

Restoration brings clams back to Mill Pond in Riverdale

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- Gloucester – Cape Ann Beacon

When Lois and William Bairstow bought their Washington Street home three years ago, they had visions of ice skating on the Mill Pond behind their home during the cold winter months, and kayaking across it during the warmer seasons. When the Bairstows realized the Mill Pond is actually a salt marsh, their visions changed.

“Anything we can do to get this back to the way it’s supposed to be, that’s cool by me,” William Bairstow said as he watched a team of volunteers and scientists extract soft shell clams, “duck” clams, and clam worms from the mud flats near their home. “It’s nice to see all these people gathering on behalf of our pond back here,” he said.

Mill Pond was originally a tidal estuary, where sea and fresh water mixed together. A gristmill was used in the area as far back as the 1680s, and fast moving water was needed in order to power the wheel. Max Schenk, an inspector with the Gloucester Health Department, said a restriction was in place to help the wheel operate. After the wheel was removed, the restriction stayed in place.

Schenk said the tide gate was upgraded in 1969 to help prevent localized flooding and so people could use the Mill Pond as a skating rink during the winter months.

“The gate itself was being kept closed more often, even during the summer months,” Schenk said, adding that because it was closed, fresh water was building up and causing the marsh to die. About three years ago, the gate was opened to allow more salt water to enter the area, restoring some of the marsh.

“This is an ongoing process. One of our main goals is to ensure the safety of surrounding properties, so we’re being very careful and methodical about our process,” Schenk said. The existing tide gate is being opened incrementally, and an additional tide gate is going to be put in.

A collaboration of non-profit organizations are working together to restore the salt marsh. Researchers from the Salem Sound Coastwatch, NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service, Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management, Massachusetts Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership and the city are working together in the research efforts that will stretch over the next three years.

This week the groups went out to the marsh and collected evidence, in the form of clams, that the restoration efforts are working. They gathered 60 samples of five to seven-and-a-half gallons of

“heavy muck,” washed them off, and recorded the numbers, sizes, and types of clams or other sea life found in each sample.

Barbara Warren, executive director of the Salem Sound Coast Watch, was excited to find clams that are about three years old. “That’s when the tide gate was opened,” she said.

T.J. Marshall, a commercial shellfisherman in Gloucester, volunteered to help the group in their efforts because it is his future, he said.

Marshall said they found more clams closer to where the saltwater comes in to the estuary, so opening the tide gate has been successful.

“I am very impressed,” Warren said as the samples came in. The group was doing a scientific sampling, meaning they dig at pre-determined locations. They will return at least once each year for the next three years to determine the success of the restoration project.

Schenk said there is potential for the area to be opened up to shellfishermen in the future. “I’m excited we are able to help in some way or another,” Lois Bairstow said as the group conducted their research on her property beside the estuary. “It’s an amazing operation.”

The research and restoration of the site is being funded through grant partnerships with the Conservation Law Foundation and NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service, the Massachusetts Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership, the Bruce J. Anderson Foundation, and Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management’s Wetland Restoration Program.

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