

FRIENDS OF SEARS ISLAND



Photo by Derek Dunbar

ANNUAL REPORT

2021

PUBLISHED JANUARY 2022

Highlights from 2021

As we mark the turning of another year, we celebrate our many accomplishments, despite continuing challenges presented by the pandemic. Our on-island, Zoom videoconference, and educational after-school programs have become more successful than ever, many of them filling up immediately after they are announced. We created three new trails and installed signs, held several effective fundraising events, and made many improvements on the island. We are especially pleased to announce that last fall, the Friends of Sears Island (FOSI) was awarded the Waldo County Business Award in a competition run by the Belfast Area Chamber of Commerce. We were pleasantly surprised and felt very honored to receive this award.

More people are coming to Sears Island than ever before, not only from the local area, but from all over the U.S. and around the world. They hike the trails, explore the tidepools, birdwatch, and enjoy picnics on the beaches. We welcomed many more visitors to Sears Island this summer—nearly 17,000 cars between June and August. However, many people come to Sears Island throughout the year, as the island offers four seasons of recreational activities, a diversity of habitats, and unparalleled views that can be enjoyed year-round. Others visit the island to attend one of our engaging informational programs or popular guided nature walks.

For the past 15 years, FOSI has continually taken care of the island—to make sure its environmental and cultural resources are protected, trails and fields are maintained, and the entrance is welcoming—so that all visitors have an enjoyable and safe experience while on the island.

FRIENDSOFSEARISLAND.ORG

Programming Updates

Activity Kit Program

In 2020, rather than meet in person for a monthly Science Squad program for kids, we began offering activity kits as a way for families to explore and engage with nature during a very isolating time. While we miss hosting in-person events for children, we've been able to serve more families each month with our kits than we were able to do with our Science Squad programs. The activity kits have been incredibly popular; in a typical month, they are all reserved within 24 hours of being publicized! In 2021, we offered 10 different themed activity kits, and distributed a total of 336 free kits to our community. Kit themes included snow science, animal tracking, powerful pollinators, magnificent monarchs, science in the dark, and patterns in nature.

In January of 2021, through the support of a grant from the Maine Environmental Education Association, we were able to collaborate with Belfast Bay Watershed Coalition to offer an additional 50 kits per month to Searsport Elementary remote learning students. The kits were sent to remote students each month from January to June to supplement their at-home learning during the pandemic.

Adult Programs

This year we were able to offer a mix of in-person events outdoors and Zoom programs for attendees to enjoy from their homes. We hosted the ever-popular yoga on the beach over the summer, as well as monarch butterfly tagging and cyanotype printing workshops in the fall. We also enjoyed Zoom presentations on microplastics, animal tracking, browntail moth management, marine mammal rescues, spring ecology, and nocturnal animals. Our in-person and remote programs combined attracted a total of 565 participants! Our programs and Science Squad activity kits were always free and open for all to enjoy.

Self-guided Events

After piloting a successful StoryWalk on the Homestead Trail in summer of 2020, we decided to collaborate again with Carver Memorial Library and offer three StoryWalks in 2021, which changed each season from spring through fall. We also offered our Sears Island Bingo Scavenger Hunt again over the summer, with a lucky child winning the raffle prize of a nature book, journal, and exploration tools.

FOSI 2022 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Officers:

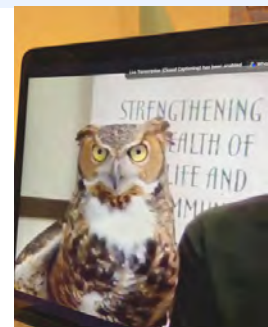
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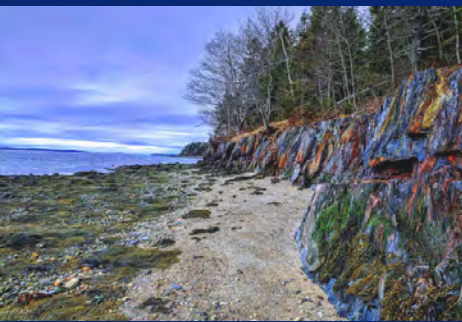
Clockwise, from upper left: cyanotype printing at Sears Island, monarch tagging workshop, nocturnal animals Zoom presentation, FOSI board members accepting the Waldo County Business Award from First National Bank staff (our sponsor) at the Belfast Chamber, yoga on the beach, the summer StoryWalk along the Homestead Trail.

Community Collaborations

Over the course of 2021, FOSI continued to strengthen relationships with organizations in our community through many partnerships. We worked with Searsport Elementary School and the Belfast Bay Watershed Coalition (BBWC) to create and deliver extra activity kits to Searsport Elementary remote learners, and we have additional projects in the works with BBWC for the coming year. We have also enjoyed our continued partnerships with both the Belfast Free Library and Searsport's Carver Memorial Library for co-hosting Zoom programs with FOSI. In addition, the Searsport library generously stores boxes of activity kits for us each month, serving as our pick-up location for families, and we plan to continue working on StoryWalks with them in 2022. We are also exploring joint projects with Coastal Mountains Land Trust and the Troy Howard Middle School (Belfast) gardening program, which frequently donated seeds and other materials to FOSI for our activity kits last year.



First snow, along the Loop Trail.



The cliffs at the end of the new Eastern Ledges Trail.



The view from the end of the new Scenic Lookout Trail.



Hikers along the Eastern Ledges Trail.

Trails Report

One of the biggest highlights for 2021 was opening to the public three new trails, two that offer spectacular views of Penobscot Bay. The Eastern Ledges Trail is about 3/4-mile long and leaves from the Cell Tower Road. It heads towards the eastern shore, passing through a field of large, lush ferns during the growing season. Arriving at an elevated rocky ledge above the shoreline, one gets a superb view of Defence Island nearby and picturesque Stockton Harbor and Cape Jellison across the bay. The trail then hugs the coast and travels northward through a mature forest to a small ravine that empties out onto the eastern shore. One can then continue north along the rocky and sandy beach, which makes for a pleasant loop hike back to the parking lot.

The Scenic Lookout Trail is located on the southern tip of Sears Island and is accessed again from the Cell Tower Road, near its end. This new trail passes through an open forest with large trees and ferns and is so named because it offers magnificent views of Penobscot Bay with its many islands. It is located near the Sears Summer Homestead Trail, a loop trail that passes the remains of the only house the Sears family lived in on the island.

Besides creating three new trails this past year, we made several other improvements to the island. A new fence was built to surround a larger handicap accessible privy. Later in the summer, Dillon Mulhern, an intern from Coastal Mountains Land Trust, helped stain this new fence and did some weed whacking on several trails. We also had help from 11 campers and two counselors from Hidden Valley Camp (Freedom) who volunteered to paint the entrance bollards and cleared encroaching vegetation on some of the trails. Other FOSI volunteers spread wood chips in the wet areas on the Western Shore Trail. As always, we kept up with the regular trail maintenance work, which included weed whacking, brush cutting, and mowing.

Trail improvements for this coming year include replacing aging bog bridges, as well as adding new ones along the Homestead and Southern Shore trails. We depend on volunteers to help with our various maintenance needs—and encourage you to contact FOSI if you are interested in becoming a volunteer!

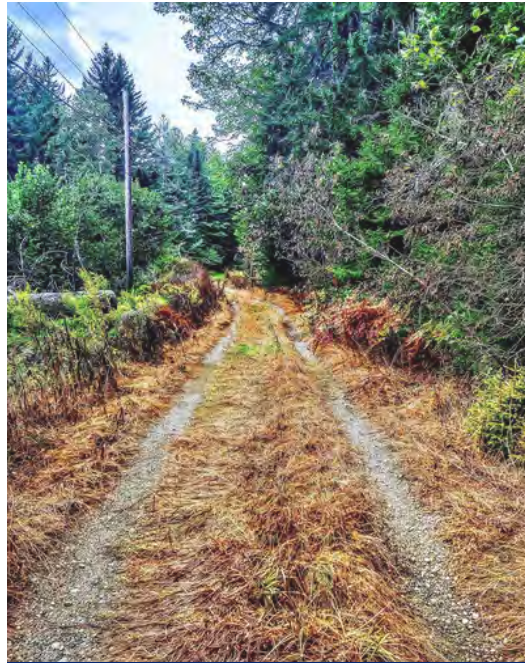


New Trail Map and Signs

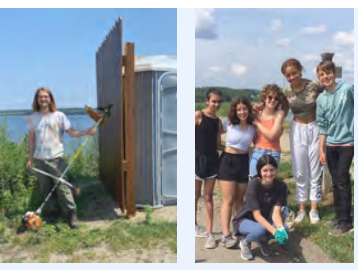
This year we created three new trails and updated the names of a few trails, so it was time for a new trail map and some new signs. We were able to update the large map in the information kiosk, and we will print new maps in the spring. In the meantime, the updated map can be downloaded on our website, and there are 'QR Codes' posted on the kiosk so people can easily download the map to their smart phones. New trail signs were made with routed lettering on cedar boards, which will be installed in the spring when the ground thaws. We will also install three new map signs with "You are here!" stickers at key trail intersections to keep visitors safely oriented. These full-color map signs were produced on durable aluminum backing by Maine DOT as part of our collaborative partnership.

Unexpected Herbicide Application

In early September, one of our volunteers reported that there was a stretch of completely dead and brown vegetation along the Cell Tower Road toward the south end of Sears Island. Further investigation showed that a strong herbicide of some kind had apparently been applied along about 300 feet of the road and 10 to 12 feet wide. We contacted American Tower Corporation (ATC), the company that owns the cell tower site, and learned that two herbicides were applied—but that the application was done in compliance with Maine laws and to ensure access to the tower site by the people who need to do work there. They assured us that the herbicides used do not pose any threat to people or animals. The Maine Board of Pesticides Control investigated, but the final determination has not yet been made. We are working with ATC to ensure that, in the future, only mechanical means will be used to control vegetation along the road.



Tower Road after the herbicide application.



Thanks to Our Volunteers!

Last year, volunteers clocked almost 1900 hours working on FOSI business. That's a lot of hours for only a little over 30 volunteers! They maintained trails and the entrance area, built and painted a new privy fence, created and installed new trail signs, planted native shrubs in ravines to prevent erosion, maintained the FOSI website, designed and produced an updated kiosk poster, and organized fundraising activities. With only a part-time outreach coordinator contracted to do our educational programming, we depend heavily on our volunteers for everything else that needs to be done to keep the organization running and the island in good shape. We are always looking for volunteers to help us out on a diverse array of projects—so please get in touch if you are interested.

We send to each of our volunteers last year a heartfelt thanks—we couldn't have done it without you!

Sears Island is Proposed Hub for Offshore Wind Project

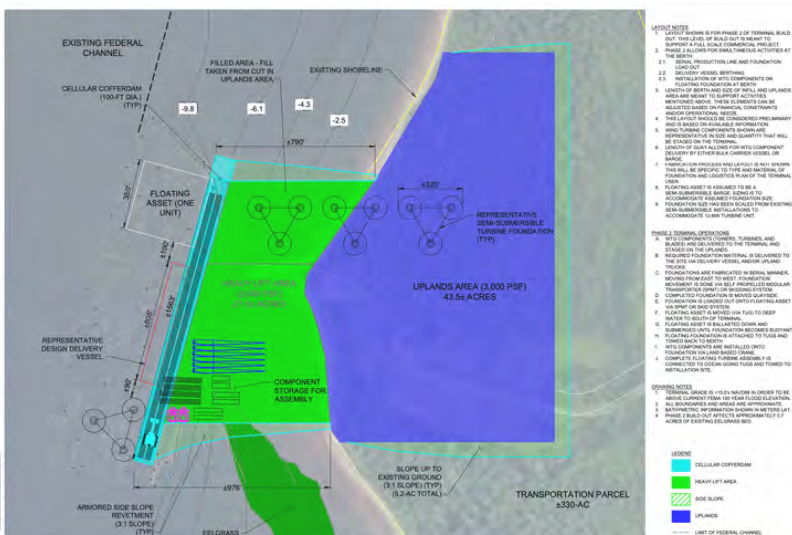
In March 2020, Governor Mills directed the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) to study the feasibility of building wind turbines in Searsport. MDOT commissioned the engineering firm of Moffatt & Nichol to conduct this feasibility study and prepare a report. The report was completed on November 17, 2021. The report strongly suggested the best location for the construction and assembly of wind turbines would be on the western side of Sears Island. The island would become the “wind port hub” of the offshore wind project.

The environmental impacts to the island from the proposed port development would be significant: about 105 acres of woods would be cleared and upland area graded, the hillside would be cut into to remove over a million cubic yards of soil to be used to build a staging area and quay extending almost 1000 feet out into the bay; and over 17 acres of intertidal and subtidal marine wetlands would be filled in.

Besides environmental concerns, there would be other impacts to the island from the proposed development. These include traffic and disruption from trucks delivering construction materials; an 800-foot crane, needed to assemble the wind turbines, visible from anywhere on the island; reduced access to the western shore and inability for visitors to circumnavigate the island; significant noise disturbance from the manufacturing facility, and light pollution resulting from the site being lit up 24 hours a day to maintain security. In short, people would no longer be able to enjoy a serene and restorative visit to the island.

The FOSI board has determined that the creation of such a manufacturing facility on Sears Island would be incompatible with the conservation and recreational use of the rest of the island, which has experienced significantly increased use during the last three years. FOSI supports the development of renewable energy sources but believes it would be more appropriate to build the wind turbine facility on an already disturbed industrial site, such as Mack Point in Searsport, rather than irreparably damage an ecologically intact island.

Bruce Van Note, commissioner of MDOT, has put together a stakeholder advisory group and FOSI is a member of this group. We will be paying close attention to the permitting process by state and federal agencies, which must take place before the project can move forward. This process will include an assessment of impacts on environmental resources of the island, the results of geotechnical surveys, and the evaluation of alternatives that are the least environmentally damaging. We will continue to monitor the situation and make sure that every alternative possibility is fully explored before a final decision is made to locate this wind turbine manufacturing facility on Sears Island.



The image on the left shows the proposed development area on Sears Island (Moffatt & Nichol Study, p.77). The photo above shows a floating wind turbine being towed into place (Moffatt & Nichol Study, p. 8).



More Visitors During 2021

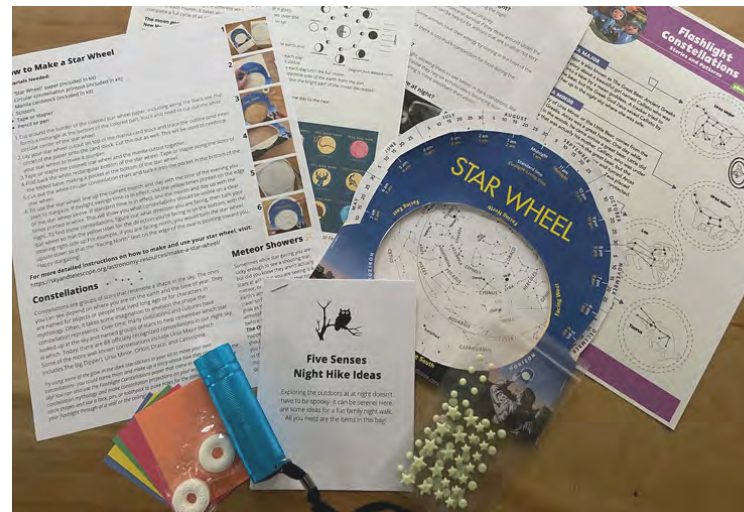
For the third year in a row, the Maine DOT provided a road traffic counter to help us learn how many people visit Sears Island. From June 6 through August 28 this year, 16,843 vehicles were counted coming to Sears Island. During the same period in 2020, the number was 15,812, and during 2019 it was 14,141. That's an increase of 19.1% over three years, and these are just the summer months; many people come to Sears Island throughout the year to enjoy our four seasons of diverse and plentiful sights and activities.

2021 Fundraising Activities

Fundraising is always a challenge for small nonprofit organizations, but it has been especially difficult during the ongoing pandemic. The bulk of FOSI's operating budget comes from individual and business donations received during our annual appeal, but the Board continually seeks other sources of revenue to support our stewardship work on the island and educational programs.

When there was a break in Covid cases in June, we were able to have a successful benefit dinner at the Nautilus restaurant in Belfast. We also had a "Treasures, Trash, and Crafts" sale at the island in August, which raised some much-needed funds through a fun community event. The Scone Goddess in Northport offered to have a benefit for FOSI during two weeks in November, donating a percentage of the profits from scone mixes sold through their website.

Most recently, FOSI sold holiday greeting cards, which featured two different photos of winter scenes from the island. In addition, we received a generous stipend from the Town of Searsport this year, and we are in the process of applying for funds from other nearby towns. We were awarded several grants in 2021 and continue to investigate all relevant grant funding opportunities. Finally, we received some funding from the AmazonSmile charitable giving program and from the CLYNK to Give bottle redemption charitable program at Hannaford Supermarkets.



Items included in our "Science in the Dark" activity kit, a program supported by the Maine Environmental Education Association and the Wild Blue Fund

Grants Received

This year, FOSI (in collaboration with BBWC) was thrilled to receive support from the Maine Environmental Education Association to deliver activity kits to the remote learners at Searsport Elementary, as well as a grant from the Wild Blue Fund of the Maine Community Foundation to strengthen FOSI's ability to respond to the challenges of virtual and self-guided educational programming during a pandemic. We also received a very generous grant from the Jewish Communal Fund for general operational support.

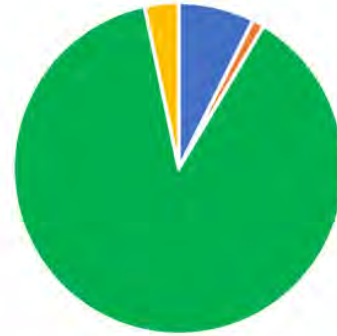
Friends of Sears Island Income and Expenditures 2021

Total Income \$43,536

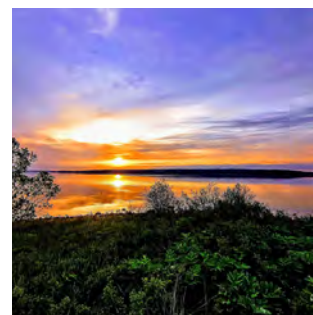
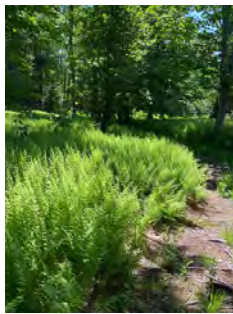
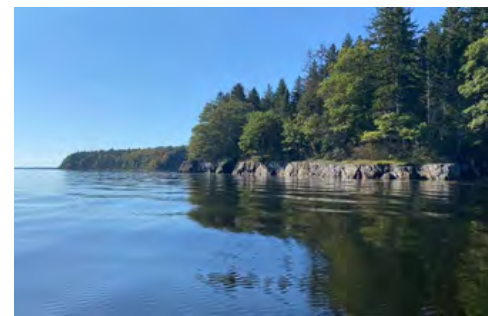
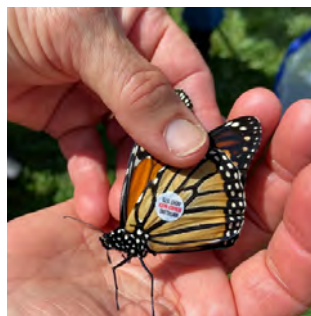


- Business Donations: \$7,441
- Individual Donations: \$10,193
- Municipal Donations: \$2,000
- Grants: \$16,750
- Events & Misc: \$7,152

Total Expenses \$30,173



- General Operating: \$2,240
- Fundraising: \$344
- Programs: \$26,586
- Trails/Maintenance: \$1,003



If you'd like to support Friends of Sears Island, you may donate online using a credit card or PayPal or send a check to our address. Thank you!

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