## GON SCONVERSATIONS ON

## **An Invitation**

## by Kristin Andres

When is the last time you went outside for some time with nature? Hopefully it is one of your weekly, if not daily, routines, because if you haven't noticed, we live in a pretty incredible place. Our outdoor experience is like no other. You can walk a long stretch on a sandy beach in any Cape town. Each shoreline offers its own breathtaking scenery, not to mention the salt air. Walking trails through pine and oak woods offer discovery at every turn, and sometimes surprising vistas. The Cape's freshwater ponds are one of the best kept local secrets for a summer swim, an early morning of fishing or just quiet reflection. We enjoy access to coastal waterways for boating, fishing or to gather some oysters. The Cape's natural areas for public enjoyment have never been more valued and appreciated then in 2020, a year of angst.

Past and ongoing acquisition and protection of open spaces and wild lands on Cape Cod will prove to be priceless for generations to come. We have our elected leaders and land trusts to thank. A prime example that everyone can agree upon is that the Cape Cod National Seashore is a national treasure. It is the iconic Cape Cod landscape. Who can imagine the Cape without these 43,607 protected acres that bring over 4.5 million visitors in most years to experience the coastal resources there?

Although they go by different names,

each Cape town has a land trust. These non-profits, led by local residents, are in the business of protecting land from development. They are funded by donations and membership dues that help support land acquisition and management of land under their ownership. They also accept gifts of land. Land trusts often strategize land acquisitions with the use of a long list of criteria. They understand the value of protecting land.

One value is the preservation of unique habitats that are found within the Cape's pine barren ecosystem. Our forested areas consist of pitch pine and oaks with an understory of shrubs, like scrub oak (a beautiful little oak with an unfortunate common name), lowbush blueberry, black huckleberry and sweet fern, and mosses, ferns, wildflowers, bearberry and wintergreen. Peppered with kettle ponds, many are coastal plain ponds, a globally rare habitat that is home to a variety of rare plant species. Protecting the adjacent upland around these ponds gives some protection to the special plant community and for turtle nesting sites. Habitat fragmentation puts many wildlife populations at risk, and land trusts target undeveloped parcels that connect to one another so that wildlife corridors can be preserved.

Protection of natural areas also helps keep our aquifer recharged. Forested areas allow the rain to soak into the ground slowly where impurities can be filtered out before reaching the groundwater, which is our drinking water. Natural areas preserved within watersheds to ponds and estuaries help protect water quality. Protected land enhances the value of abutting properties. Most people find it desirable to live next to acreage that will never be developed.

New criteria for land protection take climate change into consideration. Forests and salt marshes are two ecosystems we now understand to be important sinks for carbon, which means they hold onto more carbon than they release. Setting aside forested areas is an obvious action. But to ensure salt marshes have a chance of surviving the accelerated rate of sea level rise? This takes the preservation of low-lying flood plain parcels or old cranberry bogs adjacent to salt marshes. This allows the salt marsh to migrate landward. Salt marshes, coastal dunes, eroding coastal banks and land in the coastal flood plain all contribute to the resiliency of a community in the face of coastal storm events.

In less than a lifetime, we have seen increased pressure on town landings and the dwindling of water access points, largely due to eroding shorelines and loss of parking. With much of our shoreline privately owned, communities are challenged with maintaining what remains, and looking for new opportunities for land purchases to insure we have a place to get to the shore

for those oysters!

Open space protection benefits our recreational enjoyment of nature. While not all open space parcels are appropriate for our use, many properties are especially suited for trails, and most land trusts have trail maps on their websites.

This has been a year of distress and anxiety from so much uncertainty. People rediscovered the value of nature, taking the time to get outside. More people were using trails and parks everywhere, some even to the point of overuse. There are a few people who have been quoted as saying we have enough protected land on the Cape. Bah humbug! If anything, now is the time to save all that we can. Once it is developed, for all intents and purposes, it is gone forever.

Would it not be a great thing for us to leave Cape Cod in a way that our grandchildren's grandchildren might still experience what we love about the Cape today? If you agree, then give to your local land trust today and support their work. And remember, it's an open invitation to get outside with nature, so go and enjoy every moment you can spare.

Kristin Andres is director of education and outreach for the Association to Preserve Cape Cod (APCC) and honorary trustee of the Chatham Conservation Foundation.