

CONSERVATION WALKS AND TALKS

Did you know that the Conservation Commission collaborates with the Wilton Garden Club and the Norwalk River Watershed Association to offer monthly guided walks in our parks and open spaces? In collaboration with those two organizations as well as the Wilton Library and Wilton Go Green, we host periodic lectures on a wide variety of conservation related topics.

The goals of these programs are:

- to familiarize our residents with the array of beautiful and abundant spaces that are preserved throughout Wilton for enjoyment by individuals, families and even dogs
- to raise awareness about the many environment issues that are forcing changes in our area, many of which we can personally address through adopting different practices on our own properties.

The guided walks are typically held on Sunday afternoons. Occasionally, the schedule changes to accommodate the theme of the walk such as the full moon snowshoe walk we held in winter or the birding walk we held in mid-morning when birds are most active. All of the walks have concluded with some light refreshments providing time for questions and answers.

The talks are environmentally focused presentations held at the Wilton Library. They provide opportunities to learn about subjects including Low Impact Development, Herbaria, and Healthy Backyards. We are currently planning to host a professional to discuss establishing pollinator-friendly environments in our backyards.

If there is a conservation subject you wish to learn more about, please contact us and we can try to work it into our schedule. The walks and talks are advertised in our local newspapers as well as on the Conservation Commission's website and Facebook page. We hope to see you at our next event!

- Jackie Algon



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Vol. XXXVI, No. 1

SPRING 2016

Wilton Conservation Commission Newsletter



WATERSHED HEALTH BROUGHT TO YOU BY HARBOR WATCH

Did you know that there are over 200 rivers and streams in Fairfield County? At Harbor Watch, we study the water quality of those waterways and work to ensure that the water flowing through our communities and into Long Island Sound is clean and free from pollution. The mission of Harbor Watch is to provide the people of Connecticut with the data, knowledge, and field expertise necessary to safeguard our waterways, educate citizens about watershed issues, and train volunteers and student interns through hands-on research. We have been working in Wilton for over 25 years, and have worked closely with the town's Conservation Commission, and local residents to achieve that mission.

In Wilton, our research and monitoring efforts have focused on the Norwalk River. The Norwalk River flows through the heart of Wilton and many residents enjoy walking the trails, birdwatching, and experiencing nature along its banks with their families. Where the Norwalk River meets the sound is an active area for shell fishing, so many of our local restaurants also feature oysters that have been harvested from the Norwalk River estuary. This river flows from Ridgefield to Norwalk and experiences a variety of land uses along its banks as well as a diverse suite of human impacts. Working with our partners such as the Wilton Environmental Affairs Department, the Norwalk River Watershed Association, the Norwalk River Watershed Initiative, the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, and others, we have worked to reduce sources of pollution entering the river. Our ongoing work in monitoring and source detection will ensure that the river has clean water for our community.

We are very proud of our partnerships in Wilton itself, but actually one of Harbor Watch's most exciting partnerships with Wilton actually occurs further downstream. Each year, we partner with the Wilton High School Marine Biology Club on a harbor fish study to get students involved with natural resources. Students from the club join us on our research vessel, the RV Annie, once each week from June through October. Six students join us on each sampling day and we conduct a series of bottom trawls. The students help our field staff deploy the net, sort the catch, and record the species collected. These students also present their work at the end of each fall to the public. This has been a great partnership that we are excited to continue. Beyond the fish study, we also have Wilton students participate in our spring, summer, and fall internship programs, and we also have enjoyed having adult volunteers join us and participate in sample collection on the Norwalk River.

In 2016, we plan to continue our intensive monitoring work in the Norwalk River and work with the Town to increase the efficacy of our track-down efforts. We are excited to continue this important research in Wilton and we are grateful to the Wilton community for all of their support! Please visit www.harborwatch.org for more information.

- Sarah Crosby, Director of Harbor Watch

CARRY IN, CARRY OUT

Some of our parks and fields have trash cans at the entrances and trail heads, but many do not. Every trash bin incurs cost for the town – maintaining, emptying – and becomes an attractor for rodents, bugs and other animals. In short, in many cases, the convenience for park-goers is outweighed by the cost and mess.

Many communities are starting to adopt the philosophy that many state and national parks have subscribed to forever: “Take nothing but memories, leave nothing but footprints.”

When it comes to your picnic lunch, your water bottle or sports drink, or your energy bar, this simply translates as “carry in, carry out.” Over the coming months, we are planning to post signs in many of our parks asking you to do exactly that. It’s easy, it’s environmentally sound and clean, and if we all cooperate, we can save the town a few dollars in the process by eliminating the need for trash pickups and disposal fees.

The next time you visit your favorite Wilton park or trail, please consider trying the following – it’s a small ask and will keep our parks pristine and enjoyable for all:

- If you bring food to eat, bring a bag as well. Put your discards in the bag, bring it home with you and dispose of it there.
- Your plastic water and sports drink bottles are recyclable. Even if we had trash bins, we don’t have recycling bins, and again, more bins = more cost. Please take your empty bottles with you and recycle them.
- Energy bar wrappers will fit nicely in your pocket, especially after you’ve eaten the contents! Please try not to let them flutter away. The empty wrapper will be much happier in your kitchen trash bin than on one of our trails.
- Dog waste in the middle of a trail is a real downer for your fellow hikers. Please use a plastic bag to pick it up, and please do not leave the plastic bag on the trail! It’s no one’s job but yours to clean up after your dog.
- If you carry it in, please carry it back out. Thank you for helping to keep our parks clean!

- Dan Berg, Chairman

CONTROLLING THE DEER POPULATION

The Wilton Deer Management Committee was formed in 2001 as the Conservation Commission recognized the need to address the numerous issues with white-tailed deer overpopulation in Wilton. Addressing the spread of Lyme disease, safety concerns with automobile collisions, and the depletion of understory vegetation in our woodlands were the main reasons the committee was formed.

A 2002 deer density study conducted by the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) found 79 deer per square mile in Wilton. Studies have determined that reducing the deer population to between 10 to 20 per square mile would address the public health, safety & ecological concerns.

While many options to handle the overpopulation were initially discussed, such as deer birth control and relocation of herds, those options are expensive and difficult to accomplish with the amount of deer that were in Wilton. Ultimately the Wilton Deer Management Committee established a controlled deer hunting program.

The annual controlled hunt is managed by the Committee and its staff, as well as the CT DEEP Wildlife Division to ensure a safe and successful program. Volunteer hunters are fully vetted to ensure they will work within the program guidelines including an assessment of each hunter by the Wilton Police Department on each hunter. Hunting occurs on land owned by the Second Taxing District Water Company, the Wilton Land Trust and the Town of Wilton. For the periods that each property is being hunted, they are closed to the public during the hunting season which begins on September 15th and ends on January 31st. After many successful years of implementing the controlled hunt, a new deer density study was completed showing 45 deer per square mile in our area.

In an effort to expand the effectiveness of the controlled hunt, several years ago, the committee started a homeowner-hunter match program. The program works to match pre-screened, vetted bow hunters with private land owners who are willing to allow hunting on their property. Through this additional effort the committee aims to make further progress on the goal to reduce the deer population

throughout the entire town.

We are cognizant of the money that Wilton residents spend each year to repel, fence, apply insecticides, and repair our cars in response to our over abundant deer population. And while we are still working to reach our harvest goals, the Deer Committee believes that without these programs, the deer overpopulation problem would be significantly worse and the amount spent by residents in Wilton to combat the deer population would be even higher. Additionally, Connecticut still maintains one of the highest rates of infection for Lyme disease in the country and there is no indication that our forests are recovering, except on land where hunting has persisted diligently for more than five years.

Any property owner that would be interested in participating in the homeowner match program can email the committee at deercommittee@wiltonct.org.

- Michael Russnok, Chairman,
Wilton Deer Management Committee

ALICE LEVIN – AHEAD OF HER TIME

[Editor’s note: The following is the omitted portion of an article that appeared in our Fall 2015 Conservation Newsletter. Alice Levin, a longtime Wiltonian, passed away in Spring 2015.]

In 1966, Alice Levin and her husband Peter led a group of Wilton citizens in an attempt to balance the checkerboard methods of dividing land for residential development based on 2-acre zoning with the need to preserve the connectedness of the woods, fields, streams, and hills of Wilton. The Levins felt that by looking at a place as a whole region rather than as individual 2-acre boxes, the beauty of the land would be protected which, in turn, would raise the private value and the public value. They believed that by considering the public value when making local land-use decisions, people would gain a sense of thinking responsibly on behalf of the whole community. In Alice’s own words, protected would be “land with trails and natural vistas, streams of steady and pure flow, much undisturbed swampland, and wooded acreages in differing stages of evolution”.

Alice and Peter produced a document called “A Proposal for Cooperative Landholding & Development”. It was a comprehensive vision for

300 acres at risk of subdivision which included “the longest stretch of natural valley in Wilton” and which would “preserve the character and pattern developed long before the advent of zoning”. The hope was to save a portion of the land for privacy, recreation, and the enjoyment of nature in a way that would also increase profits for the developers. The document was presented to the landowners one-by-one and concluded with the simple question, “Will you or will you not participate”? Not a single positive response resulted.

Land-use planners today know that it’s not development that causes problems, only patterns of development. In the case of the conventional checkerboard, some of the best land for home sites is wasted. If within a larger landscape smaller parcels for houses are allowed, more open space is protected and the cost of roads, utilities, and sewage reduced. Today we have “set asides” required by subdivision zoning laws that produce tiny isolated fragments of land of dubious value for use as a park or recreation space. On the other hand, streams and wetlands, not suitable for housing yet often included in our building lots—and what the Levins were asking to preserve—are ecosystems vital to the health of wildlife, plants and people. Alice and Peter wanted the flexibility to think about the whole landscape and not just the individual parcels, giving everyone more in the end.

Eventually, this episode of planning for a better Wilton was forgotten—except by Alice. Just weeks before she passed away, a yellowed file of typewritten notes appeared on her coffee table in the off chance that someone would pick it up and tell her story. Alice wanted to pass along the lessons she learned. She hoped that someone else would see the beauty of Wilton’s natural resources and the possibility of working together to preserve it for our children.

- Donna Merrill

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