

CONSERVATION

Native lands

Mashpee group seeks conservation through acquisition

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Preserving open spaces is a priority for a number of groups on the Cape. The goal of keeping unspoiled areas free of development has an added significance to those whose ancestors occupied it for thousands of years before European settlement.

The Native Land Conservancy, a new Mashpee-based non-profit group, aims to protect land across Cape Cod, and restore it to its original state. Organizers hope property owners are swayed by the idea of returning land to the descendants of its ancient stewards.

"This is a different kind of gesture than to...donate land to a land trust," said NLC founder and Vice-Chair Ramona Peters. "To actually have in your heart and mind the idea of giving land back."

Beyond acquiring land, the group hopes to educate people about its uses, and introduce a greater appreciation for nature into the larger culture. "This is a very busy world, and high technology has even brought us farther away from the land," said Peters.

The NLC plans to launch a series of programs next year to teach

people about native ways, and foster the sense of mankind as a participant in, and protector of, the natural world. Among its methods will be a community sweat lodge, and the recreation of the Wampanoag canoe passage. The group will also conduct a series of nature walks—during which participants will wear moccasins—aimed at revealing nature from the perspective of a Native American.

The NLC will actively seek to form partnerships with the many land trusts already at work on the Cape. As long as the aim of preservation is accomplished, Peters said, it does not matter which group actually owns the land. "It's all the same. All land that is conserved is the goal."

Such partnerships have become increasingly important for financing land transactions, said Mark H. Robinson, executive director of the Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts. "Here on the Cape, land has become so expensive."

Robinson has acted as advisor during the setup of the NLC, now a member of the Compact. He said preserving open spaces serves a number of goals beyond the cultural, such as preserving animal habitats and



Members and supporters of the Native Land Conservancy, including new member Kerry Kennedy, center, Vice Chairwoman Ramona Peters, fourth from right, front, and Chairman Errol Hicks, back. STAFF PHOTO BY CONOR POWERS-SMITH

limiting the contamination of water and other natural resources involved in development.

"We're all on the same faucet," said NLC Chairman Errol Hicks. "We're all drinking the same water."

While large portions of the Cape are already protected, Robinson said, much remains in the balance. "About a third of the Cape has been protected, in terms of land mass. About a third has been developed. About a third is up for grabs."

Small areas can be important acquisitions, Robinson said, with even an acre of land potentially acting as a micro-habitat for some species. Larger parcels are generally more sought-after, though, as are areas that join lands already protected. "Bigger is better. Connecting parcels together is better, so that animals have a way to move through the landscape."

Kerry Kennedy, president of the Robert F.

Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights—the organization named for her father—recently joined the NLC, receiving a wampum necklace as a gesture of friendship. Kennedy, who has argued for the return of native lands, promised to bring the message to other members of her famous family. "I'm sure we can sign up the rest of the family. That can be my assignment."

"Having Kerry become a member is huge," said Peters. "We didn't expect that." The NLC hopes Kennedy's support will bring more attention to the group, and that the recent raising of the state's tax credit for donated land—to a maximum of \$75,000—will give potential donors another incentive.

More information on the NLC is available on the group's recently launched website, native-landconservancy.org.