

# NAHANT, NORTHEASTERN, and SWIM

*by Polly Bradley*

**There is a long history of cooperation between the Town of Nahant and Northeastern University Marine Science Center (MSC). Both have worked energetically to protect the waters off Nahant. Nahant needs clean water for swimming, fishing and lobstering; Northeastern needs clean water for the salt water intakes that are essential for its laboratory experiments. Both benefit from studies done in and near the Nahant seashore. Both have worked to get rid of the infamous algae odor. Since 1984, Safer Waters in Massachusetts (Nahant SWIM, Inc.), has worked closely with both the Town and the University. We all acted together to protect the ocean and marine life around Nahant and beyond. As citizens, we all want a clean environment for our children and grandchildren.**

**1967.** The Nahant Conservation Commission (ConComm) under chairman Ruth Alexander searched for a non-profit group to use the land at East Point which was being disposed of by the federal government. The Town had turned it down as a public park, and the next step after acquisition by a qualified non-profit group would be sale to a private developer. There were people in town and out itching to get their hands on the property and build high rise apartments.

A small committee was formed under the ConComm: John and Linda Van Leer, George and Georgia Lawson, and Larry and Polly Bradley. They called every college, university, and other likely non-profit group. Northeastern was interested. Larry, who holds a master's degree from Northeastern, made that first successful telephone call. Larry learned that Northeastern was looking for a location to establish a marine science center. Quickly Larry talked it over with Nahanter John Lowell, then a member of the Board at Northeastern. Lowell took it from there, and soon president Asa Knowles of Northeastern was meeting with the ConComm committee in Larry's study to discuss the matter. The rest is history.

For many years after Northeastern came to Nahant, there were articles in Town Meeting to change the zoning bylaws in order to build apartment buildings in Nahant locations, but they were all defeated except for the Bass Point apartments.

You can imagine what Nahant would be like if we had allowed apartments, especially high rise apartment complexes. Nahant has about one square mile and Winthrop has about one and a half square miles. Nahant's population according to the 2010 census was 3,410. Winthrop's population in 2010 was 17,497. If it were not for Northeastern University Marine

Science Center, Nahant could be as crowded as Winthrop. Instead, Nahant keeps its small-town feel in spite of its proximity to Boston, and Nahant is known as the home of an internationally respected marine laboratory.

**1969.** Nahant Conservation Commission Natural History Notes and early programs in Nahant Public Schools. The ConComm and Northeastern worked on a proposed volume of field notes with keys to the organisms living in Nahant waters. In the late sixties, Northeastern had a program in conjunction with the Nahant Public Schools, and about 80 copies of the book up to that point (it was still lacking a key to invertebrates) were printed for the students and others who were interested at the time. Over the years there were other school programs, some more successful than others. The waters around Nahant were monitored for many years by citizens led by Norma and Carl Brooks and working with Northeastern, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and the Town of Nahant.

**1984.** The battle for secondary treatment in Lynn, Nahant, and Swampscott. A Northeastern Professor, Trish Morse, sounded the alarm that Lynn was applying for a waiver of secondary treatment, which if accepted would have continued to pour polluted sewage effluent into Nahant waters. This led to the founding in 1984 of Safer Waters in Massachusetts (Nahant SWIM, Inc.) Mike Manning was one of the original founders of SWIM, along with Bill Coffey, Norma Brooks, and Polly Bradley. We took our concern to the Nahant Selectmen, and Richie Lombard was the first on the Board of Selectmen at that time to realize how important our issue was to Nahant. Northeastern was with us from the start in fighting for clean. water.

Next came the battle to protect Nahant from pollution from the Greater Boston sewage outfall. Nahant selectmen and other town officials also gave hours of time, contacted elected officials, and attended meetings which were critical in bringing secondary treatment and a long outfall. Northeastern experts came to meetings in Boston with the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA), testified at hearings, read the lengthy MWRA reports (which we called the Seven Deadly Volumes) and wrote material for our response (which we called the Sapphire Necklace.) Statewide environmental groups backed us and the Coastal Advocacy Network, then active, to which SWIM belonged. Instead of primary treatment, we won secondary treatment. Instead of an outfall about three miles from Nahant, we have a Boston outfall about six miles from Nahant, nine miles from Boston.

**1990s and 2000s.** The Battle of Chelsea Creek. SWIM prevented dumping of contaminated dredging spoils from Chelsea Creek just offshore from Nahant. It was a quick victory, because the proponents saw the strength of the SWIM-Town of Nahant-Northeastern coalition.

This victory has had widespread ramifications, stopping and preventing other proposals to use the ocean to dispose of polluted material.

SWIM also worked with the Town and the University on many more projects over the years -- a natural gas pipeline, a proposal for flood gates over the Saugus River, protecting Stellwagen Bank and endangered whales, creating a “No Discharge Area” in Nahant waters and others. Always there were hearings to go to, comments to be made on state and federal issues and plans related to environmental protection. Northeastern has worked with the Town and with SWIM to try to get rid of the nuisance algae *Pilayella littoralis* and its odor that has been with us at least since 1903, when it was first mentioned in the Lynn Daily Item. Things are better, but we’re not out of the seaweed forest yet.

SWIM has never been accused of being nimby (“Not in My BackYard”) because Northeastern scientists have made sure we always had the scientific facts right. Nahant is a cleaner, safer place because of its 40-year history of alliance with Northeastern.

**2013.** Now that I’ve retired as a leader of SWIM, Vi Patek has taken the helm at SWIM. Vi is doing a wonderful job, organizing the Adopt-A-Beach program, working to prevent cruise ship discharge, and offering educational programs in conjunction with Northeastern and the Town of Nahant.

**Northeastern University Marine Science Center professors and staff backed Nahant in the long battle for secondary treatment and a long outfall, and over the years they have given SWIM and the Town hours and days of free scientific consultation that we could never have afforded if they had demanded payment as expert consultants. Northeastern has been essential in protecting the environment of Nahant.**

**Thank you, Nahant, Northeastern, and SWIMmers!**

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