



NATIVE LAND CONSERVANCY



Welcome Autumn 2023

NLC Celebrations
NLC News and Events

WORKING TOGETHER TO SAVE A SACRED LANDMARK

The Aquinnah Wampanoag creation story tells us that Maushop provided everything the people needed to survive beginning with the land. A giant, Maushop dragged his big toe along the beaches of Cape Cod and carved out the offshore islands. The island of Noepe, now called Martha's Vineyard, was a vast, lush land for hunting, foraging, and planting. Maushop would also fish for whales, wading into the ocean, grabbing them by the tail, and bashing the whales against the high open cliffs at the westernmost tip of the island to make a meal he would share with the people. It was the blood of the whales that stained the clay cliffs in brilliantly colored hues of red, orange, gray, and black. The cliffs and surrounding land are culturally and historically significant and undeniably sacred to the Aquinnah Wampanoag. So, when 3.3 acres encompassing the cliffside Aquinnah Shop Restaurant, a parking area, and open space connecting to the Aquinnah Cultural Center were listed for sale in June for \$3.5 million, hearts in the Aquinnah Wampanoag community sank, fearing it would be lost to development.

A group of tribal women acted quickly to begin fundraising and advocating to save the land and the iconic restaurant by forming the Aquinnah Land Initiative (ALI). They reached out to the NLC, the only other group of land conservationists they knew of that is run exclusively by indigenous people. Teaming up with ALI, on August 18 NLC was able to purchase the land for \$2.5 million. NLC President Ramona Peters was glad that we were able to help this fledgling sister organization. "We've done amazing things," Ramona said, "but recovering this piece of ancestral homeland today in Aquinnah is by far the most spectacular action we've taken!" ALI President Wenonah Madison is the great-granddaughter of Napoleon and Nanette Madison, who founded the property's now idle restaurant in 1948. "For time immemorial Wôpanâak women have watched over our ancestral lands and worked hard to remain here on the island and in Aquinnah," says Madison, "We are grateful and

humbled by the support and mentorship of the Native Land Conservancy." Ultimately ALI will assume ownership of the land once they receive their 501(c)3 status and fundraise the purchase costs. Working together as long as it takes, ALI looks forward to becoming the permanent caretaker of the land which not only has profound significance to the tribe, but is also a critical archeological site and wildlife habitat. Geological studies reveal fossils of whales, mastodons, and rhinoceros buried within the layers of rock. It is part of the rare habitat type, Northeast Coastal Heathlands, and brims with biodiversity like orchids, turtles, hawks, and moths.



CELEBRATIONS

NLC Founder Recognized for Dedication to Conservation and Environmental Advocacy

In August our Founder and Board President Ramona “Nosapocket” Peters was honored by The Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts with the 2023 Ansel B. Chaplin Award for Open Space Volunteer Excellence.

“Having my name on the Chapin Award plaque with those amazing conservation champions is a huge honor,” said Ramona. The Compact has been recognizing exemplary conservationists with the Chaplin Award, named for the organization’s founding president, since 2002.

Under Ramona’s leadership, NLC has protected more than 800 acres of land through conservation easements. She has worked cooperatively with other land protection agencies and tribal groups both to protect land and create cultural respect easements that allow for the return of Indigenous ceremony, caretaking, and practices to ancestral homelands.

We are fortunate to have her guidance and leadership as we fulfill the NLC mission and appreciate that others recognize her impact on efforts to preserve the natural world.

Engaging with tribal youth

On July 20th, we were honored to welcome tribal children to the Wampanoag Common Lands as part of the Preserving Our Homelands (POH) summer camp. The Natural Resource Department of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe leads the program to support cultural preservation and traditional ecological knowledge to inspire future tribal leaders in science and stewardship. Over a dozen campers ages 11 to 14 years, camp counselors, Natural Resource Director Jason Steiding, and Assistant Director of Natural Resources Dale Oakley were greeted by NLC Board Members, staff, and summer fellows. After an opening circle, Ecologist Tim Simmons led a tour of the history and ecology of the land. Campers learned that the kettle ponds were formed from melted sheets of ice that towered a mile high. After lunch, the children paired up for a scavenger hunt that tested their knowledge of what they had learned, seeking out toadlets and medicinal plants. Throughout the sunny day, campers learned about the NLC’s work to protect the land and tribal access to it.



NLC SUMMER FELLOWS

Symposium highlights Fellows contributions

This summer we were incredibly fortunate to host four environmental science fellows. On August 25 we held a well-attended symposium where each of the Fellows presented on their individual projects.

Our first Fellow to arrive was Claire Nichols, a second-year Master's student at the Yale School of the Environment where she studies urban sustainability and balancing the need for housing with the environment. Claire was inspired to come to NLC and learn about indigenous traditional knowledge as it pertains to the environment. She made excellent use of her time surveying and mapping culturally significant plants.

Three indigenous environmentalists were accepted into the NLC Land of the First Light Fellowship program including AT, a student of environmental science at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado who was raised on the Navajo Nation Reservation, NM.

"I realized that being a human being, I needed to give back more than I was taking," he said, "Environmental science helps me understand the chemistry behind the scenes of that effort."

AT conducted a baseline study of Muddy Pond at the Wampanoag Common Lands (WCL), collecting temperature, light density, and invertebrate data. His work lays the foundation for future pond studies on the WCL.

Two of the Indigenous fellows are recent graduates of Brown University. Olivia Maliszewski is a citizen of the Rappahannock tribe of Virginia and earned her BS in Science, Technology and Society including an intense study of bats. Olivia says bats are sorely underrated and provide critical benefits to the ecosystem including pest control and mediation of insect-based diseases. "And I think they are cute too!" she said.

Olivia studied bats in three locations including the WCL and analyzed weeks of recordings to identify nine species and conditions where they best thrive. She also found time to create a mural for the NLC office and three educational posters!

A citizen of the Tohono O'odham tribe in Arizona, Michelle Motley, earned two degrees from Brown University, a BS in Environmental Science and Geological Science and Sc.M. in Data Science. She was attracted to the opportunity to learn more about the tribes and ecology on Cape Cod.

Her project was a study of the water quality of Popponesset watershed. "The number one threat to the ecosystem is the suffering water quality," says Michelle who hopes her study will support remediation efforts to resolve some of the ongoing problems.

In addition to their projects, our fellows attended 20 excursions from bird chick banding to touring the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. We thank all who contributed to a rewarding season, especially our partners at MassAudubon and the Yale Environmental Fellowship Program and our funders the NorthLight Foundation and the Island Foundation.



NLC HAPPENINGS

NLC REPRESENTED AT NATIONAL CONFERENCE

As the nation's largest gathering of land conservation leaders assembled in Portland Oregon in September NLC staff and board members were among more than 2,200 attendees at Rally 2023: The National Land Conservation Conference hosted by the Land Trust Alliance. In addition to training and networking the conference included an Indigenous Land Conservation Summit. It was an opportunity for Indigenous conservation professionals to gather for relationship building, peer learning and discussion about land access needs and barriers.

"I was deeply impressed, inspired and grateful to attend," said board member Pam Ellis, who was joined by fellow board member Miles Bernadette Peters and NLC Executive Director Diana Ruiz at the conference. "I came away even more convinced that land rescue and conservation is a critically important effort for indigenous people in relationship to language, cultural revitalization, food sovereignty, and self-determination."

She said the Summit was certainly the highlight of the conference, "We got a chance to hear from indigenous people from all over Turtle Island and even Hawaii. We got to hear about their efforts and initiatives in their homelands."

As a representative of an indigenous conservation organization Miles felt a particular sense of pride among conference attendees.

"I got a sense of how original the work we do in land protection really is," he said. "We have a true connection with the land and now that indigenous knowledge is something that is seen as a benefit and being sought after."

Pam was also impressed by the impact that indigenous stewardship principals are having on conservation. In a session led by David Lewis, Oregon State University Professor and member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, she learned about how restored land optimized conditions for traditional plants that had been dormant for a century to return and flourish.

"When traditional land use management is restored, many things awaken," she said. "That was very heartening."

One thing that stood out to Pam was the impressive reputation that NLC has among the many attendees that she met. Despite being a relatively small and new organization, her NLC affiliation was well-recognized.

"It was really humbling," she said. "So many people knew about NLC and especially about Ramona. They expressed such respect for the organization and her work."



PC: Amanda Craig



NLC HAPPENINGS

Summer Events

We had a busy summer of land care and cultural events. With the help of volunteers and fellows, we made significant progress removing invasive species at the Wampanoag Common Lands during several land care events including one that was featured on the Channel 5 news magazine program, [Chronicle that aired on Tuesday, July 18](#). We set up information tables at the Mashpee Wampanoag Powwow and Brewster Conservation Day in July, and at the Robbins Museum's Wampanoag Heritage Day in September. We also attended the Aquinnah Wampanoag Powwow in September and celebrated the rescue of land on the Gay Head Cliffs.

In August we held a BioBlitz, an intense survey of organisms including plants, animals, and fungi, at the Wampanoag Common Lands. Using the iNaturalist app we collected more than 300 observations of 126 species as we fanned out over the 32.4 acre pine barrens surrounding Muddy Pond that makes up the Wampanoag Common Lands. The findings included rare and protected plants like the Plymouth Gentian, tasty bramble berries, and invasives like the bittersweet we are actively removing from the site. This BioBlitz established an important baseline for NLC as we continue the restoration of the land. We plan to make this an annual event!

Wetu construction begins on the WCL

In August we really began to make ourselves at home on WCL with the construction of a wetu. Led by Mashpee Wampanoag tribal craftsman and historian Darius Coombs, our staff, fellows, and volunteers stripped bark from cedar saplings and dug holes in the stone-packed soil to establish the first wetu frame on the hill overlooking Muddy Pond. It looks amazing! Next year local indigenous artisans will weave mats for the structure and we will cover the frame in bark. It will ultimately be available for Wampanoag gatherings, ceremony, and even for those who want to camp out. For now, we are just so pleased with the ongoing effort to restore the WCL to a place that the ancestors would recognize.

Upcoming Events

We plan to be out and about this fall, this is where you will find us:

Wampanoag Cultural Celebration

Sunday, October 1, 11am to 4pm

Highfield Hall & Gardens, 56 Highfield Drive, Falmouth

Chatham Environmental Awareness Fair

Saturday, September 30, 10am to 2pm

Chatham Community Center, 702 Main Street, Chatham

Indigenous Peoples Day – Newton

Monday, October 9, 11am to 5 pm

Albemarle Field, 250 Albemarle Road, Newton





NLC SPOTLIGHT LESLIE JONAS

MASHPEE WAMPANOAG
EEL CLAN TRIBAL ELDER &
FOUNDING BOARD OFFICER



As a teenager, Leslie got a summer job working among the trailblazers of organic agriculture at the New Alchemy Institute in Hatchville that would set a tone for her life. She was outside with her hands in the earth every day working in cranberry bogs, building retainer walls, and gardening. “And we built compost piles the size of houses,” Leslie recalled “I felt more alive doing those things than anything else.” A Sea Grant professional for the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, these days Leslie is mother to her grown daughter, Finny, and lives in Falmouth where she is dedicated to a “green life.” Driving a hybrid car, she lives in a solarized home where she practices water conservation, recycling everything possible, and composting to support her passion for organic gardening, growing her own flowers, vegetables, and herbs. So, when the opportunity to become involved in land conservation at a higher level, and among her own people presented itself, she did not hesitate. Leslie became a founding board officer of the NLC in 2012 and has remained a key part of its growth as an active board officer.

“This is my life’s work,” she says, “My priority is getting my people and others on the land.”

Leslie believes that if people experience the land fully as she did at New Alchemy, there is so much benefit to be realized. “When you give to the land, she gives back. It reinvigorates our historical and cultural connection, our relationship to and respect for the land,” says Leslie who has organized tribal and higher education land care events like cleanups, restoration, and removal of invasive species.



It is important, says Leslie, to get young people, and adults, outside of their homes and away from screens long enough to appreciate what nature has to offer. “Technology is lethal for us. It gets in the way of our culture being practiced.”

In addition to her role as NLC Treasurer, Leslie also serves on the Advisory Board for the MA Conservation Law Foundation and is co-teaching and co-advising indigenous environmental planning courses at MIT. She also gives presentations about the importance of land and water conservation from the indigenous perspective to higher education institutions. “It’s essential to teach them about our connection to the natural world and to decolonize the relationship to land and water.”

In the last several years Leslie has been researching and focusing on climate change from the Indigenous perspective and producing educational video tools for the NLC. The video series, “Connecting with the Natural Elements” features four mini-documentaries on Earth, Water, Air and Fire directed toward a wide audience.