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Ken Beatrice: A Volunteer for all Seasons

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KEN BEATRICE

a Volunteer for all Seasons



Ken's gift for Father's Day was this magnetic sign proclaiming his status as a NOAA Phytoplankton Monitoring Network volunteer. Photo by: Bonnie Beatrice

By Peg Van Patten

ONE DAY TWO YEARS AGO, KEN BEATRICE,

a bespectacled, white-bearded retiree from East Haddam, found a copy of *Sound Health* tucked in his *Hartford Courant* newspaper. *Sound Health* is the EPA Long Island Sound Study's colorful, fact-filled biennial report on the condition of Long Island Sound, showing trends over time.

"It was really interesting, and as I read, I wondered how I could personally get involved in efforts to conserve the Sound" Ken said. One of the listings in a box titled "What Can I Do to Help?" was the NOAA volunteer Phytoplankton Monitoring Network. Ken contacted the PMN headquarters in South Carolina and was then put in

touch with me at the Connecticut Sea Grant program. As Connecticut PMN coordinator, I work with NOAA to help find willing volunteers get them the training and equipment that they need.

Both Ken and wife Bonnie were very interested in learning more about phytoplankton. They vigorously

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pursue many active interests together, for example, as volunteers with *Friends of the Office of State Archaeology*. So it was not surprising that they launched enthusiastically into a new and unfamiliar pursuit. After all, Ken reasoned, phytoplankton are the

base of the food web that supports all of the other life in the ocean, or Long Island Sound. Ken got trained in identifying phytoplankton from the online webinars that the NOAA PMN offered new volunteers. I was able to locate a double-eyepiece microscope for them, on loan from the University of Connecticut's retired equipment

stash in its surplus warehouse. PMN supplied a funnel-shaped fine-mesh plankton net, sample jars, a submersible thermometer and a refractometer for determining salinity. Off they went.

Like the other volunteers in

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the national network, Ken agreed to sample diligently at least twice a month, always using the same exact location and protocol. He assiduously notes date, time, temperature, salinity, stage of tide, wind speed, and any other pertinent information, along with species. Location, location, location is what matters—you’ve heard the maxim before, and it holds true in plankton monitoring.

“I chose White Sands Beach,” Ken explained, “because it’s a beautiful and accessible place that I was familiar with, and right on Long Island Sound.” The 240-foot section of beach looks pristine and inviting on this October day, and we all enjoyed poking our toes in the wrack line. Of course the popularity of White Sands -a beach that has its own Facebook page- as a bathing beach in the summer months, and Ken’s non-residency status in the town posed challenges for someone who is toting gear, but Ken is not one to duck a challenge.

“I explained what I was planning to do in a letter to the first selectman of Old Lyme, who saw to it that I got a pass to park at the beach for free and do my sampling” Ken said. “But I had to promise not to do it during the peak recreational times.”

Toting the net and a pail, Ken made his way out on a rock jetty, ignoring the “Danger: Wet Rocks” sign, to take plankton samples. At first, the net, which comes on a rope, couldn’t reach the water. The distance was too far without climbing down onto dangerously slick places. With his mechanical engineering background from his career at the Naval Underwater

Systems Center, Ken didn’t let that deter him for a moment. He constructed an ingenious long bamboo handle and attached it to the net, with a safety retrieval line in case the net ever snagged and became detached.

Ken examines his samples at home to identify species and count individuals, then files reports into the NOAA PMN database twice a month. He also notes anything potentially harmful, a rarity. Now and then he finds a phytoplankton like *Pseudo-nitzschia*, which in abundance, may cause a harmful algal bloom, but it’s usually only one individual or a few.

Phytoplankton sampling can be “uneventful,” as Ken says—read that as downright boring when there is not much interesting to be found. But the looking is the crucial part, and finding little is actually good news. The primary focus of the monitoring effort is the network of watchful eyes that provide an early warning system for harmful algal blooms. In addition to White Sands, Ken also samples at the Hadlyme ferry dock on the lower Connecticut River.

Phytoplankton are not the only wildlife that intrigue Ken and Bonnie at the beach. They are also avidly interested in horseshoe crabs, shorebirds and their conservation, for example. The volunteer commitment also provides an opportunity to enjoy the outdoors all year long while contributing to science, and to learn about other finds from the beach. Sometimes Ken would find phytoplankton that weren’t included in the volunteer resource materials, and then Bonnie would snap a photo and send it along to PMN. Bonnie delights in taking photographs of

the strange things they see in the small world of the microscopic field of view. Sometimes they find a mystery “critter” like the lively tail-wagging invertebrate larva that they named “Sammy”.

For Ken’s Father’s Day present last year, Bonnie thought really hard about what to give him as the perfect gift; something he didn’t already have. She had a large, attractive magnetic sign made for the door of his Ford Explorer, proclaiming proudly “NOAA Phytoplankton Monitoring Volunteer” over the image. The sign, and the plankton net, often attracts curious people at the beach who approach him



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Using a plankton net and collection bottle, Ken Beatrice takes a phytoplankton sample from the jetty at White Sands Beach. Photo by: Peg Van Patten

to ask about what he’s doing. He loves to explain.

“Sometimes,” Ken said, “my brother-in-law will be driving by and will spot me with my net. (Bonnie grew up in Westbrook and her family still lives there.) Or I’ll get a call asking me if I’m taking a sample today. Next thing I know his high school-age son and daughter will show up to assist.” The enthusiasm seems to be contagious!