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TILT announces permanent conservation of 'iconic' Cherry Island

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Cherry Island in Eastern Lake Ontario has been conserved by the Thousand Islands Land Trust in partnership with the Ontario Bays Initiative Land Trust to protect critical shoreline, wildlife habitat, and water quality. / Photo courtesy of TILT

CHAUMONT – Cherry Island, a prominent and ecologically significant island in Chaumont Bay, Lake Ontario, will be permanently conserved by the Thousand Islands Land Trust, which has partnered with Ontario Bays Initiative Land Trust.

TILT has announced the property will be known as the Cosgrove Nature Preserve on Cherry Island, in recognition of the Cosgrove family’s long-standing stewardship and commitment to conservation of this cherished natural space.

With its ecological importance, rich natural history, and abundant shoreline, TILT says the Cosgrove Nature Preserve on Cherry Island represents one of the most impactful conservation projects in Eastern Lake Ontario in recent years.

The conservation of Cherry Island reflects the Cosgrove family's deep connection to the land and their vision for its future.

"My family has stewarded Cherry Island for the better part of a century, and ensuring its conservation felt like the most fitting future for this special place," Dr. Delos M. "Toby" Cosgrove III said in a TILT news release. "Protecting the Island as a refuge for nature and a place of tranquility is a legacy we are proud to support."

Dr. Cosgrove, a Watertown native and 1958 graduate of Watertown High School, served as the president and chief executive of the Cleveland Clinic from 2004 until 2017, the year he retired. A cardiac surgeon for nearly 30 years, he performed 22,000 operations, earned an international reputation for valve repair, and has filed 30 medical patents.

Dr. Cosgrove is the son of the late Delos M. Cosgrove and Margaret Norton Cosgrove. His parents were civic leaders all their lives in Watertown. Toby's father, Delos M. Cosgrove Jr. died in 1980 at the age of 70. Margaret died in 2001 at the age of 91.

Delos M. Jr. was an expert yachtsman. His Dec. 6, 1980 obituary in the Watertown Daily Times states that he and his wife purchased Cherry Island in 1945.

A vital refuge

Situated between Pillar Point, Point Peninsula and Point Salubrious, Cherry Island serves as an important stopover for migratory birds along the Atlantic Flyway, offering rest and refuge during migratory journeys. Its conservation also plays a vital role in Chaumont Bay and Guffin Bay, areas that support a thriving recreational fishing industry and contain multiple public drinking water intakes.

The Cosgrove Nature Preserve on Cherry Island, located just offshore in Lake Ontario, features about 129 acres and more than 13,000 feet of undeveloped shoreline; a rare and increasingly valuable resource in a region renowned for its fishing, wildlife, and water quality. Historically used as farmland, the island has naturally regenerated over time and is now a dense young forest that provides critical habitat for wildlife, including an active bald eagle nest.

“The Cosgrove Nature Preserve on Cherry Island protects over two miles of natural shoreline in a part of Lake Ontario where conservation is especially important,” Spencer Busler, assistant director of the Thousand Islands Land Trust, said. “Also, Cherry lies in the immediate viewshed of countless homes and cottages. Its natural beauty is now permanently safeguarded.”

Through the partnership with the Ontario Bays Initiative Land Trust, the island preserve will be thoughtfully managed, ensuring the island's natural character will remain intact for generations to come.

“Working in partnership with the Ontario Bays Initiative Land Trust has made it possible to protect this Island in a way that delivers long-term benefits not just for wildlife, but for local communities and industries that depend on a healthy lake,” said Busler.

Cherry Island is a familiar landmark on the Lake Ontario horizon, known for its tranquil, picturesque setting. Its historic light station, a critical navigation marker, has long helped guide boats around shoals off the Island's west end. The island is believed to have been named for the cherry trees that once grew there, and it has remained largely undeveloped.

“It is an honor to partner with the Thousand Islands Land Trust to conserve Cherry Island, a beloved landmark for those of us lucky enough to live along the shores of Eastern Lake Ontario,” said Rosanne Weir, president of the OBI Land Trust. “This Island is a constant on the horizon, and now it will remain as-is forever.”

Local residents echoed the significance of the project for both the community and future generations.

“As a lifelong Town of Lyme resident and a waterfront homeowner, I am thrilled that TILT is going to conserve Cherry Island for future generations,” said Caroline Fleming, vice president of OBI Land Trust. “Cherry Island means so much to so many people. Not just town residents, but visitors to Chaumont Bay as well.”

TILT and OBI Land Trust plan to work together to ensure the iconic Island remains undeveloped, protecting wildlife habitat, water quality, and the character of the Lake Ontario shoreline forever.

On Monday, June 1, OBI Land Trust will welcome volunteers to join them for a shoreline cleanup of Cherry Island with the shared goal of removing pollution and debris. Boat transportation will be provided to volunteers. To sign up, call the TILT office at 315-686-5345

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