



Plum Island Gull
Photo by Robert Lorenz

How Art, Storytelling Are Being Used to Save Plum Island

Effort to Save Beautiful, Ecologically and Culturally Significant Resource is Gaining Momentum



Painter John Sargent sketching Plum Island. Sargent worked with photographer Robert Lorenz to develop the ongoing art exhibit focused on Plum Island in Long Island Sound, and efforts to save it from development.
Photo by Robert Lorenz

By Pem McNerney
Living Editor

For years, a group of dedicated volunteers from along the shoreline and beyond fought to save a 1,000-acre tract of coastal forest straddling Old Saybrook, Westbrook, and Essex from development. The creation of The Preserve in spring 2015 not only helped protect against flooding in the area, but also protected sources of drinking water, and the headwaters of tributaries that flow into the Connecticut River and Long Island Sound, along with wildlife habitats, vernal pools, woodlands, and wetlands. It also provides the opportunity for visitors to enjoy all of the protected property through a system of trails being developed.

That victory also left volunteers like Robert Lorenz looking for something else to do.

“Now that The Preserve is permanently protected forever, we said, ‘Geez, what else?’” Lorenz says. “And Plum Island comes along.”

And so the Old Saybrook photographer has turned his attention to Plum Island in the middle of Long Island Sound. Reached by a ferry that runs from Old Saybrook, the 840-acre island currently houses a government-owned animal disease center scheduled to be relocated in Kansas. As

part of that move, Congressional legislation was passed mandating the sale of the island to the highest bidder, with proceeds to go toward supporting the move and the construction of the new animal disease center. The pretty little island—which is also a rich resource for a variety of species, including some that are rare and threatened—has drawn interest from a variety of developers, including Donald Trump, who has been quoted as saying it would be an ideal location for not one but two championship golf courses.

To help prevent the island from being sold for commercial development, more than 60 environmental, maritime, and recreational organizations, and volunteers including Lorenz and painter John Sargent of Old Lyme, are working together to save the island.

Fighting to protect resources that help protect Long Island Sound is getting to be a habit with these two. They have also worked on the effort to prevent Broadwater from building a liquefied natural gas terminal in the middle of the Sound, a plan that was abandoned in 2012.

Lorenz and Sargent met on a tour of Plum Island organized by Save the Sound in fall 2013. They eventually decided they wanted to collaborate on the creation of art, both paintings and photography, that

would allow them to share with others the beauty and significance of Plum Island. Their work is the focus of an exhibit *The Natural Beauty of Plum Island: Sea, Seals, Sunsets and More* that will be on display at the Old Lyme Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library, 2 Library Lane, Old Lyme through Wednesday, Nov. 23. The exhibit is accompanied by a lecture series that will explain the history of the island, its geological significance, and its impressive biodiversity.

Worth Saving

Sargent grew up in the Hartford area, but often summered as a child along the Connecticut shore, where he remembers the blue skies, the sparkling water, the waves, the smell of the sea, and the overall beauty of it.

“I’m a passionate nature appreciator and have a long history of fighting for environmental interests in my family, going back to my parents. They were early supporters of the Nature Conservancy and the Connecticut Fund for the Environment,” he says. “That’s because we’ve seen the effects, when nature is not well taken care of. So I became involved with the Broadwater effort..and The Preserve in Old Saybrook, and through that got to know people at the Connecticut Fund for the Environment, and Save the Sound.”



Plum Island Photo by Robert Lorenz



Plum Island, by John Sargent

It was on his second tour of Plum Island that he discussed with Lorenz the idea of a collaboration. With his visits to the island, along with photographs taken by Lorenz, Sargent was convinced he could create art that would help persuade people that Plum Island was worth saving.

“I had this idea of doing artwork about the island, and saw somebody that had this nice camera gear, and got to know him and asked if he would be willing to let me use the pictures as inspiration for the artwork,” he says. “I didn’t really have enough time on the island to sit and sketch and paint. He was also involved with The Preserve, and so some of the same players that helped save The Preserve and fight Broadwater are involved in this project as well, and we are bringing in new people, so it’s some of the same and some different. It’s a pretty comprehensive effort.”

When he first visited the island, he was not only taken with it, but also surprised by how it was different than what he imagined. Like many people, he had heard rumors about nefarious activities and research being conducted on the island, notions based in part on a fictional account of the island in a novel by Nelson DeMille.

“On our tours, we saw what a beautiful place it was and most of it was kept very natural, because for so long there has been very little activity besides the lab,” he says. “It has an incredible beach on the south side, and the largest seal haul-out in southern New England. The bluffs are fascinating glacial geological formations, and there are a number of endangered species. So we wanted to bring awareness to it. So many people have preconceptions and impressions about the island that are not correct. And we wanted to show what



Plum Island, by John Sargent

is actually there. I was pretty surprised by how special it was.”

The exhibit itself is unique in that it uses two traditional mediums, painting and photography, to serve an environmental effort.

‘I think we can make this happen’

“It wasn’t just a matter of documenting what is out there, but showing it in a positive manner that would help people understand what is there and why it should be saved,” Lorenz says. “So these are crafted images, not just pictures of the shoreline and trees. This is my first foray into fine art, but not my first foray into allowing imagery to tell a story.”

Lorenz is confident that, once people find out more about the island, the effort to save it will gain momentum.

“Saving The Preserve was really hard,

I think this should be easier,” he says. “It’s an obvious outcome that it should be saved. I can’t guarantee it, but I’d be very disappointed if the course of events went in the other direction. The effort to save it is slowly building, and there are an awful lot of groups involved now as the word spreads. Our goal is to get our work closer to the political centers so that the people who are in a position to make a difference can see it. That would be in Hartford, Albany, and Washington, D.C. I’m a dreamer, I guess. But I think we can make this happen.”

Chris Cryder of Old Saybrook also worked to save The Preserve. At the time he managed a retirement community for a job, and working on environmental causes was his hobby. Now his hobby is his career, and he is the special projects coordinator for Save the Sound, and the outreach

coordinator for the Preserve Plum Island Coalition. He agrees with Lorenz that it’s possible to save Plum Island, but only if enough people get involved.

He says Plum Island is important for many reasons, including that it is a rare example of a coastal barrier island that has been lightly inhabited for a long time, in the “hugely populated area of Long Island Sound.”

“They just don’t make islands any more,” Cryder says. “The island has a long history and about 80 percent of the island today has been allowed to revert to its natural state. There has been very little human disturbance, and so this island is home to some of our region’s most imperiled species.”

He says it’s also in a unique location, off



Plum Island Lighthouse Photo by Robert Lorenz



Plum Island, by John Sargent

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the tip of the North Fork in eastern Long Island Sound, where the Sound connects with Gardiners Bay.

“It is a very rich marine environment, and overall there are about 111 species that fall within the category of conservation concerned,” Cryder says. “So if 80 percent of the island is developed into two golf courses... that would have a huge impact. It is a beautiful island and there are other developers as well who see this as a ripe opportunity for development. A few have shown interest and the most notable, of course, is Donald Trump. He sent an entourage out in 2013.”

The island has one of the highest concentrations of rare plants in the region, Cryder says, and it has been designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other agencies as an ecological gem.

“It has been designated as a significant coastal and fish habitat. So there are government interests that have said this is an important island to protect, and yet our federal government is moving forward to selling the entirety of the island,” he says.

The Department of Homeland Security is the operator of the island, and the U.S. General Services Administration, which serves as the nation’s realtor, is moving ahead with the sale, bypassing the normal route that is taken when government surplus property comes up—according to Cryder, other agencies including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are usually offered the property first, but that was bypassed due to a law passed in 2009 that stipulated proceeds from the sale should go toward building the new animal disease research facility in Kansas.

“They thought they could get \$1 billion then, but the financial dynamics have changed,” Cryder says. “And they already have all of their construction dollars now. They secured the amount they needed in last year’s budget.”

Several Strategies

Cryder says it’s important not to let this opportunity to save the island slip away. He

believes the time to act is now, which is why the lecture series and art show are being offered now.

He said there is good momentum already, including people who don’t want more congestion traveling to and from the island, and people in the boating community including sailing clubs, marinas, and other enthusiasts who “do not wish to see this pristine island that they sail by turned into some championship golf course and resort.”

Some fishermen are part of the coalition because they are concerned development could cause stormwater runoff from the island that would damage the inner tidal zone and seaweed beds in the area. Plum Gut, one of the straits that runs through the island archipelago between Plum Island and Orient Point would certainly be affected.

Furthermore, the nearby islands are interlocked ecologically with Plum Island.

“Great Gull Island, a 17-acre island to the east of Plum Island, is an extremely important bird breeding habitat,” Cryder says.

Research has shown that more than 9,500 pairs of common terns breed on the Great Gull Island, and that there are also 1,300 pairs of endangered roseate terns breeding there.

“That is the number one spot for this in the northern hemisphere,” Cryder says. “So, when these 20,000 plus birds have fledglings, they might be coming over to Plum Island to feed, and forage, and teach their young how to feed and forage. So the entire combined island system is interlocked. They really do work together, and it’s a birder’s paradise.”

The coalition is using a number of different strategies, Cryder says, admitting that once a bill has passed like the one that mandates the sale of Plum Island, that can be hard to reverse.

“Once that ship leaves harbor, it’s hard to turn it around, and get it going in the right direction,” he says.

The goal of the coalition is to get at least 80 percent of the island conferred into the public realm, such as being transferred to

the national Wildlife Refuge System, or some other preservation mechanism. In addition to the important environmental resources, there are also important culture resources on the island as well that should be saved, including a lighthouse, and military historical sites.

The island is also included in the initiative by Save the Sound to force the government to reassess its environmental impact statement for Long Island Sound in its entirety, an initiative that is the focus of a lawsuit against the government.

“We hope our lawsuit will, among other things, help us bring various federal agencies to the table to discuss conservation alternatives for the island,” he says.

The coalition is also working to, eventually, repeal the law passed in 2009.

“We actually believe that the law as written allows the federal government to pursue a conservation sale or alternative,” he says. “However, that could become more clear through a repeal of that law.”

Cryder said there is a bi-partisan, bicameral group of legislators working on legislation that would repeal the sale of the island, and decouple it from the funding of the new construction in Kansas, “but it’s very hard to get bills passed in our congress nowadays. With the situation our congress is in, things can get politicized very quickly,” he says.

The coalition is working with state officials, in addition to federal officials, in search of a solution.

Cryder said the average person can make a difference just by becoming informed, and talking about it.

“The public will, and the public’s voice is very important in these battles. We need people to be part of the legislative process going forward,” he says.

Anyone who attends any of the lectures and/or signs up on the preserveplumisland.org website will receive frequent communication from Cryder about what is happening, and how people can help.

How To Help Save Plum Island

An ongoing art show and lecture series on Plum Island at the Old Lyme Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library and St. Ann’s Church is one of several initiatives being used to let people know about the island, and how they can help save it from development.

People who want to help can become informed, write to the legislators, write letters, and tell their friends and neighbors about the initiative, says Chris Cryder from Save the Sound.

To get specific suggestions for how to help, visit preserveplumisland.org and go to “How You Can Help,” and sign up for e-mail alerts through the link at the top of the home page.

The art show, the brainchild of painter John Sargent featuring both his work and that of photographer Robert Lorenz, is at the Old Lyme Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library (OLPGN) 2 Library Lane, Old Lyme, and at St. Ann’s Church, 82 Shore Road, Old Lyme.

The lecture series continues on Thursday, Oct. 6. Here are the details about the lecture series:

Thursday, Oct. 6

7 p.m. at Saint Ann’s Church

“Survey of the History of Plum Island” by Amy Folk, Collections Manager for Southold Historical Society and co-author of the book *A World Unto Itself, The Remarkable History of Plum Island*, New York.

Thursday, Oct. 27

7 p.m. at OLPGN Library

“Plum Island’s Place in the Geological History of Southern New England” by Ralph Lewis, Connecticut State Geologist Emeritus, and currently part-time Officiate of The Long Island Sound Resource Center at the University of Connecticut-Avery Point and professor in residence in the Marine Studies Department at UCONN-Avery Point.

Thursday, Nov. 10

7 p.m. at Saint Ann’s Church

“Plum Island’s Biodiversity, Birds, Bats, Bugs and Basking Seals” by Matthew D. Schlesinger, PhD Chief Zoologist New York Natural Heritage Program and Adjunct Assistant Professor, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

Registration is required for lectures. For programs at the Library, please call 860-434-1684 or visit the calendar of events at www.oldlyme.lioninc.org. To register at St. Ann’s Church, please call 860-434-1621 or email office@saintannsoldlyme.org.