

# Protect Sears Island

*Gary Lawless  
James McCarthy*



On Memorial Day my poet friend Gary Lawless and I went on a seven-mile walkabout on Sears Island. A chestnut-sided warbler greeted us soon after our arrival. Its song is sometimes described as a short ditty: "Pleased, pleased, pleased to meetcha!" Even though this is what male chestnut-sided warblers sing to attract a mate, we chose to take it as a friendly greeting to both of us as we explored its homeplace.





We made this visit to see for ourselves what's at stake under the Maine Department of Transportation's announced preference to build a \$760 million wind-energy port on a 100-acre section of the 941-acre Sears Island. For more than four hours we listened to wind move through grasses and trees. For almost two hours we did not see another person. Bird song and wind provided the soundtrack for our walkabout. Mostly, we walked in silence: Taking it all in as we became acquainted with this place.





“The island is characterized by a maritime spruce-fir forest, and mature hardwood forests, which afford habitat to specific kinds of birds, mammals, invertebrates, and understory plants. Although it is not an old growth forest, having been farmed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, there are some large old trees that have reforested the land, large white pine, spruce, red oak, and yellow birch in particular. Sheltered within these forests are several vernal pools, the nurseries for six of Maine’s eight frog species, two salamander species, and many important invertebrate species.”

*Source: [Friends of Sears Island](#)*





We marveled at all the ferns — thousands and thousands of emergent yellow-green ferns filling the edge niches bordering the forest and the trails. In their own way, the ferns were walking with us as we made our way to the southern point of Sears Island overlooking Penobscot Bay.









We were mindful of the people who spent time here long before: the ancestral Wabanaki who named the island *Wassumkeag*, a word meaning “bright sand beach,” which made the island an important navigation beacon for the Wabanaki as they paddled their birchbark canoes to and from the various islands and peninsulas of Penobscot Bay.



# Land acknowledgment

Archaeological records confirm that ancestral Wabanaki started camping on the island over 3,400 years ago.

They used it as a base for hunting and fishing. It was a resting place along paddling routes that extended along the entire coastline of what is now called Maine.

These were the primary human uses of the island until Europeans arrived in the 1600s.

In the early 17th century, newly arrived French and English settlers fought with the Wabanaki over land around Penobscot Bay. As they did throughout the sovereign lands of the Indigenous inhabitants of Wabanakik, or Dawnland, the colonizers sought to claim as their own the islands and peninsulas of Penobscot Bay as well as land further south.

In 1730, Boston merchant Samuel Waldo asked the English King's Council for a land grant. He was rewarded with a large parcel of land taken from the local tribes — land that included Wassumkeag Island.

Wassumkeag, place of the “bright sand beach,” was renamed Brigadier's Island in honor of Waldo, a brigadier general and land developer whose name is affixed to several locations in what is now called Maine.

In the 1800s it was renamed Sears Island, after one of its owners, David Sears, a prominent 19th-century Boston philanthropist, merchant, real estate developer and landowner. Ownership of the island was then passed down through four generations of the Sears family, who owned much land in the area now known as Searsport.

The Sears family never lived year-round on the island. A summer home built at the southern end in 1853 burned 40 years later.

Since the 1970s, Sears Island has been threatened by several industrial development plans, all of which were ultimately rejected. In the late 1980s, the state took 50 acres of the island by eminent domain/purchase, and bought most of the remainder in 1997. In 2009, an agreement was reached to place 601 acres in permanent conservation while the state retained retains 335 acres for possible future use as a cargo or container port. Maine Coast Heritage Trust holds the conservation easement and Friends of Sears Island is the designated land manager, responsible for protecting the island's natural and cultural resources.

*Source: [Friends of Sears Island](#) (Some of the above is paraphrased, other parts are quoted verbatim).*





At the southern tip of the island looking out over Penobscot Bay at North Islesboro, we listened to harking gulls and calm ocean waters slip-sliding over smooth stones and seaweed.







Our walkabout eventually took us to the designated “transportation parcel,” where the state wants to build a port facility to support the manufacturing, assembly and launching of floating offshore wind turbines for eventual placement in the Gulf of Maine. From the vantage point of a tumbled-rock jetty we looked across the cove to the industrial site of Mack Point in Searsport. It has significant dock frontage, extensive facilities such as warehousing and liquid tank storage and access to a nearby rail line.



# What's at risk?

Consider these concerns raised by Friends of Sears Island over Gov. Janet Mills' proposal to build a \$760 million wind-energy port on more than 100 acres on Sears Island's western shore of the 300 acres owned by the state:

- “If the wind port is built on Sears Island, more than 45 acres of upland will be cleared, graded, and compacted; 1,215,000 cubic yards of earth will be removed; and more than 17 acres of marine habitat will be filled with over 800,000 cubic yards of the harvested soil. This will destroy acres of eelgrass meadows, essential fish habitat, a fisheries nursery area, and shellfish beds. About one-third of the island will be changed forever.
- “To assemble the wind turbines, a crane that can reach nearly 800 feet tall will be permanently installed on the western shore of the island, towering over any recreational activity or educational programs currently taking place on the other side.
- “The facility will be lighted all night and a security fence will surround the whole operation — so visitors will no longer be able to walk around the island. Noise and traffic will dramatically increase, and the experience of being on the island will be irreparably diminished.
- “Sears Island is known as a top birding hotspot in Maine. Industrial development, with the accompanying noise and constant lighting on the western shore, would disturb birds' feeding habits and interrupt their migration routes; they would most likely bypass Sears Island altogether.”

— *Source: Friends of Sears Island [“Offshore Wind Port Fact Sheet”](#)*







Neither of us can fathom why the state prefers to transform a significant section of Sears Island into an industrialized site when there's already an industrialized port site a stone's throw away at Mack Point? Especially when the energy company Sprague, which already operates a full-service terminal there, offers a viable alternative that would spare Sears Island from all the clearing, grading and earth removal and destruction of forest and tidal-zone habitats that is called for in the state's proposal.



# Mack Point is a better site

Sprague Energy, one of the largest energy suppliers in the Northeast, with more than 20 years of experience handling utility-scale wind turbine components, already has a full-service terminal at Mack Point in Searsport. It is just across a small cove from Sears Island. The company has put forth what appears to Gary and me (and others) as a viable alternative — one that avoids environmental impacts upon Sears Island that will inevitably result from Gov. Mills wind port proposal. Here are some highlights gleaned from the company’s detailed alternative proposal that can be found on its [website](#).

- 100 acres segregated from all current activities with its own dedicated entrance.
- Dedicated vessel component receipt dock: Already dredged to 35 feet of mean low water.
- Dedicated base launching dock: Allowing the use of a semi-submersible barge or tug dock device.
- Dedicated base assembly area that is out of the flow of the rest of the facility.
- Dedicated fit-up dock for wind energy component assembly: Separated from the launch dock, decreasing conflicts when lifting blades; allows for use of large assembly cranes to move ultra-heavy components.
  - Greatly increased docking space: More total dock face than the current Sears Island design with 1,600 feet dedicated to large vessels and foundations, while providing an additional 1,000 feet for small workboats and tugs.
  - A second large vessel dock: For Sprague’s current bulk and liquid operations while also doubling as an additional backup component receipt dock for components using a self-propelled motor transporter.
  - A designated support services area: An area away from the workflow for employee parking, warehousing of critical supplies, and administrative offices and work trailers.
  - An additional 10-acre full-function rail yard: Already existing rail yard and lines throughout the terminal. Rail system has recently undergone a \$2 million renovation allowing for the delivery of domestically sourced components and supplies, while not interfering with other wind handling activities.
  - Ready to adjust to wind energy while preserving current capacity: Sprague will relocate current terminal activity to accommodate offshore wind development with no decrease in capability.
  - Construction time and costs reduced: Sprague’s total cost is expected to be less than the state preferred plan and its already industrial nature creates less risk of delays in permitting.



*Source: Sprague Energy Mack Point Floating Ocean Wind Terminal proposal*





**eel-grass – Sears Island**

*Hard to be lonely  
in the lushness of  
eel-grass, feeling the ocean's  
ebb and flow —  
hard to know  
want or hurt or  
waste, here below  
the sun, the sky,  
the water's edge of  
grass and mud and  
moving with the moon —  
hard to know  
the hearts of men, those  
who would fill and spill and  
kill all below  
their own shallow depth of heart, their  
line of sight —  
hard to know these hearts,  
hard to be alive,  
hard to survive  
in the face of their  
rush toward riches,  
toward death,  
hard to be alive.*

**— Gary Lawless**





Gary and I stand with all our relations in and around Sears Island. It makes no sense to industrialize their homeplace to create a wind port that would so radically change the nature of this returning-to-the-wild island in Penobscot Bay.

## Journal note

*bowing to this moment*

*to this particular moment*

*this moment of*

*sunlight, grasses, ferns*

*birch, salt water,*

*chestnut sided warbler -*

*bow to the*

*horizon, hello*

*clouds, hello*

*ocean*

*every moment*

*bowing*

— Gary Lawless

