

Newman Ponds to Become 'EARTH SANCTUARY'

By Jim Larsen

"Chuck and Claudia Pettis have a 500-year plan to turn Newman Ponds into an old growth wonderland called Earth Sanctuary.

While developers a mile down the highway stand accused of building an Exxon station in a wetland, a couple from Bellevue have a 500-year plan to make one of South Whidbey's most distinctive wetlands even better.

Chuck and Claudia Pettis aren't kidding about the 500 years. They won't be around to see it, but some day the Newman Ponds will be situated in the midst of an old growth forest, patterned after the South Whidbey State Park forest. There won't be a non-native blackberry or other foreign species in sight at their Earth Sanctuary. Located off Newman Road east of Freeland, the three ponds are already a natural wonderland. Ducks, geese, herons, osprey, eagles and a variety of smaller birds call it home, largemouth bass and catfish swim in its depths, and cedars and firs ring their borders. But the Pettises say it can be even better.

They have applied to the Island County Planning Department for a permit to allow a critical area alteration. The ponds enjoy the highest level of protection the county provides, and any change inside a 100-foot buffer requires a permit. Last August, the ponds were designated a habitat of local importance in the county's new Comprehensive Plan.

He's got a good idea going here, said Scott Johns, a county planner. He wants to make the wetland better.

Pettis purchased the property last year. Once the county permit is received, he will begin what he describes as a large scale ecological restoration of the Newman Ponds forested wetland habitat. First step will be the replacement of invasive non-native Himalayan blackberries with a wide variety of native plantings.

Pettis is sparing little expense in the endeavor. Earth Sanctuary is being planned by Kevin Fetherston, a wetland, river and forest restoration expert, whom Pettis describes as one of the most experienced wetland ecologists in the Northwest. Assisting will be Dan Borroff, an award-winning landscape architect.

Some progress has already been made:

- Detailed GPS mapping has been done of the existing three ponds, wetlands and streams.
- A wildlife ecologist helped identify existing and potential critical animal habitats.
- A vegetation survey was conducted as the basis for the ecological restoration.*
Himalayan blackberries were removed by hand from two locations.

- A fish survey will be conducted this spring. An attempt last fall was thwarted by cold weather and ice on the ponds.

Pettis, 52, is a marketing consultant whose Brand-Solutions company serves many major clients, including Microsoft. He picked South Whidbey for his restoration project because of a family connection. His wife Claudia is part of the Gabelein family. Her grandmother was Martha Gabelein, whose only son, Randolph Raydon, is Claudia's father. Claudia was raised off the island, but she retains ties to Whidbey. Claudia Pettis said their Newman Ponds project can help others undertaking similar efforts. Other people wanting to restore property on South Whidbey can use this as their model, she said.

The two smaller Newman Ponds are artificial, having been added around 1970 by the Soil and Water Conservation District. The project at that time was called Fin & Feather, with backers hoping for a hunting and fishing club with trails and viewpoint areas.

Fin & Feather never succeeded, but the ponds were so well constructed that they function naturally today, Pettis said. A lot of their original ideas we've already embraced, he said. I want maximum wildlife, so we need maximum wildlife vegetation.

Pettis purchased four parcels of property. Roughly, the ponds encompass 57 acres. There are adjoining 8-acre and 2-acre parcels, and a 5-acre parcel with a house on it.

The Pettises are followers of Tibetan Buddhism, which helps explain their long-range philosophy. Life is how you get there. It's about the path, Chuck Pettis said. The project won't be a public place, as new no trespassing signs along Newman Road make clear. Educational visits by Audubon and other naturalists can be arranged, but, It's pretty private, not a public park, Pettis said.

The Pettises are also thinking about providing retreat facilities for fellow Buddhists, assuming a permit can be obtained. The Planning Department's Johns said the county code does not allow retreat centers. However, certain church or country inn uses are allowed, depending on highway access and other issues.

Pettis said nothing major is being contemplated. It will be incredibly small and modest, he said. And it's a ways down the road.

The path to a completed Earth Sanctuary is a long one, but in the end the Newman Ponds will be even more of a treasure than they are now. We want to leave a little legacy here. It will be better than it is now - way better, Pettis said."