

Sag Harbor ^{The} Express.

Jeremy Samuelson



By Annette Hinkle
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Jeremy Samuelson, executive director of Concerned Citizens of Montauk (CCOM) which has joined forces with the national Surfrider Foundation to regularly test bacteria levels in waters around Montauk. Mara Dias, a water quality scientist with the Surfrider Foundation and a Montauk resident, trained volunteers to conduct the tests, the results of which are regularly posted online with a map of the sampling locations.

What inspired CCOM to initiate this testing program?

There is no doubt that regionally our waters are in decline. We also know that there are solutions that can solve these problems. The sooner we begin to turn the ship the sooner we'll be able to get back to enjoying the resource.

Are your suspicions about water quality in Montauk based on firsthand reports or something else?

There's a sign at the south end of Lake Montauk that says "no swimming — no lifeguard on duty." That beach has been closed for the better part of the decade because of poor water quality standards. The sign misleads the public. It's what I call the "Jaws" syndrome. The powers that be are afraid to tell the public what the real hazards are. They're afraid people will be concerned about their property values.

One thing that concerns me most at Lake Montauk is the significant loss of eel grass over the last 30 years. Dozens of acres of eel grass have been lost. These are, of course, critical fin fish and shellfish nurseries. If you like shellfish you need to care about water quality.

You are regularly testing eight sites around Montauk both on the ocean and the bay. How were those sites chosen?

They were chosen because of historic concerns around water quality and the popularity of beaches like Ditch Plains. Every location has different potential impacts. The point of testing is to understand and quantify those so we can begin to prescribe solutions where needed. Without testing it's impossible for our community to have an accurate understanding of the situation.

Aren't there governmental agencies charged with regularly testing the waters?

This is one of the things that makes trying to answer a simple question — is our water clean — so difficult. Water quality testing for bathing beaches is done by Suffolk County. But there are different agencies, different charges, mandates and measurements and different things that are tested at different times. Some poor person at the edge of Lake Montauk just wants to know "Can I take my kids swimming or eat the clams?"

The idea is to give people a readily available resource they can go to every week to see what's the trend and if they can take their kids swimming.

Are you planning to add more locations?

We want to add in additional beaches, but we also want to get it right first for locations we've already been sampling for two months and make sure the general data is ironclad so we have complete confidence in our results and those who look at it have it have confidence.

How does the testing program work?

There are two triggers – one is periodic, so every Thursday we collect samples. Another is after significant rainfall events. That gives us two ways to think about the data.

The folks that do the sampling worked with Mara for two months being trained, running samples, setting up the lab, tweaking the protocols and going back and doing it all over again. This is complex stuff. The data you see online is months three and four. We were not sure the first two months of data from the training period rises to the level of accuracy we wanted, so we have two months of extra data that we did not post. We wanted to be positive when we went live we were 100 percent confident it was accurate.

What are the early results showing you?

It's too early to draw conclusions based solely on our data set, but I can tell you, unfortunately, we haven't seen anything yet that is too surprising. We're probably going to be faced with numbers in the future that will show us we have a lot of work to clean up the resource.

Do you envision volunteer water testing models spreading to other areas on the South Fork?

Would I like to see it spread across the South Fork and the East End?
Absolutely. But it will take people in those communities to make it happen. Sag Harbor is the perfect community for something like this. There's no reason why it couldn't be done in the upper cove or inside the jetty.

I also have to sing the praises of [Baykeeper] Kevin McAllister. He worked really hard against opposition and those who wanted to prove there wasn't a problem at [Sag Harbor's] Haven's Beach. I think it's a shame when people charged with planning our communities choose not to make decisions based on science but another set of reasons.