



Conservation Partners Spotlight: Essex County Trail Association

By Jennifer M. Keeler

Equestrian lands are fighting an ongoing war against urban sprawl, and it may seem as if an army is needed to turn the tide of development and preserve precious acres for riding. In the case of the Essex County Trail Association in Massachusetts, preserving land for the community did indeed take the effort of an army – a one-woman army.

Susanna Colloredo-Mansfeld grew up as an enthusiastic equestrian in Hamilton, MA, less than an hour north of Boston. Her studies and career took her away from historic Essex County until 1970, when she returned with her husband and three children to find the charming countryside she grew up in had changed. With many more houses dotting the landscape, trails she'd loved to ride on were no longer accessible.

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Determined to do something to help preserve precious acres for riding, she decided to pursue the formation of a local trail association. She invited members of local horse clubs to come together to discuss ideas, looked to area conservation groups and land trust organizations for guidance, and recruited the help of her neighbor, Ann Getchell of Groton House Farm. A plan was developed to help “police” the trails and act as communicators and liaisons between equestrians and landowners in order to regain the confidence of people whose private property had been taken for granted and even abused by horseback riders. “That way, the landowners knew they had someone they could call if a situation needed to be addressed, and we also would work with riders to be respectful, understand property restrictions, and encourage stewardship of the land,” explained Colloredo-Mansfeld.



Enjoying a peaceful ride on the ECTA trails

Since the time of her original idea to form a trail association in 1982, the tireless efforts of Colloredo-Mansfeld and other founding members of the Essex County Trail Association (ECTA) have paid off.

Today, the ECTA works to protect access to open land and a vast network of over 450 miles of trails throughout six towns in eastern Massachusetts, partnering with both public and private landowners to ensure that the experience of open trails is positive for them as well as the trail users. And while ECTA is a favorite with local equestrians, this active group is about much more than just horses, hosting many athletic, educational, and social events throughout the year including long-distance runs, nature walks, and sled dog races. ECTA embraces diversity in trail usage for multiple disciplines, such as walking, running, riding, biking, and skiing, bringing different trail users together in a mutually respectful way.

On the conservation front, ECTA actively negotiates with private landowners to give permanent trail easements to the association's members. ECTA also rigorously maintains, repairs, and constructs trails, ensuring safety and protection of the land. Maintaining a vast network of trails takes manpower, and ECTA excels by engaging the community through Volunteer Trail Days combined with an innovative system of 19 “Trail Stewards” located throughout the six townships who oversee particular sections of trails.

ECTA has become a model organization in making a real difference for conserving land for future generations of equestrians. But it all began with just one individual. “This grew into more than I could have imagined,” said Colloredo-Mansfeld. “I just wanted to do what I love and be able to ride through the trails of my childhood.”

Could you be the next person to make this kind of difference for your community? ■



Photo courtesy of Elisabeth Pundt Photography

ECTA Founder Susanna Colloredo-Mansfeld

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