



THE MAGNIFICENT HITHER WOODS

MONTAUK'S MAGNIFICENT HITHER WOODS



Stretching from the eastern shore of Napeague Harbor to the westerly side of Fort Pond Bay, Hither Woods and the associated dunelands of Hither Hills State Park form one of the truly great tracts of preserved land in Suffolk County. Outside the Central Pine Barrens, Long Island has few protected land areas as large as Hither Woods. As of 2021, the contiguous land mass of public land

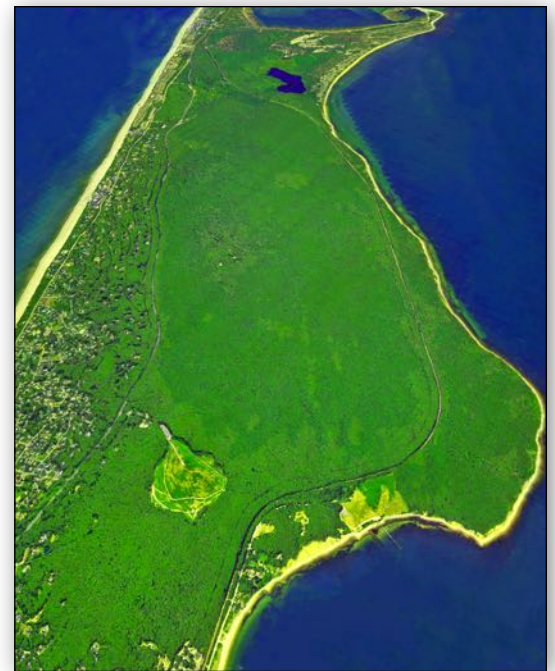
at Hither Woods and Hither Hills, north of Route 27, amounted to approximately 3,325 acres.

Within this land area can be found the unique dune formation east of Napeague Harbor known as the Walking Dunes. East of the Walking Dunes are a large freshwater marsh and, adjoining it, the secluded 34-acre Fresh Pond. From Goffe Point at the northwesterly end of Hither Hills State Park, to Edward V. Ecker County Park on Fort Pond Bay, the Hither Woods complex has 5.5 miles of spectacularly wild shore frontage on Block Island Sound and Fort Pond Bay. Much of this coastline is lined with bluffs, rising to almost 90 feet in height. Within Hither Woods are still some small areas of native grassland, remnants of the prairie-like grasslands that once covered much of Montauk.

But the interior of Hither Woods is dominated by forest – oak-hickory forest that sprawls across the often-rugged terrain that characterizes this area of Montauk. The oaks and hickories grow to a moderate size in Hither Woods' sandy soils. Interspersed with these trees are stands of American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), and understory evergreen trees and shrubs such as American holly (*Ilex opaca*) and mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*). Groundcover is typically lowbush blueberry and huckleberry. Pine trees in Hither Woods are limited to a few pitch pines, mainly in the Walking Dunes area. The pitch pines (*Pinus rigida*) are dying under the recent assault of the southern pine beetle.

East of the Walking Dunes, Hither Woods is primarily a dry forest. The Plymouth-Carver soils that predominate in this part of Montauk are too porous to support perched wetlands, so the only wetlands to be found are the aforementioned Fresh Pond and a coastal wetland further east known as Flaggy Hole. Flaggy Hole is a small but rare cattail marsh, in which blue flag (*Iris versicolor*) blooms during the summer.

The land in Hither Woods is the highest on the South Fork east of the Bridgehampton Hills. In fact, the highest point in the Town of East Hampton will be found in Hither Woods, at exactly 200 feet above sea level.



NATURAL ASPECTS OF HITHER WOODS



Hither Woods today is primarily an oak-and-hickory deciduous forest. East of Hither Hills State Park there are so few pitch pines in Hither Woods that one could literally count them by hand. Hither Woods contains no white pines (*Pinus strobus*).

Hither Woods does have some uncommon vegetation. Eastern hophornbeam, or Ironwood (*Ostrya virginiana*), is found near the Old North Road in some places west of Rocky Point, and is otherwise said to exist in East Hampton Town only on Gardiner's Island. Shining sumac (*Rhus copallinum*) is the distinctive shrub which grows at Ram Level, the only remaining meadow area of any size in Hither Woods. Because

so much of Hither Woods – perhaps 50% – was once open grassland, there is still exists a seedbank of grasses throughout the woods. Some of the ground cover within the woods is surprisingly grassy.

The predominant soils in Hither Woods are coarse and well-drained Plymouth-Carver sands. These sandy soils do not retain water well. Thus, there are no wetlands in the interior of Hither Woods to the east of Fresh Pond. Fresh Pond is a glacial kettlehole. The pond's water level is a manifestation of the ground water table.

Hither Woods does have an unusual landform feature – the so-called “push moraine” topography that causes a topographical map of Hither Woods to appear corrugated, with parallel ridges and troughs running in a southwest to northeast direction. This was evidently due to repeated small advances of the glacier in this area, which pushed soils ahead of it to form a series of miniature moraines. The push moraine was breached millennia ago by several drainage valleys that cut across and through the push moraine ridges to drain away glacial meltwater. The largest of these drainage ravines is the sprawling Great Valley, which once emptied towards Flaggy Hole. Another is the steep-sided Laurel Canyon, further east.

The glacier created other interesting features in Hither Woods, such as the half-mile-long elongated kettlehole known as the Devil's Cradle. Scattered surface boulders – called “glacial erratics” – can also be found in Hither Woods. The largest of these have names: Split Rock and the Lost Boulder.

HUMAN HISTORY OF HITHER WOODS

Hither Woods was first mentioned by name in East Hampton Town's Trustee records in 1826. Two centuries after East Hampton Town's founding in 1648, roughly half of present-day Hither Woods was cleared land, used for grazing livestock (especially sheep). Hither Woods was about 40% grassland in the 1830s, when the earliest good maps of the region were prepared by the US Coast & Geodetic Survey. Very little of these grassy areas remain, Ram Level being the most notable surviving example. Enough forest existed in the 1870s for the Montauk Proprietors, who then owned all of Montauk, to contract for the cutting and sale of wood in Hither Woods.

Before East Hampton's English settlers arrived, of course, the Montaukett Indians roamed these woods for thousands of years. The Indians probably had few encampments in Hither Woods, though, because the height of the land and the dryness of the soils meant an absence of water sources.

At the time of Arthur Benson's purchase of all Montauk in 1879, Hither Woods was used as a source of lumber for construction and cordwood for fuel. From 1852 to 1879 Montauk, and thus all of Hither Woods, was owned and managed by a consortium of shareholders known as the Montauk Proprietors. In this third quarter of the 19th century, the open areas in Hither Woods were used, as before, to graze sheep. During some parts of the year cattle were also allowed into Hither Woods. The Montauk Proprietors rented out tracts of forest to be felled for the wood, with profits shared between the Proprietors and their lessees.



Hither Woods in the second half of the 19th century probably consisted of 1,500 to 2,000 acres of wooded land, possibly more. At that time, it must be remembered, Hither Woods included forested territory south of present-day Montauk Point State Parkway which is not part of today's public parkland. Cutting 30 to 40 acres a year in Hither Woods was probably a sustainable forestry practice. The Montauk Proprietors never allowed wholesale cutting of the woods.

There were extensive grasslands in Hither Woods in the 19th century, amounting to hundreds of acres of land which are forested today. This includes the area known as Ram Level. Greenbrier (*Smilax species*) is fairly common today in much of Hither Woods. This thorny plant loves direct sunlight. Its existence throughout so much of these woods is probably a legacy of the long years of open grasslands, browsed by livestock, and cut-over woods.

In the 20th century, when so much of the rest of Montauk offered unobstructed views in almost all directions, Hither Woods was at first not considered especially desirable for residential development. When the Long Island Railroad was proposed to be extended to Montauk, it seems that Arthur Benson reluctantly went along with the idea in part because the railroad right of way would run through the northern part of Hither Woods and thus would be mostly out of sight. The railroad trackbed required substantial fill in two places – in the valley which leads down to Quincetree Landing and Rod's Valley on Fort Pond Bay. The railroad also proved to be a source of periodic forest fires, most notably in 1927, 1982, and 1986. All of these forest fires occurred in the springtime. During the 1982 fire about 600 acres of woodland were burned (almost all in Hither Hills State Park). The massive forest fire of May 1986 engulfed some 1,500 acres of Hither Woods and reached to (and, in places, across) Route 27.

The first residential use of Hither Woods since Indian times was the so-called West Side community – a few scattered fishing shanties or cottages along the shore of Fort Pond Bay and Block Island Sound near Rocky Point. Fishermen and lobstermen, some of them from Long Island's North Fork, had built a handful of seasonal houses here by 1892. These cottages and shanties stood on land leased from Arthur Benson's heirs.



They were removed or abandoned in 1956, when the Benson family finally sold its remaining acreage at Hither Woods.

PRESERVING HITHER WOODS

In 1924 the westernmost part of Hither Woods was preserved when New York State, under the impetus of the newly appointed Long Island Parks Commissioner, Robert Moses, acquired Hither Hills State Park. Hither Hills was among the first of Long Island's State parks. From 1924 until 1982, not much transpired in the privately-owned central and eastern parts of Hither Woods, although there were occasional proposals to develop the property with as many as 5,000 home

sites. The main property owners in Hither Woods by 1982 were the Curtiss-Wright Corporation and the Toronto Dominion Bank of Canada, who together owned 1,357 acres of land here.

This was the starting point for the 1980s fight to preserve the rest of Hither Woods. In late 1981, in the aftermath of East Hampton Town's dismantlement of its Planning Department, a pair of local environmentalists, Tom Ruhle and Richard Whalen, formed a group called the Coalition for Hither Woods. The Coalition for Hither Woods, as its name implies, was intended to be an umbrella organization, a consortium of existing environmental groups whose purpose was to save as much as possible of Hither Woods. The new organization wasted little time in promoting its cause. Letters were sent to newspapers throughout Eastern Long Island, and to any elected officials who might be in a position to help, stressing the need to preserve Hither Woods for its natural attributes and the protection of its freshwater aquifer. Before any applications for the subdivision of Hither Woods had even been submitted to the East Hampton Town Planning Board, the Coalition for Hither Woods persuaded the Planning Board to allow it to make a public presentation on the importance of saving Hither Woods.

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And applications to subdivide and develop Hither Woods were on their way. By early 1982 the 777-acre Curtiss-Wright property in Hither Woods' interior was already in contract to be sold to an entity called Sunbeach Real Estate Development Corporation. A separate group of local developers known as Dune Associates was negotiating to buy the 580 acres of Hither Woods shorefront from Toronto Dominion Bank. By the middle of 1982 subdivision applications were pending on both of these properties.

The so-called Benson Point subdivision proposed to develop the part of Hither Woods east of Hither Hills State Parks and along Block Island Sound. The developers envisioned 100 residential units, all of them north of the Long Island Railroad and thus near the shore. There would be 68 house lots plus 32 units in a condominium complex west of Rocky Point. This subdivision had nearly two miles of shore front. At the



same time, the even more aggressive Sunbeach Real Estate Development Corp. was proposing to subdivide the interior of Hither Woods. Sunbeach submitted its 331-unit subdivision application to the Planning Board on July 29, 1982. This project was called Sun Beach Hills at Montauk. It foresaw 188 single-family house lots, 143 condominium units, and a golf course on 777 acres of land in the heart of Hither Woods. A golf fairway would run the length of the Devil's Cradle. The Sun Beach Hills proposal was the largest single subdivision application ever submitted to the East Hampton Town Planning Board.

The Coalition for Hither Woods fought with desperate energy throughout 1982 and 1983 to prevent these subdivisions from being approved and to find money to preserve the land. A Town election in November 1983 changed the dynamic. The incoming Town Board majority imposed a moratorium on major subdivisions while the Town conducted a review of its zoning laws and undertook a wholesale revision of the Town Comprehensive Plan. The change in Town administration proved critical. The developers of Benson Point let it be known that they would be amenable to a sale of the property for preservation. This was no easy task, even though Town voters had in 1982 approved a referendum allocating \$1.5 million towards the purchase of Hither Woods. The Town did not have enough money on its own to make a deal happen. Neither, apparently, did any other level of government. A joint acquisition would be necessary, involving three levels of government – the Town, Suffolk County, and New York State. Such a tri-level open space purchase had never occurred before in New York history.

But the momentum for the preservation of Hither Woods was now too strong to be stifled. The Nature Conservancy offered to front the acquisition cost of \$8,310,000 for 557.66 acres, pending a buy-out by the Town, County, and State. And so it was done. The Conservancy closed on the Benson Point land – excluding 23 acres around a former sand pit at Rod's Valley, which were deemed unworthy of preservation – in December 1986. This property was reconveyed to the State, County, and Town by separate deeds in early 1987. The northern part of Hither Woods, with its shoreline intact, had been saved.

This still left the center of Hither Woods, the 777 acres of land owned by Sunbeach Real Estate. A forest fire caused by the Long Island Railroad in May 1986 had burned much of the Sunbeach property, leaving dead, scorched trees across hundreds of acres of that tract. Even this didn't seem to dampen Sunbeach's drive. But Suffolk County now had a new source of revenue for land preservation – a 1/4 per cent increase in the County sales tax, earmarked for protecting land in critical groundwater areas. The County struck a deal with Sunbeach, which was announced in December 1988. The price was \$17 million, or about four times what Sunbeach had paid for the property in 1982, but the cost was worth the prize.

Today an extensive network of single-track and woods roads offers hikers, runners, skiers, and mountain bikers year-round access to Hither Woods' natural beauty.

Despite incredibly long odds, the preservationists had succeeded. All but 23 of the 1,357 acres which the Coalition for Hither Woods had aimed to preserve in late 1981 were now in public hands. Most of Hither Woods had been saved. But the preservation process at Hither Woods was not complete. Suffolk County purchased the rugged 95-acre Laurel Canyon Preserve, east of the Montauk landfill, from 511 Equities in 2000. The Town, to almost everyone's amazement, acquired the 23 acres of land at Rod's Valley – once a sand mine considered almost worthless by preservationists – in 2002. These finishing touches in Hither Woods' salvation came without the acrimony that had attended the land preservation battles of the 1980s.

Today an extensive network of single-track trails and woods roads offers hikers, runners, skiers, and mountain bikers year-round access to Hither Woods' natural beauty. The Paumanok Path, for instance, runs for 9.70 miles through Hither Hills State Park and Hither Woods, between Napeague Harbor Road and Upland Road near Route 27. Hither Woods is open to seasonal hunting. Recreational and natural use of this land has benefited Montauk and all Long Island. With proper management it will do so for generations to come.

A NEW THREAT TO HITHER WOODS: East Hampton Town's Proposed Sewage Treatment Plant

When it comes to protecting Long Island's natural landscape and its biological and botanical communities, it pays to never be complacent – even when dealing with lands that are “already preserved.” Such is the case with Hither Woods. In April 2022 East Hampton Town announced its desire to build a sewer system to serve the Downtown Montauk commercial area. The Town's proposed location for the sewage treatment plant was none other than Suffolk County parkland in Hither Woods.

At first the Town proposed to place the sewage treatment plant in the County's Lee Koppelman Preserve, the former 777-acre Sun Beach Hills property. More recently, the object of the Town's interest has shifted to 14 acres of wooded County parkland near Laurel Canyon, a glacial outwash ravine which carves through the forest. This is high, hilly land east of the one-time Montauk landfill, which has been closed and capped for 30 years. The Town proposed a land swap with Suffolk County, under which the County would get 18 acres of newly acquired Town parkland off East Lake Drive, Montauk, and the Town would obtain the land in Hither Woods near Laurel Canyon.

If East Hampton Town manages to acquire parkland in Hither Woods, it will eventually clear all or most of this land to construct the sewage treatment facility, parking areas and accessory buildings, and to install potentially hundreds of subsurface concrete recharge basins through which to discharge treated wastewater coming from the sewer plant back into the ground. Estimates of the proposed sewage flow have been hard to come by, given the Town's secrecy, but a July 2022 report by the Town's engineering consultant suggests 550,000 gallons of wastewater could be handled by a Hither Woods sewage treatment plant each day.

Despite the fact that Hither Woods is protected against private development, local government interests occasionally turn to these public areas for expansion.

In response to the Town's proposal, local citizens reformed The Coalition for Hither Woods, dormant since the late 1980s, and this time incorporated the entity. The Coalition for Hither Woods immediately organized strong opposition to East Hampton Town's plan for a sewer plant in Hither Woods. On February 23, 2023, following a presentation by Town officials on the Town's sewer plant proposal, and opposing comments by members of The Coalition for Hither Woods and its allies, the Suffolk County Parks Trustees courageously voted, 10-0 with two abstentions, to recommend against East Hampton's proposed acquisition and alienation of County parkland at Hither Woods for the purpose of a sewer plant.

What will East Hampton Town do next? The Town could in theory go directly to the County Legislature and ask the Legislators to ignore or override the recommendation of their own Parks Trustees. The Town has been close-mouthed throughout this whole process, offering very limited information to the public. The Coalition for Hither Woods has learned enough from the behavior of East Hampton officials in the past two years to know that the Town's machinations still pose a serious threat to Hither Woods.

PLEASE CONTRIBUTE

If you would like to contribute to The Coalition for Hither Woods, in its efforts to prevent a sewage treatment plant from being built on Hither Woods parkland, you can mail a check to:

The Coalition for Hither Woods, Inc.
P. O. Box 1775
Montauk, NY 11954

For more information please see us at hitherwoods.org or hitherwoods.com