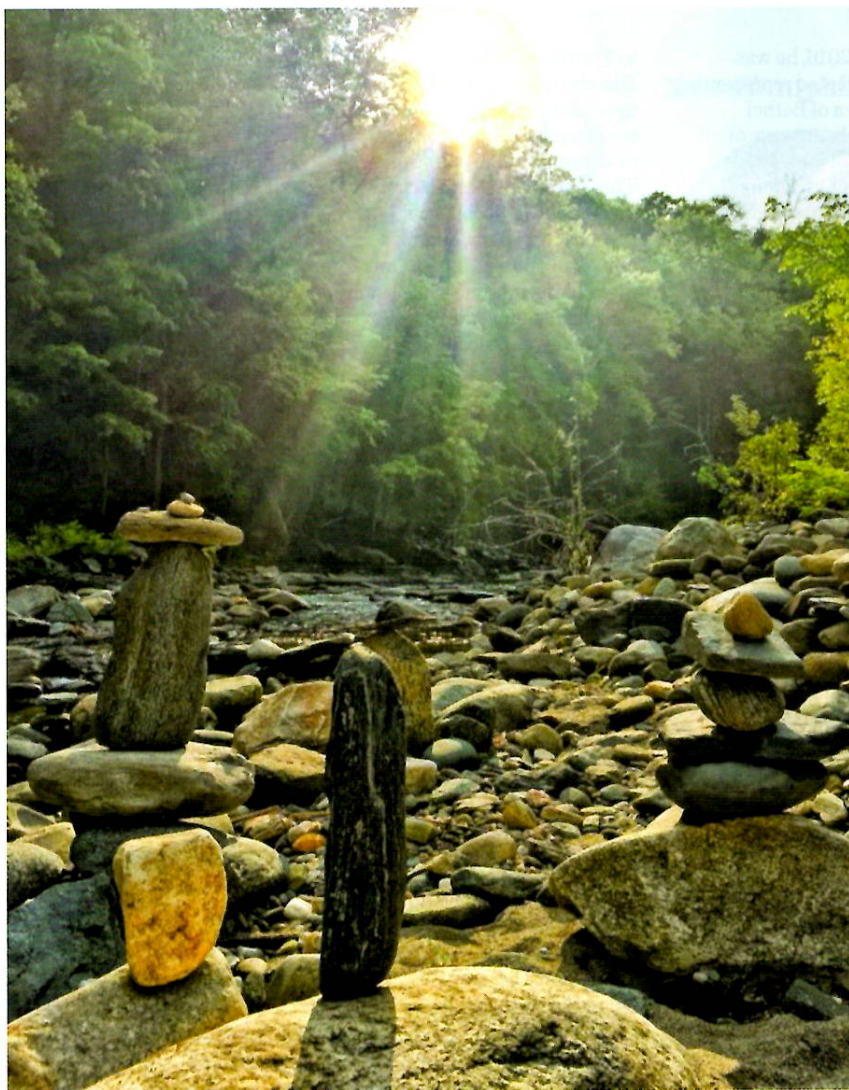




Preserving Eden

Naturist's nature retreat saved through generous sale by longtime owner and formation of Rock River Preservation

The Swartz family cabin sits nestled in the forests of southern Vermont. By the cabin is a memorial site dedicated to the late Alex Swartz. Alex loved this land, says his sister, Jennifer Swartz. He especially enjoyed lazing by nearby Rock River, a place historically popular with generations of gay men who, through quiet word of mouth between kindred souls, somehow turned the discreet wooded spot into

a locally fabled Shangri-La for friendly nude bathing, communing with nature and spiritual and sensuous discovery.

For many years, visitors wondered whether Rock River's rare and treasured gay beaches would remain accessible from season to season. After all, they were on private land. And though most people looked the other way, not all locals liked the site's gay-Eden reputation. But it never

Rock River

occurred to the Swartz family to interfere with the community's use of Rock River, says Jennifer Swartz. And now something extraordinary has happened.

In October, the Swartz family will complete a sale of 21 acres of land, including the areas that contain the gay beaches and surrounding trails, to Rock River Preservation, a nonprofit organization of community members stewarding the land and its gay heritage for the future. If they'd gone to a developer, the Swartz family could certainly have fetched far more than the \$75,000 that Rock River Preservation quickly fundraised from devoted pilgrims. But it was important to pass the land along to men who already loved it as their own, says Jennifer Swartz. Alex would want to know this special place was safe.

"It's so peaceful, a place where you get swept away by beauty and can truly relax," says Swartz. She knows that freedom means even more to those too rarely granted it.

"For people within the LGBT community, it can be difficult to find a place that allows you to be yourself," says Swartz. "I'm glad the land is there for people who may not have that, and I know my dad feels the same way."

In fact, says Swartz, the only regret is that financial constraints prohibit her family from outright donating the land.

Rock River Preservation still seems pretty thrilled with the deal.

"They were generous with their pricing," says Moon Morgan, a board member who helped architect the sale. Morgan visits Rock River multiple times a week, even when he's not doffing his duds for a swim, to check on the reliably litter-free land.

"This is so exciting, so amazing."

Morgan first started visiting Rock River in 1996, clued in by his connections with the queer counterculture of the Radical Faeries, who have a camp nearby, and the Tantra-teaching Body Electric School.

The bucolic region that surrounds Brattleboro, Vermont seems to attract a gay men's culture that is green living-minded and celebrates higher consciousness-seeking in spiritual and sexual life. Besides Rock River and Faerie Camp Destiny, the region is home to Frog Meadow, a clothing-optional men's bed and breakfast that welcomes travelers seeking "heart-centered touch" massage retreats,

meditation workshops and other mind-and body-healing events. The charming bed and breakfast, located on an apple orchard, receives many visitors seeking Rock River, just a few miles away, and Frog Meadow co-owner Dave King was on Rock River Preservation's volunteer fundraising committee.

Rock River initially emerged as a gay gathering spot in the early 1970s, explains Morgan. From a main road, visitors hike a lengthy but well-worn path upstream, first reaching a family beach. Beyond, past the clear "clothing-optional" signs, the shoreline crowds increasingly become nude and gay. The vibe is friendly, no-pretense, and community-minded. The wooded areas by the furthest beach are cruisy, and the riverbanks are dotted with rock cairns arranged by visitors.

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Jennifer Swartz

When Morgan started going, the gay nude beach was mostly a well-kept secret. He remembers regulars like Lawrence, who would serve fellow beachgoers from his tray of cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, and London, who organized volleyball games at the now-shuttered nearby gay bar, Rainbow Cattle Company. And of course, there was Alex Swartz.

But Rock River's low profile has been raised post-Internet, and visitor numbers are

growing. Now it's not unusual to find 100 guys out there in the heat of summer, says Morgan.

And although Vermont has a pretty well-earned reputation as a progressive, free-spirited state, Rock River's heightened notoriety has led to a few flare-ups of protest in the rural community.

"There's been some ugliness," says Swartz. It reached a crescendo about a decade ago, she says, when the family

cabin was broken into and vandalized. Solar power panels were smashed. The place was covered in spray paint.

But Jennifer Swartz and her father Robert, who purchased over 50 acres of land there in the late '80s, are unabashed "liberals" who weren't about to change their attitude about the river's use by the gay community.

"Our stance was to not engage those who had a problem with it," says Swartz. "I've always been happy to answer questions, but we've never been called upon to do so. Just allowing what was going on to continue was our form of a response."

Kerfuffle seems to have quelled under the responsible stewardship of Rock River Preservation, which Morgan and others formed in 2005 to help protect the river from development and ensure

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continued public access. In 2007, the group purchased a 4.5-acre parcel along the public access trail from the Connecticut River Watershed Council, with conservation guarantees from the Vermont Land Trust. Rock River Preservation fundraised \$16,000 for the purchase.

The additional 21 acres is being purchased from the Swartz family for \$75,000. Rock River Preservation was able to fundraise over \$90,000, enough to cover closing costs and get a head start on future property taxes. The monies came from passionate supporters from at least 11 states and Canada after just 34 days of a public campaign. Morgan says \$20,000 came from a single donor, Donald Bragg, but the median donation was \$100.

Following a separate land sale to another family, Jennifer Swartz says she and her father are left with about 10 acres, including the cabin location. When it's time to let that go, Rock River Preservation will be the first to receive an offer, she says. No matter what happens, they "will never sell it to a developer," she vouches. She simply can't put a price tag on the value of protecting land that has meant so much to so many people.

With the sale anticipated to close in October, Rock River Preservation now has enough acreage to apply for conservation land status, which would reduce property taxes and restrict the land from ever being developed.

Though Rock River already has a storied legacy, that its gay-friendly future is becoming assured means a lot to younger folks too.

"I'm happy to hear of preservation efforts for Rock River because there is something magical about the area that you can't quite get from reading about it," says Johnny

Chag, a 31-year old Vermont native who first learned about Rock River shortly after coming out. He didn't make the trip until nine years later, after finally discovering a blog post that "detailed how to find the mysterious, hidden gay mecca in the woods of Southern Vermont."

What he discovered was truly special.

"Everyone was very social, sharing drinks and laughing," says Chag. "There was no cell service for Grindr, or any outside distractions. It was like I had stepped back in time to what gay culture looked like before the digital age, and I could feel the sense of seclusion that made this a safe, open space before we could be safe and open in the world. As we integrate into society and lose more and more of these archaic safe spaces, I think we lose a piece of our history that still lives with our older generations."

Moon Morgan agrees that Rock River is a place where visitors can still feel the energy of countless gay men who came before and blazed a trail, literally and figuratively, past the well-trod and familiar and toward the outsider-friendly fringes, where the real enchantment lives.

"There's a lot of magic at Rock River," says Morgan. "I had a sense early on in this project that there were a lot of dead people pushing this along." He wistfully remembers finding three separate heart-shaped stones at Rock River, each coinciding with a different fundraising milestone: signs, he says.

Rock River Preservation will also install its own sign on the beach on the Swartz property. It will recognize the site as "Alex Swartz Beach."

No single steward lives forever. But the spirit of this sacred place now will. [x]

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