identity and continuity.”

- Kerry Wood, Abenaki Basketmaker

Aaron and Kerry then taught the group how to make black ash splints to use for traditional Abenaki baskets. We spent 3 hours pounding ash, leaving our arms shaking with fatigue, and gained much more appreciation for the time and skill indigenuos basketmakers put into their craft.

Two More Threats to the Forest

The second day consisted of a tour of a forested property in Isle La Motte, led by Bob Zaino, Natural Community Ecologist at the Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife. As we walked, Nancy and the other foresters would periodically bend over and pull out a buckthorn or honeysuckle sapling. These invasive plants are not native to our region, and can crowd out the native species that make up an ecosystem. The foresters' dedication to understanding and controlling invasive species was evident throughout the workshop.



From top: Aaron Wood shows VT foresters how to peel ash bark to expose the wood used for basket-making; Ash splints made from pounded and peeled wood; SHLT AmeriCorps Anna and county foresters pounding ash to make splints.



VT Foresters walking through a mature forest with very few saplings due to increasing deer browse pressure.

Nancy also found ample evidence to highlight the third major threat to our Islands forests: White-tailed deer. The deer population is increasing in Vermont, and Grand Isle County now has the highest deer per acre population in the state. Nancy Patch pointed out the almost ubiquitous examples of “deer browse” as we walked. The deer are eating leaves, buds, and twigs of almost all of the young trees, which means that while our forests have many mature trees, very few seedlings are able to grow older than a couple of years. If EAB kills a significant portion of our ash trees, and no young trees are able to replace them, our forests will disappear.

Some Hopeful News

Nancy did have some hopeful news: back on the first day, we toured an experimental deer enclosure fence at Snow Farm Vineyard, installed with permission from the Lane family. This fence protects young trees by keeping deer out. Once the trees get above a certain age, they are safe from deer browse, so by strategically relocating a deer enclosure fence every few years, we can restore a forest over time. The fence at Snow Farm was installed just a few months ago, but its impact could already be seen. The area inside the fence was lush with green foliage on young ash, maple and beech seedlings, while outside of it the deer browse was very evident.

From the county foresters’ perspective, the protection of our forests from EAB, invasive species and deer overpopulation is not only about protecting the economic value of forests, but also for their own intrinsic beauty and value. Besides acting as the lungs of our planet, they sequester carbon, help anchor the soil and prevent erosion into our waterways, and aid in maintaining biodiversity of the land. When our ecosystems thrive, so do we.

Want to get involved? We encourage you to: Come up with a plan for ash trees on your land: contact Nancy Patch at nancy.patch@vermont.gov or call (802) 524-6501.

Hi There! My name is Anna Johnson, and I am South Hero Land Trust’s 2022-23 AmeriCorps member through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. I am a North Carolina native, and graduated in May of 2021 from Warren Wilson College outside of Asheville, NC. I have a degree in Environmental Policy and Justice, and my passions for environmental justice and social equity are deep. I was thrilled to come across an opportunity to join a non-profit that aligns with my dedication to community engagement and environmental stewardship, with a strong focus on the intersectionality of such issue areas.

As a young adult who grew up cherishing the beauty of nature, I feel drawn to the need for conservation that is not just sustainable, but regenerative. In doing so, I strive to meet every new experience and challenge with empathy, and to nurture honest and aligned connections with community members through meaningful relationship-building. When I’m not out there trying to save the world, you can often find me in nature: swimming, hiking, sunbathing, forest bathing, and admiring all the pretty moss and lichen that grows. If you would like to get in touch, feel free to email me at anna@shlt.org. I’m excited to connect with you!

Warmly,
Anna Johnson (she/her)
Community Conservation Coordinator
Vermont Housing and Conservation Board - AmeriCorps



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