The Lookout
THE NEWSLETTER OF THE OTSEGO COUNTY CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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Our environment. Our home. Our challenge.
OCCA’s effectiveness is directly linked to the degree to which our members support our efforts.
If you have not yet renewed your 2009 membership, please mail your Annual Fund donation today, or call 547-4488 to request a membership brochure.

OCCA honors Robert, Jean Miller for lifelong devotion to the environment
Community efforts also receive special recognition

The Otsego County Conservation Association held its Annual Dinner and Meeting on November 13 at Stella Luna Ristorante in Oneonta. Honorees at the event were 2009 Conservationists of the Year, Dr. J. Robert and Jean Miller. The Millers are lifelong naturalists who helped found the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society.

Robert Miller, who has published chemistry and ornithological papers in major scientific journals, edited the organization’s newsletter, “The Kingfisher,” for 30 years. He continues to organize December and May bird counts for DOAS.

In presenting the award, longtime Conservation Chair of DOAS Andy Mason, stated, “I learned how important science was from him. You need good data to be successful in conservation. He contributed more to bird life in Otsego County than any one person.”

As a writer, presenter, photographer and active environmentalist, Jean Miller was president of DOAS for 13 years, is still active on the Board of Directors, and writes frequent articles for “The Kingfisher.” As a Board member and horticulture chairman for the Oneonta Garden Club, she has presented programs on wildflowers and written articles for the club newsletter as well.

At the dinner, OCCA also gave nods to three local initiatives having a positive impact on the county’s environment – the Butternut Valley Alliance, Cooperstown Kid Garden and Sustainable Otsego.

The BVA, spearheaded in 2008 by Ben Friedman and Carla Hall, was acknowledged for action taken on the environmental components of its mission statement. Robert Eklund, co-chair of the Alliance, received the award on behalf of BVA.

Since its formation, BVA has contacted local agencies and organizations with knowledge and expertise in water quality with the goal of establishing baseline data on the water quality of the Butternut Valley, and has given a presentation to its membership providing an overview of information collected.

Also receiving recognition at the OCCA event was the Cooperstown Kid Garden, a volunteer-run organic vegetable garden cultivated at the Cooperstown Elementary School. The garden is the brainchild of Antoinette Kuzminsik of Fly Creek, herself an avid gardener. Bennett Sandler, also of Fly Creek, Richard deRosa of Middlefield and Kristen Griger of Cooperstown, along with others, assisted in the effort.

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Andy Mason, Jean Miller, Martha Clarvioe, and Dr. J. Robert Miller celebrate the presentation of the OCCA Conservationists of the Year Award at the OCCA Annual Dinner and Meeting, Nov. 13 at Stella Luna Ristorante, Oneonta (left). OCCA members meet and converse before the Annual Meeting and Dinner (right).
President’s Message

Many thanks for a job well done

Recently, the NYS DEC banned outdoor burning statewide, not just in communities of over 20,000. For more than 10 years, attempts were made to regulate this practice through the state legislature, to no avail. Kudos to the DEC for taking charge and doing the right thing! And kudos to many local advocates who raised awareness of the threats posed to air, water, soil, and human health from toxic compounds released when inorganic – and even organic! – materials are burned.

How do you adequately thank people who have tirelessly given heart, soul, time and energy to bring about positive change? I’d like to attempt to express my thanks here, if only by “naming names” – so here goes.

• Michael Whaling first brought the issue to my attention – 18 years ago!
• Jim Leo, former County Codes Officer, urged early on a ban on burn barrels in trailer parks, recognizing the high risk of fire they cause.
• Dottie Hudson helped create the first locally-produced flier, listing the chemicals released in burning (1999).
• Teresa Winchester suggested the county Solid Waste Committee form a committee to educate the public on this issue, and Carl Higgins, then County Board Chair, followed-up by appointing members to the Burn Barrel Education Committee, or BBEC (2001).
• Mary Ashwood served as chair of the BBEC for most of its existence. Other members were: Kathy Abernathy, Gayle Austin, Arthur Clarke, MaryLou Ganio, John May, Fred Thering, Dick Thompson and myself.

With a $4,000 county grant, we conducted an educational campaign, making two signs for Oneonta Public Transportation buses, purchasing Pennysaver ads, and creating a television commercial and radio spots, and an ad for the public access channel. We also wrote numerous letters to the editor and regularly petitioned the County Board for a trash burning ban. In 2002, our efforts were rewarded when the BBEC received the Conservationist of the Year from OCCA.

But our work was not over. We lobbied the Attorney General’s office with assistance from Judi Enck, then assistant to the Attorney General, formerly with Environmental Advocates of New York and currently Deputy Secretary for the Environment, Office of the Secretary of the Governor. In all these roles, Judith was a major supporter of the ban.

Other Albany-related efforts included meeting with Sue Senech, aide to Senator Maziarz, who co-sponsored the anti-trash burning bill. Fred Thering, Mary and I also advocated for a ban at several Earth Day Lobby Days, and Mary attended the Clearwater Festival in 2007 to help spread the message throughout the state.

• Mark Takefman helped devise a survey to ascertain who burned trash and why.
• Nancy Pearlman, Dottie Hudson and others helped administer the survey at the Otsego County Fair. Results showed one-third of the people surveyed burned all or part of their trash, predominantly for convenience. Only 16 percent burned to save money. Overall, 66 percent were opposed to burning trash.
• Terry Bliss, former county Solid Waste Director, supported our efforts with articles in his newsletter and with “Trash Talk,” a journal sent to elementary schools. He also sent educational letters to persons reported for outdoor burning.
• Dr. Lois Levitan of the Cornell Waste Management Institute helped coordinate two meetings with Senator James Seward, Assemblyman David Koon, and other local and state officials to explore alternatives for farmers who burned agricultural plastic wraps. She also organized a public hearing on open burning (March 2004). John May, of New York Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health (NYCAMH) and Bassett Hospital, served on the panel. Lois has become a national expert on the subject, and due to her work, an agricultural plastic recycling program, using six

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OCCA in the news

The fall of the year is also the season we hold our Annual Dinner and Meeting. Much of our publicity has been related to this event and its honorees. Natural gas drilling – a “hot-button” issue – has been the subject of our communications to the press as well. A link on our website’s home page (www.occainfo.org) will allow you to catch up on or review news items generated from OCCA press releases.

Annual dinner, meeting

“Community efforts receive recognition from OCCA.” OCCA gave special recognition to three entities for outstanding environmental achievement – The Butternut Valley Alliance, the Cooperstown Kid Garden and Sustainable Otsego.

“Wick profs to discuss Susquehanna bacteria study at OCCA dinner.” Professors Mary Allen and Zuzsanna Balogh-Brunstad were invited to share their research on antibiotic-resistant bacteria and water quality monitoring in the Susquehanna River.

“OCCA names long-time nature enthusiasts as Conservationists of the Year.” Dr. J. Robert Miller and his wife, Jean Miller, were named as Conservationists of the Year for their work with the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society and many other endeavors in support of environmental matters.

Natural gas drilling

“Letter to the editor” by Martha Clarvoe. OCCA agreed with the Daily Star editorial, “Drilling task force would help,” which endorsed a proposal to form a gas-drilling task force to assess the ability of Otsego County to meet the emerging infrastructure needs as gas drilling progresses and help the various entities develop plans for meeting those additional needs.

“OCCA informs county municipalities about gas drilling options.” With the eminent prospect of gas drilling in Otsego County, OCCA sent information and model legislation to all 34 municipalities urging them to take proactive measures to deal with the impacts drilling operations may bring.

OCCA’s revised website features new sections focusing on environmental issues facing our region today – invasive species, natural gas drilling, and water quality – plus details on current programming, how to donate and other ways to contribute. Visit www.occainfo.org to learn more.
If you can’t beat ’em, eat ’em

By Nefretiti Pough

Pough is a student of OCCA Board member and SUNY-Oneonta Biologist Donna Vogler.

Have you ever been driving along I-87 downstate in the autumn and looked out your car window to see a medium to large shrub laden with reddish-pink berries? What you may be seeing is Elaeagnus umbellate, also known as Autumn Olive, a species likely to invade our region. It is easily confused with Russian Olive, another invasive plant similar in overall appearance. Russian Olive is already established in our area, but Autumn Olive is only recently taking hold in Otsego County and surrounding counties. Both species feature alternately arranged leaves, somewhat longer than wide. The smooth-edged mature leaves, stems and buds have a dense covering of lustrous silvery scales, notably thicker on the Russian Olive. Both species present small, creamy white to yellow flowers that bloom in late April and May. Autumn Olive produces abundant clusters of small but juicy berries whose seeds are then dispersed largely by birds and other animals, such as raccoons, skunks, and opossums.

Autumn Olive occurs in disturbed areas, successional fields, pastures, and roadsides, where it has been widely planted primarily to provide food and cover for wildlife and also to serve as a screen or barrier along highways or to stabilize and revegete road banks. Autumn Olive was once considered a means to control erosion and provide wildlife habitat, but it is now becoming more widespread and invasive like its cousin, the Russian Olive. Once established, both species are extremely tricky to control. The Autumn Olive can live in a variety of soils, and because its roots allow it to fix nitrogen, it can even grow in unfavorable soils and live through droughts. Burning, mowing or cutting the plant will cause it to resprout vigorously. Endowed with these characteristics, it invades fields, woodlands, and other areas, out-competing and displacing native flora. Plants that require a lot of sun are easily out-competed under the shade of the Autumn Olive.

The most effective way to control the Autumn Olive is to pull it up by hand while it is still a small plant or seedling, when adequate ground moisture allows removal of the root system above the above-ground growth. If the shrub gets too big to pull by hand, it will take more than cutting it down or burning it to remove it. Herbicides may be put on the stump following cutting or burning. By law they may only be applied according to label directions and, when working on public properties, by licensed applicators only. The most ineffective way to control Autumn Olive is repeated pruning of established plants at ground level without subsequent herbicide application. Each regrowth results in a thicker stem base and denser branches.

So if we can’t beat Autumn Olive, why not eat Autumn Olive?! The Autumn Olive fruit is tasty enough that some people have tried it as a jam. The recipe calls for 8 cups of ripe Autumn Olive berries. Half of the berry is pit, so a lot of fruit must be collected. Add 1 cup of water to the 8 cups of berries, bring to a boil, and simmer for 20 minutes. Run the mash through a sieve to make about 5 cups of pressed fruit. Measure out 3.5 cups of sugar. Take 0.25 cup of the measured sugar and mix it with the contents of a package of “no-sugar-needed” Sure Jell. Mix it in with the pressed fruit and bring to a rolling boil. Add the remainder of the sugar to the boiling liquid and return to a rolling boil for one minute. A fast way to remove pits and save the maximum amount of juice is to wash stems off, put two layers of berries into a microwaveable dish and cook for four minutes on high. Then put berries through a food mill to remove the pits. Heating will also kill the seeds so the plant will not spread. What better way to slow the spread of invasives, while at the same time creating a tasty spread for your muffins!

Editor’s note: While this article takes a lighter view of a non-native plant, we want to emphasize that invasive species, both aquatic and terrestrial, pose a serious threat to the environment on many fronts.

Annual dinner

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The Kid Garden was recognized for creation of organic produce while providing education on organic gardening. Griger, Kid Garden coordinator, was present to receive the award.

The third group recognized was Sustainable Otsego, an ad hoc group of local residents banding together to promote the concept of sustainability. The group formed in 2007, under the leadership of Adrian Kuzminski of Fly Creek. Over the past year, Sustainable Otsego largely addressed the prospect of horizontal gas drilling in the county, organizing three educational forums on the subject. Marty Stayton accepted the certificate of recognition for Sustainable Otsego.

The keynote speakers at the dinner were Professors Mary Allen and Zsuzsanna Balog-Brunstad of Hartwick College, both of whom presented preliminary findings of research conducted on the Susquehanna River. OCCA has contributed $2,000 toward their studies.

According to Allen, the goals of the project are to investigate seasonal changes in proportions of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and to look for bacteria capable of “eating” antibiotics. “Data from this research will establish a baseline for determining the impacts of continued development along the Upper Susquehanna River,” Allen said.
We try to conserve precious resources at OCCA by printing on recycled paper and using soy-based inks when feasible. If you would like to help us do even better, consider being put on our electronic distribution list and receive future newsletters and general correspondence via e-mail.

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President’s message
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mobile balers, will soon be underway to give farmers an alternative to disposing of plastics by burning.

• David Cox, formerly with Otsego County Cooperative Extension, worked on the baling project and hopes to continue the work at the Schoharie County Cooperative Extension.

• Susan and Jeff O’Handley of the Wildlife Learning Company created an OCCA-commissioned curriculum, “Burn Barrel Biology,” designed to address open trash burning for elementary and secondary students.

• Senator James Seward helped the BBEC obtain a grant-in-aid to develop focus groups as a way to reach out to those who burn outdoors and to help us improve our educational efforts.

• The Daily Star covered and advocated much of our work over the years.

Even with the ban, people still need education. Many still equate burning to a property right. But progress has been made. In 1991, Michael Whaling and I walked a quarter-mile radius in Milford, counting approximately 72 burn barrels. This October, I drove through the same area and found only four! Our years of effort have made a difference. I offer my sincere thanks to all who were part of this journey!