

General Questions About the Benson Reserve Project

Q: What is the Benson Reserve and why is it significant?

A: The Benson Reserve is a 40-acre property in Montauk, New York, acquired for public preservation in the 1990s. It's significant because it offers public access to a valuable natural area. Unfortunately, invasive plant species have taken over parts of it and have blocked the views from the NYS designated Scenic Highway.

Q: Who is involved in the habitat restoration project at Benson Reserve?

A: The project is a partnership between the Town of East Hampton, Concerned Citizens of Montauk (CCOM), and landscape ecologist Rusty Schmidt from Nelson, Pope & Voorhis.

Q: What are some potential benefits of this restoration project?

A: This project aims to restore native coastal habitat, benefiting species like monarch butterflies, migratory birds, and coastal songbirds. It will help protect against climate-related threats and erosion and restore the scenic view from the NYS designated Scenic Highway.

Q: Why is it essential to address invasive species in this restoration project?

A: Invasive species can harm biodiversity and degrade habitats, disrupting ecosystems. Addressing invasive species is critical to restoring native plants and protecting against climate-related issues, storms, and erosion.

Q: Can the entrenched invasive ecosystem be fully converted back to native?

A: We acknowledge that reversing the effects of invasive species is a complex challenge. Our goal is not to turn back time but to establish a native-dominant ecosystem.

Q: Why is root depth important?

A: Root depth is critical to understanding the restoration's success. Native plants, particularly those adapted to sandy, water-scarce environments like this, have evolved to develop deep-root systems. These deep roots anchor the plants securely in the shifting sand, making the dune more resilient in challenging conditions. In contrast, invasive species do not produce deep or wide roots, but are looking to colonize with rhizomes instead. The shallow root systems threaten the dune's resiliency in the face of climate change.

Q: Does removing invasive species disturb the soil and does it invite more unwanted plants before native plants can be seeded?

A: We're minimizing soil disturbance, using specific methods for flat areas and goats on steep slopes. Erosion protection measures are implemented before any work begins. The native plants we're introducing are well-suited to this micro-ecosystem. It's important to note that only the top third of the property, which amounts to 16 out of 40 acres and parallels the road, is being disturbed. This approach avoids disruption near the coast or mid-slope areas. The invasives are removed, and we promptly seed any disturbed soils. To ensure the seeds establish successfully and protect against rain events and erosion, we employ erosion control blankets or mulch. This seeding process happens immediately, and the soil remains protected as the native plants get established, minimizing the potential for invasives to reseed.

Q: Are grass species suitable for higher dunes?

A: We're planning to use native grasses like little bluestem and switchgrass that thrive in higher dune elevations, not beachgrass. Woody shrubs like bayberry and beach plum will also be considered for higher ground. And flower species like seaside goldenrod and Maryland goldenaster are well suited and will provide protection for the dune.

Q: How will invasive plant species be managed during the restoration project?

A: Invasive plant species will be removed both mechanically and, in the first year, by using a small number of goats. Goats have been proven effective in managing invasive vegetation like the vines we are looking to be managed. After the initial removal, continued monitoring and maintenance will be required monthly to observe any new young invasive species germinating to be removed by hand and to plant any locations that no plants are germinating.

Q: Will public access be restricted by this project?

A: No. The current trails that exist on the property will remain open.

Q: Will the public have a chance to provide input on the project?

A: Yes, East Hampton Town will offer opportunities for public comment at the Montauk Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) meeting and an East Hampton Town public hearing. Keep an eye out for the release of agendas and schedules for these events.

Q: What environmental review is being done for this project?

A: While this habitat restoration projects does not require environmental review under SEQRA, the Town has reviewed the project for potential short and long-term impacts, and worked with project partners to ensure any potential impacts such as erosion, stormwater runoff or potential impacts to public access are avoided completely or mitigated to the maximum extent possible.

Q: What outreach to adjacent property owners and public awareness is being planned?

A: Before any work commences all adjacent property, owners will be notified and provided with details of the project by EHT. Also, both CCOM and EHT will maintain a website portal with all relevant information and CCOM will be providing regular public updates on progress throughout the 10 year plan period.

Goats for Invasive Species Removal

Q: Why is using goats considered a good method for removing invasive plant species on a dune?

A: Using goats is a beneficial method for invasive plant removal on dunes because they are highly effective at eating a wide range of invasive plants but not grasses, reducing the need for herbicides and mechanical removal methods reducing soil disturbance, and reducing the tangled web of vines for easier access. They will provide sunlight for the native grass species to germinate in the dune while continually eating the vines that are trying to reestablish.

Q: How do goats help control invasive plants on dunes?

A: Goats are natural browsers, and their selective grazing can target invasive plants while leaving native vegetation largely grasses intact, making them a precise and eco-friendly choice for this type of restoration.

Q: What are the environmental advantages of using goats for invasive plant control on dunes?

A: Goats provide an environmentally friendly solution by minimizing soil disturbance, reducing erosion, and promoting native plant growth through their selective grazing habits.

Q: Are there economic benefits to using goats for invasive plant removal on dunes?

A: Yes, using goats can be cost-effective as they require less labor and equipment compared to mechanical removal methods, and they can access steep or challenging terrain. The areas that the goats will be targeting are on the steep portions of the project where mechanical methods are not safe and human hand removal is too time consuming and costly.

Q: Can goats be used in sensitive ecological areas?

A: Yes, goats are well-suited for sensitive ecological areas as their grazing is targeted, and they have a low impact on the surrounding environment, including nesting sites and native vegetation. Goats have been used effectively in many of the most sensitive areas of the eastern US.

Q: Do goats pose any risks or challenges when used for invasive plant control?

A: Risks include overgrazing if not properly managed, and challenges may include the need for secure fencing to contain the goats within the targeted area and to keep dogs and other potential disturbances out.

Q: Will the goats require special fencing in Benson?

A: Yes, goats need appropriate fencing to keep them within the targeted area. The fencing will not be a permanent structure and will be removed from the site when the goats are removed. The fencing is an open woven wire fence, that is not obtrusive to the visitors.

Q: Do goats used for invasive species control bite humans or other animals?

A: The goats proposed for this invasive species control are not aggressive toward humans or other animals, they have been specifically selected for these types of projects. They are retired goats from milking and breeding programs, only wanting to spend the remaining years grazing. They are browsers, primarily interested in eating vegetation. However, the goats will be kept in enclosures away from humans and other animals.

Q: Will the goats be used year-round for invasive plant management on Benson?

A: Goats will only be used seasonally, typically during the growing season when invasive plants are most abundant.

Q: Are the goats going to be there every year?

A: No. The goats will be brought to the Benson Reserve to graze invasive plants within 4 designated, enclosed areas for 7 months starting in spring through fall of 2024. Depending on their effectiveness in these 4 areas a determination will be made at the end of 2024 whether they may be required in these

same areas for a second season in 2025. The ongoing management of invasive species in subsequent years will be a combination of hand and mechanical removal and will not involve goats.

Q: How many goats will be at the project site?

A: A total of 14-21 goats in 4 separate locations comprising 8 acres within the 40-acre Benson Reserve. The number of goats in each area is based on a grazing density of 2-3 goats/acre and therefore will depend on the acreage of each area as follows;

1.33 acres: 2-3 goats

3.18 acres: 6-9 goats

1.06 acres: 2-3 goat.

2.05 acres: 4-6 goats

Q: Do goats have a strong odor when used for invasive plant management?

A: Goats have a distinct natural odor, but it is usually not overpowering. Their odor is generally less offensive than other livestock animals, and because we will have only a small number of goats at each location, the smell will likely be unnoticeable.

Q: Are goats noisy when employed for invasive plant removal?

A: Goats are relatively quiet animals. They may occasionally make sounds like bleating or low-toned vocalizations when disturbed or herded, but they are not known for being particularly noisy compared to other livestock, in fact a number of goat herds being used in urban areas are so quiet that collar bells are used to help with locating them.

Q: Do goats have any environmental benefits beyond invasive species control?

A: Yes, goats can help improve soil health through their grazing and nutrient recycling activities. They also reduce the need for herbicides or fertilizers, promoting environmentally friendly land management.

Q. Can goats safely eat poison ivy without experiencing any adverse effects?

A. Yes, goats are known for their ability to consume poison ivy without apparent harm. They have a unique digestive system that can break down and detoxify the oils responsible for causing skin reactions in humans. In fact, the milk from a goat provides some immunity to the recipient.

Q: Are there other areas where goats are being used for dune restoration and invasive plant control?

A: The use of goats for weed and invasive plant management has been studied and implemented throughout the Northeast, and locally at Heckscher Park, Prospect Park and Staten Island and in coastal locations.

Interactions Between Invasive Species and Butterflies, Migratory Birds, and Coastal Songbirds

Q: What is the connection between invasive plant removal and the survival of migratory birds?

A: Removing invasive plants enhances the availability of native vegetation, which provides better nesting sites and food sources for migratory birds during their stopovers and breeding seasons in Montauk. Our insects (90%) require a host plant or specific species of plants to develop in their growth, for instance the Monarch requires milkweed. 90% of our terrestrial birds eat 6,000 insects to raise a brood of birds, without the insects, the birds are not able to be reared. The Cornell Ornithological Lab has calculated a

decline of 35% of the bird population across the US since 1970, primarily due to habitat loss, including the decline of insects to feed those broods.

Q: What role do coastal songbirds play in Montauk's ecosystems?

A: Coastal songbirds contribute to ecosystem health by aiding in pollination and seed dispersal, making them vital for maintaining the diversity and resilience of Montauk's coastal habitats.

Q: How do invasive species disrupt coastal songbirds in Montauk?

A: Invasive species can alter the structure of coastal habitats, making it harder for songbirds to find suitable nesting locations and food resources, ultimately affecting their populations. Our invasive species of Long Island are not host plants, they come from other parts of the world and have not evolved with the ecosystem of our coastal zone, providing very little to no benefit to our habitat, songbirds, and resources.

Q: How do invasive plants harm monarch butterflies in Montauk?

A: Invasive plants can crowd out native milkweed and our seaside goldenrod. The milkweed is essential for monarch butterflies to lay their eggs and provide food for their caterpillars, while seaside goldenrod is essential nectar source for the butterflies to migrate. This can lead to a decline in monarch populations, in fact this past year, Monarchs have been listed due to the vast population decline.

Q: Are there specific invasive plants that particularly threaten these species in Montauk?

A: Yes, some invasive plants, such as common reed (*Phragmites australis*), multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*), and Japanese knotweed (*Reynoutria japonica*), can pose significant threats to monarch butterflies, migratory birds, and coastal songbirds.

Q: How can the removal of invasive plants benefit these species in Montauk?

A: The removal of invasive plants allows native vegetation to thrive, providing monarch butterflies, migratory birds, and coastal songbirds with the essential resources they need for breeding, nesting, and feeding.

More General Information About Invasive Plant Species

Q: What are invasive plant species?

A: Invasive plant species are non-native plants that establish themselves and spread aggressively in new environments, often outcompeting native vegetation and has shown to have a human and environmental impact.

Q: Why are invasive plant species considered bad?

A: Invasive plant species are problematic because they can disrupt ecosystems, harm native species, and have negative economic and ecological impacts.

Q: Knowing how difficult it is to eradicate Japanese knotweed, is it even worth trying to at the Benson Reserve?

A: Absolutely. Japanese Knotweed can be difficult to eradicate, but it is possible. Right now, it is only present on 0.1% of the Benson Reserve, which makes this an opportune time to remove it before it spreads further. With repeated cutting (5+ times/year), Japanese knotweed can be controlled and eventually eliminated.

Q: How do invasive plants disrupt ecosystems?

A: Invasive plants disrupt ecosystems by altering nutrient cycling, reducing habitat quality, and interfering with the natural processes that native species rely on. They also tend to outcompete the native species which can create a monoculture or an area with only that plant present.

Q: What harm do invasive plants cause to native plant species?

A: Invasive plants can harm native species by competing for resources like sunlight, water, and nutrients, which can lead to the decline or even extinction of native plants.

Q: How do invasive plants affect wildlife?

A: Invasive plants can alter food sources, nesting sites, and habitats for wildlife, often negatively impacting native species' populations. Especially towards insects as these plants can not support our local insect populations, creating a decline in the population, and the important transfer of energy from the sun, through the plants, and up into the food chain,

Q: Can invasive plants impact water quality?

A: Yes, invasive plants can impact water quality by altering the nutrient balance in aquatic ecosystems, potentially leading to issues like algal blooms and oxygen depletion.

Q: Are there health concerns associated with invasive plant species?

A: Some invasive plants can be harmful to human health. For example, contact with certain species can cause skin irritation, allergies, or even toxic reactions.

Next pages additional FAQs from East Hampton Town Website

Benson Reserve FAQs

Why are both goats and mechanical removal of invasive species being proposed for this Habitat Restoration project on the Benson Reserve in Montauk?

The Benson Reserve is a 40-acre property owned by the Town of East Hampton. Although the acreage, a combination of maritime shrubland, maritime grassland, and maritime dunes overlooking the ocean just before you enter downtown Montauk, remains undeveloped approximately 16 acres of the land has been overtaken by invasive species immediately adjacent to Montauk Highway.

The proposed 10-year invasive management and habitat restoration program will not only restore native species but also protect the dune from future climate-related issues, storms, and erosion while also providing vital native coastal habitat to many species (e.g., monarch butterflies, migratory birds, and coastal songbirds).

Goats are to be used only in 4 areas comprising a total of ~ 8 acres on the steep areas that are primarily covered in invasive vines or perennials like Japanese knotweed, multiflora rose, Japanese honeysuckle mixed with two natives that most consider undesirable, poison ivy and green briar. It is difficult for machines to traverse these steeper areas and protect soil erosion. It is too time consuming and expensive to do the removal by hand, or machine in comparison to a small group of goats. Goats are the least expensive and least disruptive option for soils to manage the sections with this topography and predominance of this type of invasive plant. Mechanical removal will be used on the other 8-acre flatter sections and areas with large shrubs of Morrow's honeysuckle and border privet, both of which can be removed without issues of regrowth in a single action by pulling out from the roots.

Are goats effective for the removal of invasive plant species?

Yes. Goats are currently being used by the Southampton Highway Dept and have been used in Staten Island, Riverside Park –NYC (within the densely populated Upper Westside) and Heckscher State Park where they have shown to be effective in removing heavy invasive species of non-native shrubs and vines as their continual grazing both removes the invasive species and prevents their regrowth. However, goats will not fully eliminate all invasive species and both hand removal of regrowth and some follow-up mechanical treatment is expected in the second and subsequent years. Also, as goats prefer non-native vines and shrubs, they have minimal effect on any grasses.

How many goats will be at the project site?

A total of 14-21 goats in 4 separate locations comprising 8 acres within the 40-acre Benson Reserve. The number of goats in each area is based on a grazing density of 2-3 goats/acre and therefore will depend on the acreage of each area as follows;

1.33 acres: 2-3 goats.

3.18 acres: 6-9 goats.

1.06 acres: 2-3 goats.

2.05 acres: 4-6 goats.

Will the goats be roaming free?



No. The goats will be in designated, penned in areas in 4 separate locations within the Benson Reserve. And all of the enclosed areas will be arranged to keep the goats penned and the humans out, keeping access to the beach free.

Will there be any structures on-site?

Yes. A temporary small shed like structure will be placed within each of the 4 enclosures at the Benson Reserve to provide shelter for the goats to protect them from any harsh weather from Spring to Fall. Although resilient animals, goats do not like rain!

Are the goats going to be there every year?

No. The goats will be brought to the Benson Reserve to graze invasive plants within 4 designated, enclosed areas for 7 months starting in spring through fall of 2024. Depending on their effectiveness in these 4 areas a determination will be made at the end of 2024 whether they may be required in these same areas for a second season in 2025. The ongoing management of invasive species in subsequent years will be a combination of hand and mechanical removal and will not involve goats.

Will the goats be accessible to the public and do they bite and make noise?

No. The enclosure fences will prevent any human contact and video cameras will be used to ensure their safety. They may sometimes be visible to the public, but any interaction will be discouraged by signage and real time monitoring of the video cameras. Goats only have teeth in their bottom jaw, like sheep, and are not aggressive and not noisy when managed in these small numbers and with a constant supply of food as will be the case on these sites. Reports from other areas where goats are currently being used confirm that there are no noise concerns.

What type of enclosures will be installed?

Typical livestock panels that are 16 feet long and 5 feet tall, secured to T posts 4-5 feet apart, and are routinely used to safely confine goats.

Who is responsible for caring for the goats?

A professional livestock management company will be responsible for caring for the goats to ensure their constant safety. In addition to a professional manager, Concerned Citizens of Montauk will have daily check-ins at the Site to keep the project on track and the goats are happy and safe.

Will public access be restricted by this project?

No. The current trails that exist on the property will remain open.

What do the goats eat?

Mostly vines and shrubs, their favorite foods are multiflora rose, Japanese honeysuckle, Japanese knotweed, poison ivy, and green briar which we have in excess for this project. They tend not to eat grasses and thin leaved flowers and will ignore these when given the choice of vines and shrubs.

How will the goats be managed and used safely in this area?

The goats will be “rented” for 7 months from a professional livestock management company that has extensive experience with goats used in Staten Island, Riverside Park –NYC and Heckscher State Park. Fresh water will be provided daily to each of the 4 sites and a small shelter will also be made available to provide protection from rain. The goats have also been retired from milking or breeding.

Is the public paying for the project cost and ongoing maintenance?

No, EHT approval of the plan is contingent on commitment by the private non-profit partner, CCOM, to raise the necessary funds for both the initial work and subsequent maintenance phases over the 10-year project scope.

What are the benefits of using goats to remove invasive plants instead of machinery?

Goats are the preferred method to remove invasive plants in areas where there is steep topography and bringing in machinery would be difficult or damaging to the site. Goats will be used in the steep sections of the property, where there is the greatest concern about erosion and bluff protection. Goats typically avoid eating the native plant species, preferring the invasive species that are smothering or out-competing the native plant communities.

Is Japanese Knotweed one of the invasive species that has been found on the Benson Reserve?

Yes. Following an extensive mapping of the type and number of non-native and invasive species on the property, Japanese Knotweed has been identified and will be controlled as follows; Goats in the first year (2024) will be the primary method to remove knotweed as it is a preferred forage

for goats. Neither mechanical methods, such as pulling or digging, nor chemicals are part of the management plan for Japanese Knotweed.

What environmental review is being done for this project?

East Hampton Town Natural Resources and Planning Departments are completing an Environmental Assessment Form (EAF) which is a form used by an agency to assist it in determining the environmental significance or non-significance of actions. A properly completed EAF must contain enough information to describe the proposed action, its location, its purpose, and its potential impacts on the environment. To date EH Town Planning, Natural Resources and Legal departments have all been consulted and have provided input.

What outreach to adjacent property owners and public awareness is being planned?

Before any work commences all adjacent property, owners will be notified and provided with details of the project by EHT. Also, both CCOM and EHT will maintain a website portal with all relevant information and CCOM will be providing regular public updates on progress throughout the 10 year plan period.

Has this been done before?

Goats have successfully been used for invasive plant removal in other areas. For example, the [‘Goatham’](#) Project in Manhattan’s Riverside Park has hosted goats for four summer seasons (2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023), in which the goats roam a two-acre area within a fenced enclosure. Additionally, [Charlottesville, VA](#) and [Fairfield, CT](#) have announced that similar projects will take place in their jurisdictions, underscoring the growing adoption of the prescribed grazing approach.