

Sea Farms Conservation Area, East Falmouth

It is trees, not sea or farm that form the first impression of Sea Farms Conservation Area. Here in a thickly-settled area of Falmouth is an 88-acre parcel of open space where dense trees create the sensation of being deep in the woods. Following the beautifully winding trails will lead you at last to various viewpoints over Bournes Pond, an arm of the sea. But the impression of forest remains, as the majority of the area is wooded upland where trees have colonized former farmland. The name Sea Farms comes not from the original farmers but from a more recent owner of the land—an organization that worked on aquaculture—sea farms.

Thick woods are the major characteristic of Sea Farms, but the trees that make up those woods are neither very tall nor very old. Probably the oldest trees are the small, ragged-looking Pitch Pines that were likely the first trees to colonize the area when farming ended. These short-lived trees have begun to die as the younger oaks have grown tall enough to shade them. Only where fires are frequent enough to kill off other trees will Pitch Pines remain the dominant tree—and fires are not generally allowed to burn on the Cape today as houses have been built all through and around the woodlands.

The really large, gnarled White Pines may actually be younger than the Pitch Pines—White Pines prefer to germinate in the shade, and they grow much faster than Pitch Pines, quickly reaching large size. But it is also possible that these short, many-trunked White Pines are older, a remnant of a former forest, allowed to remain to shade the animals when this area was cleared for pasture; many-trunked trees are of little commercial value and might have been more important to the farmer as shade. Beneath the trees the thick undergrowth of Black Huckleberry, Low-bush Blueberry, Wintergreen, and Sheep Laurel indicates that this area was pasture, not fields of turnips or strawberries. These low native plants are destroyed by plowing and return slowly or not at all to formerly plowed fields.

Where the paths overlook the various coves of Bournes Pond there are good views, and some lovely areas of marsh bordering the upland. These marsh areas are important not only for wide views and the habitat they provide, but also for the fact that such wetlands remove nitrogen from the groundwater, reducing the burden of pollution on coastal ponds such as Bournes Pond. Preserving the marshes thus helps the health of the ponds.

Open space has many virtues and values, from protecting groundwater and animal habitats to providing recreation and reducing noise. But one of the most basic is reduction of population density. These 88 acres, if not preserved as open space might have been developed into several hundred housing units, with the concomitant traffic, pollution, and demands on town services. Development would have increased pressure on the town's roadways, water and school systems, and increased the pollution of Bournes Pond. Instead, the town's acquisition of these parcels as open space has given us all a lovely area of parkland and the natural cleaning of water and air that such land has always provided.

To visit Sea Farms, walk the trails from the small parking area at the end of Gayle Avenue, on the east side of Davisville Road. There is also access and a small unpaved launch ramp at the end of Pacheco Path. A trail map can be downloaded and printed from The 300 Committee's website at www.300committee.org.