

Earth Day Op-Ed from Mark Rasmussen – April 21, 2020

This week marks the 50th anniversary of Earth Day and between the sobering reality of how our environment is degrading in response to climate change and today's unsettling reality of the Covid-19 pandemic, you might expect that conservationists like me are seeing this anniversary as a lost opportunity to make some much needed progress toward a more sustainable future.

That's true, but I'm also seeing something remarkable happening here in southeastern Massachusetts; something that makes me hopeful for the future of our planet; something entirely unique to this moment and the stress that is weighing on all of us right now.

I'm seeing people OUTSIDE. No, not at the shopping mall or on their drive to school. The real Outside. In nature, and even better, in the nature right in their own neighborhood. One of the most encouraging responses to virus Stay-at-Home advisories has been the growing number of people utilizing local walking trails, enjoying the views across preserved farmlands and saltmarshes, noting the change in season with ospreys overhead, spring peepers in the marsh and river herring in the streams below.

At the Buzzards Bay Coalition, we have never seen the volumes of people responsibly utilizing our Reserves as we have over the past month. The same is true from our partners in other land trusts managing publicly-accessible open spaces across the region – from Westport to Wareham and Woods Hole – we are all welcoming new friends and families to the outdoors. They are coming, and with hardly an exception, are observing necessary social distancing as they take comfort in connecting with the nature in our backyards.

It's not by accident that these lands and trails are available to all of us in this time of need. After decades of hard work by local conservation groups and town boards, supported by landowners and thousands of voters at Town Meetings and on the ballot, our region is rich with preserved open spaces. Over the past 20 years, the Buzzards Bay Coalition is proud to have been directly involved in preserving more than 8,000 acres and land conservation remains a critical component of our work today.

That's good for the Bay, its rivers, our drinking water, and wildlife for sure. But it's the connection of these conserved lands to PEOPLE where the most environmental benefit is gained. People care for and defend the things they love and value as important to their lives. We will not succeed at restoring our local environment – or do our part to tackle global challenges like climate change - unless people feel a personal connection to the natural world.

So that's why I'm feeling a bit optimistic about all of us humans on this Earth Day anniversary. Because the events of the past month have shown that when faced with the stress and uncertainty of this pandemic, one response for many people has been to seek relief, recreation and reconnection in nearby, treasured, natural spaces. That's a powerful reminder of the role our local environment plays in all of our lives and one that will reach far beyond this anniversary and this pandemic.

So, join your neighbors and GET OUTSIDE this Earth Day. Wondering where to start? Check out **discoverbuzzardsbay.org** to find more than 250 free places to go and outdoor activities to do across the region. Do it for yourself (and for the planet) and stay well.

Mark Rasmussen is President of the Buzzards Bay Coalition, a nationally-accredited land trust, based in New Bedford, MA.