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# Falmouth's Pond Watchers Are Troubled By The Evidence That Pollution Is Widespread

By ANGELA FRATER

For the past two years the Falmouth Pond Watchers have monitored the water quality of Falmouth's Little, Oyster and Green Ponds with an unflinching dedication.

Sixty strong, these volunteers are a diverse group. Businessmen, architects, traffic controllers, biologists — some retired — have joined together as part of a project of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution Sea Grant Program. As a group they are providing more clout in solving the problem of the deteriorating ponds than they could provide as individuals.

Some of the volunteers observe the ponds year round, watching for unusual events such as fish kills, algae blooms or bad odors. Others, like Ar-

mand Ortins, Edmund Wessling and Jack Shohayda, go out on the ponds in their boats once a month to make measurements and collect water samples.

All of the pond watchers are troubled by the evidence of pollution in the town's coastal ponds: the algae, murky water and few fish and shellfish.

Mr. Ortins remembers Green Pond thirty years ago. "The water was so clear then, my kids could sit on our dock and see all kinds of marine life," he said. "Today most of that is gone. I feel sorry for people who didn't see the Cape at that time. It was still pristine then."

And Mr. Wessling, a retired businessman who also monitors Green Pond, used to get oysters, clams, quahogs and scallops there. "We still get some clams and quahogs," he said, "but the sensitive shellfish like scallops are gone." He attributes this loss to all of the building the past years on both sides of the pond. "The cesspools and lawn fertilizers are leaching into the pond," he said. "Everybody wants to live near the water; and when salt water property wasn't available, they built on the fresh water ponds."

Jane Carter, a former WHOI technician and pond watcher on Little Pond, would like the public to be more concerned about pollution. She has lived near the ocean for many years and does a great deal of shellfishing. She has noticed the amount of shellfish has declined at an alarming rate. "People are still dumping garbage in our waters," she said.

The pond captain for Little Pond, Jack Shohayda, is opposed to plans for additional buildings on that "already over-stressed" pond. "In past summers there's been lots of foul-smelling algae on the surface," he said. "When I moved here in 1958," he continued, "Little Pond was fresh water. It had pond lillies, ducks nesting, turtles and rainbow trout as long as your arm. There's still some marine life there. But will it continue?"

This seemingly new phenomenon had been forecast re-



Robert S. Rogers, Hamlin Avenue, Falmouth, (standing) and Robert H. Leavens, Iroquois Street, East Falmouth, prepare to shove off for a sampling trip on Little Pond.

(Photograph by Marie Levesque)

peatedly in the past. Mr. Ortins, a former chairman of Falmouth's Conservation Committee 12 years ago said "We couldn't convince people that the water would become so polluted the fish would die. The water was so clean then. We made proposals at town meetings, but nobody understood what we were talking about."

Alan White, marine science advisor for the WHOI Sea Grant Program and its Pond Watcher project, summed up this indifference. "One of the insidious things about water pollution," he said, "is that it doesn't happen overnight. It happens little by little so people can't envision the impending disaster. Your eye gets used to the fact that the water

is a little green this spring, then a little greener next spring. Greener and greener until finally you can't remember how clear it was twenty years ago."

The pond watchers' work is designed to provide concrete measurements of pollution in Falmouth's coastal ponds. And the information is submitted to the town's planning commission as an aid to correcting the problem.

To garner this information, these volunteers translate their concern into action one Sunday morning each month, from May through October. From several stations on each of the three ponds — seven on Green, four on Oyster, and four on Little Pond — they measure

depth, temperature, salinity and oxygen content, taking samples on the surface and at designated depths. These samples — 33 in total — are then tested for nutrients at WHOI in the laboratory of Dr. Brian Howes.

The Pond Watchers is a cooperative project funded by the WHOI Sea Grant Program and the Town of Falmouth Planning Office. It got its start at town meeting in 1987. Because of the usual tight budget situation the town was unable to fund a \$60,000 article for a water quality study of the ponds. However, Dr. David Ross, coordinator of the WHOI Sea Grant Program and at that time a town meeting member, pledged Sea Grant's assistance with a study. The town then approved \$5,000 toward the effort.

## Two Major Points

That is when Alan White became involved. According to him, there are two major points to this project: to present to the town, in an inexpensive way, documentation of the present water quality of the three ponds, and with this documentation, give the town an accurate basis of comparison for their future actions to manage the ponds.

Pond Watchers is a two-year project, and funding for it terminates in June 1990. But Mr. White would like to continue it in a different form. "We don't want to see the project come to a standstill after all the enthusiasm that's been generated," he said. His goal is to shape the project into a bridge between citizens and local and state agencies, such as the state's Department of Environmental Protection. He would like this project to guide citizens in developing their own pond projects, plugged directly into local and state regulatory and policy mechanisms. "In Sea Grant, we're careful not to play an advocacy role," he said. "We present information and advice, but do not advocate. People have to make their own decisions."

Two years ago, when Mr. White canvassed the general public for pond watcher volunteers, he had 60 potential workers within three weeks. Despite this enthusiastic re-



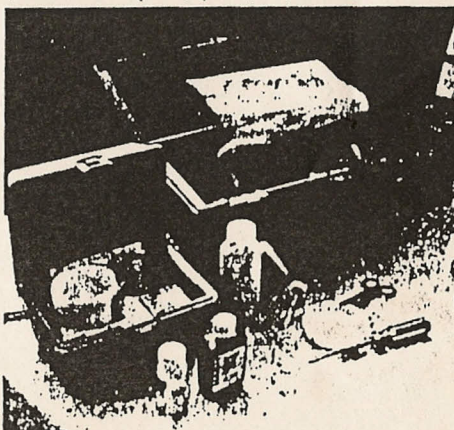
Armand Ortins of Ashmet Road, East Falmouth, (left) performs an oxygen test while Edmund C. Wessling, Bridge Street, East Falmouth, records the data.

(Photograph by John Porteus/WHOI)

sponse, there was considerable reticence, especially among scientists, that laymen could work effectively as research assistants. That doubt was put to rest early. These volunteers have proven to be as capable as they are enthusiastic. Their professional backgrounds, of-

ten involved more complex work than they use as pond watchers.

"They're willing to work beyond the call of duty," Mr. White said. "Their attitude has always been 'What else can we do?' It's magnificent working with people like that."



"Pond Watchers" sampling kit for determining water quality.

(Photograph by John Porteus/WHOI)