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MURKY WATERS

Volunteers hope to reclaim beauty of pond within Maudslay

By Katherine Landergan
Correspondent

NEWBURYPORT — With its open meadows, bright hues of azaleas and rhododendrons, 19th century gardens and clear view of the Merrimack River, Maudslay State Park certainly factored into Marlys Edwards' decision to move to Newburyport three years ago.

But there is one blemish in the midst of all this natural beauty — one imperfection, that makes Edwards and other park-goers cringe.

As Edwards looked out at the pond that is smack in the middle of the park this week, her face wrinkled with disgust. Algae, leaves and dead tree limbs decorate the top of the pond. Slabs of the stone bridge have fallen into the water over time. And there is an eerie silence in an area that was once filled with wildlife.

"To bring an ecosystem that brings this pond back to life would be fantastic," said Edwards, the former dean of students and former English teacher at Phillips Academy in Andover. "You can just see how beautiful it could be."

The Maudslay State Park Association, a group of volunteers that raises money to improve the historic and aesthetic nature of the park, has held fundraisers and obtained grants to restore iron gates, stone walls and gardens over the years.

Now, the group is taking on the pond as its next project. On Monday, the volunteers will meet with Commissioner Ed Lambert of the Department of Conservation and Recreation to discuss the possibility of the state helping to fund the revamping of the pond.

Their argument for these funds is not just that the pond is an eyesore but also a potential public hazard, Edwards said.

Terry Berns, president of the Maudslay State Park Association, said that last summer there were reports of dogs becoming seriously ill after drinking out of the pond. And recently, a member of the association spotted a large, dead turtle floating on its back near the stone bridge.

In 2010, the Massachusetts Department of Health tested the water and found it contained high levels of bacteria, Berns said. The department deemed the pond unsafe for swimming, and now signs are posted warning park-goers to avoid the water.

"Anyone who spends time in Maudslay doesn't want to see caution tape all around the pond," she said. "Aesthetically, it is one of the most beautiful vistas when it's clear.

Years ago, white sand covered the bottom of the pond and dozens of goldfish and turtles would be spotted on any given day, she said. Lilies covered the pond's surface, and azaleas grew on the outskirts.

All of that is now gone.

But Berns said that no one is to blame for the condition of the pond.

"It's no fault of the park ranger or anyone locally, it's just a matter of money in the state budget and the money we receive," she said.

In the past, DCR has helped fund other projects in Maudslay, often paying for one-half or two-thirds of the overall cost, Berns said. But restoring the pond is a considerably larger project, she said. Berns estimates the entire project will cost at least a half million dollars. The price tag for dredging, or excavating sediments at the bottom of the pond alone is expected to be \$100,000 to \$200,000.

The process to revamp the pond is extensive. First, dead limbs must be removed from the pond's surface. Then, the pond water must be drained and the bottom dredged. A new valve and piping system will then need to be installed, so the water may be drained when necessary.

"We know it's going to be a huge expense, and we are going to try to get as much help as we can," Berns said.

The Maudslay State Park Association has raised a substantial amount of money in the past by holding horse races and road races, she said. But the pond project will require much more legwork, and there are no plans to do any major fundraising until the association has an exact estimate of the project's cost.

For now, all the association can do is hope it will receive at least some funding to help with the effort.

"(That pond gives) the peace and solitude that people are looking for," Berns said. "You can't hear traffic or (Interstate) 95 when you go over to that pond; you can't hear anything except for the people near you.

"That spot that was once gorgeous could become toxic soup."

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Donations to support the restoration of the pond at Maudslay State Park may be mailed to the association at 74 Curzon Mill Road, Newburyport 01950-6254.