

*Column #3 for July 15 edition*

## **Celebrating Place: Anniversary Notes from BHHT**

### **Trails and Programs that Connect People to the Land**

By Jim Dow, Executive Director

Over the 25 years since its founding, Blue Hill Heritage Trust has changed in many ways. One of the more interesting changes has been the importance we now place on getting people out on the land to experience the wonderful assortment of natural areas that have been conserved.

In its early days, the Trust saw its job as simply working with landowners to conserve undeveloped parcels of land, either by acquiring a full ownership interest or by holding a conservation easement on land that remained in private ownership. This view was shared by most other land conservation organizations. Connecting people to the land, for education or recreation, was not part of the mission.

Gradually, though, we realized that it would be of benefit to the public as well as to the organization to get people involved with these lands. This realization was triggered in part by misperceptions that were voiced by some people in the community about the value and purpose of the Trust's work, as well as by a growing public interest in having places to "go for a walk in the woods". It was fostered by the fact that the Trust now owned some places that would be appropriate for public walking trails.

The Blue Hill Mountain land bequeathed to the Trust in the late 1990s by Louise Fredrick hosted our first experiment in trail building and maintenance. We employed the best trail expert in the State of Maine to guide us, gathered up some volunteers and went to work. Our trail work on the Mountain and on many of our other lands has continued ever since. Today we offer about 13 miles of trails scattered throughout the landscape. We've been adding to that total steadily over the last few years.

We have learned many things by developing and maintaining public trails. We know there is a steadily growing demand for places to walk (in an area where local, state or federal government land for recreation is in short supply). We know that creating the trails is the easy part, even when it involves building stone stairs as we have done on Blue Hill - the hard part is the constant maintenance that well-used trails require. We also know that trails do indeed help people to get out and enjoy the lands and ultimately to value these beautiful places.

We have also come to understand that trails alone are not enough. So for the last 12 years we have offered public educational programs called "Walks and Talks" that are guided walks on our conservation lands, led by experts in various fields of natural history, many of whom are local residents. Because of their popularity, we keep expanding these offerings.

Recently we have given special attention to children. The importance of getting our children as comfortable with the natural world as they are with the computer world has been highlighted in educational circles nationally. Richard Louv, in his 2005 book Last Child in the Woods (which

coined the term “nature-deficit disorder”), links a lack of a connection to nature to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rises in obesity, attention disorders, and depression.

We agree that there is a real need to get kids out in the natural world for their own well-being, but also to connect them to the place that is their home – after all, they will be the ones to care for this place when we adults have passed on. To fill this need we are adding a special offering to our programs this summer for young children and their families. It is a chance for parents to discover all of our new kid-friendly trails, and for children to get outside with friends and family.

During July and August, every Wednesday morning from 9:30 to 11 am, our Stewardship Coordinator Charlotte Clews Lawther, a skilled and experienced naturalist and outdoor educator, will lead a short hike (up to a mile), rain or shine (but not thunder!). Each week the hike will occur on a different trail. (Check our Facebook Page or call our office at 374-5118 for the meeting location.)

We are fortunate to be surrounded by an abundance of fields, forests, mountains and streams and coastline waiting to be explored. We are lucky that here on the Blue Hill Peninsula there is little that can cause harm to an adventuresome child. There are no poisonous snakes and our black bears tend to be shy. Most importantly, there is much here that a child can see, do and learn when they step out into our landscape.

We hope children will come prepared (and will be permitted) to get wet and dirty!