

IN A SALT MARSH, FINDING THE HIGH GROUND

By DUO DICKINSON

Several decades ago, when John Teal wrote *The Life and Death of the Salt Marsh*, Americans' consciousness of our fragile coastal landscape was in dramatic decline. In its wake, we in the Northeast, have swapped words like "bog," "fen," and "swamp" for "vernal pools," "fragile wetlands," and any number of equally loaded proper names.

In large measure, Teal's book was in response to the prior generations' bizarre efforts to manage these large tracts of land that subsoil and tidal flow make unusable for development. In an effort to drain these marshes, 1930s CCC workers (Civilian Conservation Corps) gridded these lush mats with troughs set to the low tide line, in theory, to allow for drainage to prevent mosquito growth. In truth, the exact opposite happened – more spawning areas were created and the landscape was scarred in a way which may take until the next Ice Age to heal.

My own little idyll, nearly 2 acres set to one of these salt marshes, is part of a larger parcel of land in Madison, where the Chittenden family built "Oak Hill" about 120 years ago. This large box of shingles with eight or 10 bedrooms was meant as a summer home for the less prosperous side of the family as it sits on the north side of the Boston Post Road (further from the more desirable Sound). In truth, the vast majority of my property was simply used as a garbage dump for the adjacent main building. At some point, sheep



were part of the equation as fence posts were set dramatically through the salt marsh itself preventing wanderers from getting stuck. The benefits of having the sheep were several – they kept the lower plants down and allowed the fabulous white oaks to grow dramatically above the glacial moraine landscape, a landscape of interlocking rocks so densely packed that not even Swamp Yankees like the Chittendens could attempt farming it.

As I am not alone in my desire to live near salt water (even salt water half a mile north of the coast), three or four other

building sites were subdivided off of the dozen or so acres that made up Oak Hill and in time, the runoff from all of these developed areas created an enormous overgrowth of illegal aliens. Not human, but vegetative. Phragmites reeds, it is thought, jumped across the Atlantic a century or so ago from England and due to ever greater desalinization of the marshwater – saltier water prevents them from growing and allows for the indigenous spartina grasses to remain dominant. Development has let Phragmites take over many salt marshes in New England. In our backyard, so much fresh

water washed through the lowlands in the last 10 years, the new runoff spawned a 10-foot to 12-foot high wall of Phragmites delineating the edge of the marsh. Phragmites, by the way, is a Greek word meaning "fence."

Phragmites are viewed in "The Life and Death of the Salt Marsh" as the "invasive" (read "evil") grasses that propagate when the natural salt level allows the more passive "less aggressively" invasive spartina grasses to grow. In the summer of 2003, much of the salt marsh became a spartina "dead zone" with only small fringes of spartina grasses growing



The early summer growth around the renovated salt marsh. Nature seems to have had the last word in this battle. Or not? Below, the tide comes in.



along the edge of the Fence Creek itself.

The state of Connecticut also had to deal with the perceived threat of mosquitoes spreading the dreaded West Nile Virus, but my sense was that the efforts to “bring back” my little salt marsh had an echo of the moral overlay of the spartina/Phragmites battle described in “The Life and Death of the Salt Marsh.”

An industrial equivalent of “RoundUp” (glyphosate) was used by the state on Phragmites in our marsh and many others in the last decade. After the state came through and wreaked herbicide on the invading Phragmites hordes, the casualties of this just crusade were then pushed over and laid flat by a bizarre tractor and almost nothing grew in their wake in the summer of 2004.

We lived for a year with this mostly dead backyard, but the biggest (and most surprising) change that has happened to this property since we moved here 21 years ago, occurred when the state, as it does every 10 years or so, repaved Route 1. Part of this roadwork project was to clear out the culvert that directs Fence Creek underneath it. What was once a plant-choked marsh, has now become a tidal wetland – with large areas of standing water when the moon pulls the water northward hard enough. In the last four years the spartina grasses have fully overwhelmed the fallen corpses of the vanquished Phragmites – a foe consigned to botanical hell by the cleaned-out culvert’s gushing flow of Long Island Sound



The reclaimed salt marsh at high tide in the summer. The author asks, is it better to have one form of naturally occurring life rather than another? Photos by Duo Dickinson.

salinity.

The visual effect is far more beautiful than the choking Phragmites were, and obviously more beautiful than the killing field it had become at the hands of the state of Connecticut’s agents of death. I do not know whether death-dealing mosquitoes are less able to reproduce (I suspect I will die far sooner of Deet overdosing than West Nile). The question oft left unaddressed by those endeavoring to “solve” these “problems” is whether the altered state of my backyard is in any moral sense of the word “better.”

Is it better to have one form of naturally occurring life rather than another? I know, many naturalists have been virtually religious in their veneration of “biodiversity” and indigenous ecosystems. But to me the scientific realities have morphed into aesthetic and moral judgments.

Are the uglier, taller, more invasive Phragmites somehow morally, ethically, and aesthetically inferior to the shorter, passive, thinner, elegant spartina grasses? Was it wrong for the sheep to denude the landscape of its undergrowth in the 19th and early

20th Centuries? Was it better that the Chittendens dumped their garbage all over the property rather than create landfills? Was it a good idea to spray toxins, however benign, onto plants that were determined to be less desirable so that other plants would grow?

Once the environment had changed, was it a good idea for the state of Connecticut to clean up the muck in the culvert, forcing the environment through another dramatic shift? Seeing so much change in such a small period of time, gives me pause that we may have more questions than answers.