

VILLAGE VIEW

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"What good is a swamp?" That wasn't so much a question as a flat and disparaging statement of disgust. It was a temptation to force the man to listen, to learn something, to hear what good swamps are. But he was bigger than I. And he didn't want to know. So I didn't try to tell him.

Ever since, though, I've been troubled; if he doesn't know, then there are still lots of other people who don't know, either. It's important to everyone's future that as many people as possible become aware of the value of swamps, as well as of bogs and marshes.

The fellow whose remark triggered my dismay is a person sensitive to the natural beauties of his surroundings. Last summer when hot rainless day followed hot rainless night, week after week, he was among many of us who said, "I wish it would rain!" And when it finally did rain, a good hard soaking in the night, right after Labor Day, the sound of it woke him (his wife told me). He came fully awake long enough to say, "I don't believe it!" and fell back asleep.

After he got home from work each night, all summer

long, he was to be found among his plants, watering, weeding, willing them to survive. He mulches them in the fall, and fertilizes them in spring and again in mid-summer. He mows and waters his small lawn; flowers bloom and nod in the gardens along his split-rail fence. Still, he sneers at swamps.

Not many years ago, less than 20, there were three small swamps and one good-sized one in this neighborhood. Two of the three small ones are gone. The large one remains undisturbed. One of the small swamps was filled with truck-load after truck-load of sand. A house stands now where the swamp once was.

Down below, deeper than the basement floor of that house, pine logs are moldering away. They were felled into the swamp before the sand was poured into it. Sometimes I wonder what will happen when those pine trunks rot and turn to powder. I know what happens when a stump finally rots away; a hole appears in the ground. It eventually fills with leaves and soil, but it takes a long time to level itself with the surrounding surface.

Another of the little swamps has become a small pond. Truck loads of peat and muck were dug from its bottom with a crane. Its banks were sodded, it was stocked with goldfish to keep the mosquito population under control, and (except when the groundwater level drops during drought conditions) it looks very attractive.

What good is a swamp? Swamps and bogs, like marshes along the salt water shores, are defined as wetlands. They are important to people as well as to wildlife; they need extraordinary protection for they are easily destroyed. During some part of each year, they are covered by natural non-flood waters and are an irreplaceable water resource.

Swamps form a habitat for fur-bearing animals and are a nursery for many species of fish and waterfowl, but more important, they moderate extremes in water flow, aid in the natural purification of water, and maintain and recharge groundwater.

Groundwater is Cape Cod's only source of water. As more and more of the Cape is converted from woodland to residential development, the balances of nature are thrown out of equilibrium. Each year more parts of our towns are sewered. Each year town water systems are enlarged to provide public water supply to more and more new homes. And with every passing year the demand for water increases.

When more people live on the land, there are more toilets to flush; and each time one is flushed, five to seven gallons of clean fresh **drinkable** water goes down the drain. There are more dishes, clothes, and cars to wash. And teeth, hair, hands and faces and bodies. There are more gardens and more lawns to water. More streets to maintain mean more salt is poured on them in winter. Salt washes into the soil and eventually ends up in the groundwater, of course.

The only places this doesn't happen is where there are sewers. There, the salt ends up either in the filter beds of the sewer system or flows through pipes to a watercourse which eventually empties into the sea. Before so much of the earth's surface was paved, rainwater drained into swamps, bogs and marshes; now much of it goes directly into the ocean. The only way it can be reclaimed from the sea is through evaporation which leads eventually to clouds, more rain, and the

Meanwhile, however, our bogs and swamps are being filled, cleared, dredged, dug and bulldozed into oblivion. No one can make a swamp. Destroying or disturbing them destroys the capacity of wetlands to absorb and store fresh water, to provide flood and storm control, and to act as recharge basins for groundwater supplies. Swamps and bogs are natural pollution treatment systems. They control sedimentation and filter silt and organic matter from fresh water.

Asking people to care about swamps for the protection of unique life-forms, both plant and animal that depend for survival upon the eco-system of wetlands, is expecting too much. To many, the continued existence of tree frogs or sphagnum moss, skunk cabbage or wildflowers that grow in no other environment, is incidental. They don't care whether these tiny creatures or delicate plants are wiped from the face of the earth. They are primarily interested in their own comfort and personal well-being. What they want to see when they look from their picture windows is an expanse of green grass, neatly edged, mowed to a uniform length of one-and-one-half inches, and surrounded with cultivated plants and flowers that enhance the landscape plan.

Self-interest alone, however, should stimulate a strong desire to protect the groundwater supply. What will happen to all those beautiful and expensive cultivated foundation and landscape plantings as water grows more and more scarce? Water use will be restricted, and the plants will die, of course.

As the groundwater level drops lower and lower, even the native trees and shrubs will be incapable of driving their strong hardy roots deeply enough to reach the life-sustaining water supply. They, too, will die. As the Cape is denuded, the root systems that now hold the sand of our peninsula in place will dry up and disappear. Erosion, already a threat to most of the Cape's ocean-front property, will rapidly take its toll. Cape Cod will eventually disappear beneath the waters of the sea.

This isn't going to happen next week; it won't happen next year, either. Maybe there will still be a small barren sandy peninsula called Cape Cod at the beginning of the twenty-second century. If there's anything at all left of it by then, there won't be space for many tourists, nor will there be much left to attract them.

The changes in the last hundred years have been unprecedented in the geologic history of the earth, not because man is any different from the way he's ever been, but because his tools have changed. Damage that once was limited to what man could do with a shovel has now become damage that can be wreaked with a bulldozer.

In one hour, today, man can ruin tens of thousands of years of nature's handiwork.

What good is a swamp? As good as a drink of water to a thirsty tree, or to an animal, or to man, himself.