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EDITORIALS

Protecting Moshup Trail

With its salt-blasted heathlands and rich ecology of rare flora and fauna, Moshup Trail is a place unlike any other on the Vineyard. Situated in the windswept, westernmost reaches of the Island, it is also often a forgotten place.

For several years now a large section of Moshup Trail has been a quiet battleground in a complicated legal war that has been playing out in state court between the owners of a series of landlocked lots, the town of Aquinnah and the Vineyard Conservation Society. The intricacies of the case, which is woven with arcane issues of land use law and involves old titles difficult to trace, are so complicated that even the attorneys are hard-pressed to explain them at times. A recent decision by the Massachusetts Appeals Court that remands the case back to the Massachusetts Land Court almost defies translation, and hopefully the state Supreme Judicial Court will act favorably on a petition for further appellate review.

By contrast the stakes are clear and easily understood: if access is opened to the landlocked lots, owners stand to make huge sums of money from their development, and the pristine environment of Moshup Trail will be ruined.

The battle over this key section of Moshup Trail is likely to continue for a long time. The conservation society has been working behind the scenes for years to buy some of the landlocked lots and place them in permanent conservation, but the work has been slow because of the complicated title problems. In 1995 the state office of environmental affairs contributed five hundred thousand dollars to the effort.

Recently some residents asked the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank to get involved. This is a good idea, and with its stunning vistas and unspoiled coastal heathlands, Moshup Trail is an area that meets the high priority definition under land bank criteria for purchase. But

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unfortunately, the land bank cannot negotiate a purchase without a willing seller.

So the legal battles continue, as they must, if the town and the conservation society are to prevail in protecting this crucial piece of the Vineyard, an ancient place named for the legendary Wampanoag giant who stepped gently on the land. It is a place which once lost, cannot be recovered.

Good Neighbors

In connection with the start of construction on a taxiway and airplane ramp at the Martha's Vineyard Airport, a more delicate construction project has been undertaken as well: the creation of habitat for state-listed rare plant and animal species displaced by the work.

The seventeen acres of sensitive sandplain and grassland habitats affected by the development were identified several years ago in the environmental impact report that was filed with the state - a necessary step in the course of winning approval for the capital improvement program outlined in the airport master plan.

As one airport official noted at the time, "I have learned more about the barrens buckmoth than I ever wanted to know." The comment was said with a hint of humor, but in fact awareness is half the battle - the other half being action.

The principle behind mitigation sounds like good common sense: maintain the environmental balance; turn up a field of grasses here, replant it over there. The rigorous process ensures the protection of rare habitats.

In the case of the Vineyard airport, compensatory measures include trimming the overstory of larger trees across the Edgartown-West Tisbury Road to foster young scrub oaks, the tender shoots of which are a favorite food of the barrens buckmoth. Sandy paths for the purple tiger beetle have also been laid there. And a grasslands habitat has been replanted near the edge of one of the runways, a home for the grasshopper sparrow and native grasses such as purple needlegrass and sandplain blue-eyed grass.

In 1785 the Scottish poet Robert Burns could do no more than offer an apology to the mouse whose nest he upturned with the plough,



writing "I'm truly sorry man's dominion, Has broken Nature's social union."

We have come a long way since then, but still: Who will tell the purple tiger beetle about the move?

Quiet Tuesdays

The fall equinox arrived last week and on Friday September comes to an end, all too quickly it seems although the Indian summer weather has been perfect for fishing and boating and straggling beach days.

Now October arrives; family and commercial scallopers are cleaning off the culling boards and New England asters and goldenrod dot the roadsides with dusky shades of blue and yellow.

At the Gazette October also signals the end of the twice weekly newspaper cycle and a return to one publication a week. The Tuesday Gazette is one of the many hallmarks of summer, mirroring the double-time pace of the season.

Now it is time for the quiet season to begin and time too for the Gazette to change its journalistic pace after a hectic summer. Accordingly, today marks the last Tuesday edition until early June of next year. And to all the loyal Gazette readers, thanks for being with us on Tuesdays - we've enjoyed the pleasure of your company. Meanwhile, through the long winter we look forward to our regular appointment on Fridays; the Gazette has published every Friday without interruption for 159 years.

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