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INITIATIVES

Saving the Forge River

An Unhealthy River

Having been alerted to proposed new developments likely to impact the headwaters of the Forge River, Peconic Baykeeper began keeping an eye on the health of the river in Spring 2005. By mid-June, community members living on and near the Forge River, which runs between Mastic and Moriches, saw and smelled significant changes in the river and alerted local and state officials. On June 17 Peconic Baykeeper Kevin McAllister navigated the patrol boat up the Forge, noting the foul sewage-like odor and grayish water, with numerous dead fish and crabs floating near the east side of the river. Kevin measured dissolved oxygen levels, both at the surface and several feet underwater, and measured the turbidity, or cloudiness, of the water. Dissolved oxygen levels were extremely low -- insufficient to support most marine life -- and turbidity levels were extremely high.

Kevin called the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to report the problem and his on-site measurements, then went ashore to speak with residents and to find out how long they had been observing such conditions. On repeated trips up the river over the next several days, Kevin observed similar conditions, prompting an investigation and further testing by Suffolk County and New York's DEC.

Community Involvement

These dire conditions set in motion a call to action and the community quickly rallied, turning out by the hundreds to press conferences and meetings held throughout the second half of 2005. A group of concerned citizens, trained by the Baykeeper, regularly tested the waters during this period. In September, Peconic Baykeeper petitioned DEC to classify the Forge River and its tributaries as "Impaired Waters". Under the Clean Water Act, states are required to identify such waters where specific "designated" uses are precluded due to water quality conditions. In this instance, the Forge failed to provide the water qualities necessary for the very survival of existing fish populations, not to mention their successful reproduction. After nearly a year of water quality testing and the community's clear demand for action, DEC granted in April 2006 the petition of Peconic Baykeeper and citizen activists for impaired status. The agency corroborated findings of extremely high concentrations of nitrogen and bacteria, and dissolved oxygen levels insufficient to support life. The Town of Brookhaven subsequently established the Forge River Task Force -- composed of government officials, citizen leaders and public interest groups including the Peconic Baykeeper- to make recommendations to guide restoration efforts.

Ongoing analysis of the factors causing decline in water quality by Suffolk County and Stony Brook University are leading to a compelling conclusion: over-development within the watershed has reached a tipping point. Stormwater runoff and contamination of groundwater by residential septic systems are causing excessive nitrogen loads and the chronic algal blooms that deplete the river of its oxygen. While some suggest a simple dredging solution will cure the ills of the Forge, most community activists understand that protection of open space within the watershed is the most critical, immediate need and one which will provide the greatest long-term benefit to all other restoration efforts. For this reason, the Affiliated Brookhaven Civic Organizations (ABCO), Peconic Baykeeper, The Nature Conservancy, Pine Barrens Society, Open Space Council and the Citizens Campaign for the Environment have endorsed legislation to protect open space resources in the watershed. In addition, as active members of the Forge River Task Force, ABCO and Peconic Baykeeper worked to support a 12-month development moratorium in the Town of Brookhaven to allow the Task Force to complete its recommendations for restoration. Unfortunately, this proposal failed to win Town Board approval in December, 2007.

Peconic Baykeeper's clean water efforts on the Forge River are supported with a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). NFWF was created by the U.S. Congress in 1984 to promote public-private partnerships for protection and management of fish and wildlife habitat.

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Duck farm on the Forge River

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