



# Landowners Encourage Cooperative Conservation on their Wetland

**A** family in New York's Finger Lakes Region is responsible for a cooperative conservation story like few others.

Keith and Moira "Mo" Tidball are energetic and persuasive people. In 2001, the couple lived and worked in Washington D.C.; Keith was employed with the USDA's Foreign Agriculture Service, and Mo was involved in community nutrition. They enjoyed their jobs, but the events of 9/11 were a catalyst for their decision to leave Capitol Hill.

"Mo's family is from Rochester, and they always vacationed in the Finger Lakes," Keith said. "She spoke very highly of this area, and I happened to be doing a lot of collaboration with people at Cornell University and had the opportunity to visit and look at farms."

Keith said none of the farms he visited really seemed right, but he had another business trip to Cornell planned for three months later, so Mo came with him and they gave their wish list to a local realtor. They said they wanted an old house with wooden floors, fire places, a view of the lake, some marsh on the property, and a farm. The realtor said, "Oh, you're not asking for much, are you," and the Tidballs realized they were asking for a tall order.

A year later, the family received an

overnight package from a person with a name that seemed vaguely familiar. Inside was a note that read "I found it!"

"I opened up the package of pictures of a 160-acre farm in the town of Fayette that had sprawling property that came to rest on Cayuga Lake," Keith said. "I looked through all of the photos and started salivating. The house needed a lot of work, but the views were magnificent and the barns were nice, so we bought the farm and moved in 2002."

The family had two main goals for their new farm. They wanted to cultivate a holistic animal farm program that was grass-based, and they wanted to cultivate wildlife habitat.

Keith said he didn't envision their entire front yard going into a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) program, but as he researched more and talked to District Conservationist Ron Vanacore and NRCS Biologist Dave Kitchie about the Wetlands Reserve Program, or WRP, it became clear that it was the best thing to do from a habitat and water quality standpoint.

As it turned out, NRCS offered to purchase the farm and development rights on roughly 35 acres, and the Tidball family donated an additional 12 acres for an easement on their farm. The easement

would last 30 years, and the agency was interested in restoring the wetlands portion of the easement from a mono-typical, cattail marsh to wetlands that would appeal to a variety of wildlife. Also, the uplands of the easement, when planted with warm season grasses, would provide native habitat for nesting waterfowl, pheasants and other song birds.

Typically, with a 30-year WRP easement, NRCS pays 75 percent of the cost of restoration of a wetland and the landowner is responsible for the other 25 percent. One of the unique things with this project is that Keith and Mo contacted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which also has a cost-share program called Partners for Wildlife, and pitched an agreement with that agency. The couple said they were thrilled to find out that Fish and Wildlife wanted the project done as much as they did and were willing to pay the 25 percent cost share.

Behind the scenes of the wetland restoration, there were a lot of permits and bureaucracy when negotiating with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, or DEC, because the state and federal government had regulated part of the easement area as Class II wetlands, which meant the land was protected from various uses and disturbances.

Keith examines native grasses he planted on the upland portion of the property.



“I was contacted by Ron Vanacore about the process of getting wetland permits,” said DEC Wildlife Biologist Jim Eckler. “There has been concern from our organization and the Army Corps of Engineers about authorizing people to work in wetlands. Generally, the regulations do not allow fill within a wetland. That is a federal and state regulation, but we thought that if we were careful about how we allowed fill in the wetland it could be a good thing.”

With Eckler’s help, the DEC gave permission for the Tidballs to go forth with the engineering planned in the easement.

Interestingly, just to the south of the farm is a newly acquired wildlife management area by the State of New York. There is substantial marsh on the state’s land, even more than on the Tidball’s farm, and the land has a creek called Canoga Creek running through it, which is spring-fed and the main source of nutrients for the entire marsh, both north and south.

“When DEC became involved in our project, they decided they would take advantage of the equipment we were using by doing similar wetlands restoration on their property,” Keith said.

With the support of the DEC, the Tidball’s cooperative conservation effort really blossomed. They contacted other environmental groups and agencies to encourage their involvement.

“We are a farm family with a commitment to conservation who has joined with two federal agencies, USDA and US Fish and Wildlife Service, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), and other partners like Cayuga Lake Watershed Network, Trout Unlimited, and Ducks Unlimited for the benefit of not only habitat but a sustainable kind of agriculture,” Keith said. “It is an ideal situation. There are not a lot of WRP projects with this much public-private partnership.”

Keith said there is a misconception their property is now state land, because it is close to the state wildlife management area and because when the State of New York declared it a protected wetland some people interpreted that to mean the state took it through eminent domain.

“One challenge is a public perception challenge that when you do something like this you are cheating your rural town out of tax revenues,” he said. “The impression is that land has been enrolled into a federal program, which means we do not have to pay taxes on it anymore, which is not true. There are tax benefits, because the land is no longer worth a real estate development price, and the taxes are adjusted for being enrolled in an agricultural program. Also, there are income tax exemptions for doing conservation, which should be a national priority, but it does not mean you stop paying property taxes or are a sell-out in the community.”

The Tidballs said, now more than ever,

they want to be involved in the leadership in the agricultural community in the United States and abroad, where production is compatible with wildlife habitat enhancement or protection and not antagonistic, which it sometimes seems to be in some commercial agriculture.

“We are very interested in the science behind what we are doing,” Keith said. “Where we can do field trials and experiment with different technologies and different engineering plans, we want to do that, and we want our farm to be a test plot for where that can happen.”

The couple has partnered with the Cayuga Lake Watershed Network and has done a lot of outreach and education. They bring Seneca Falls school children to the marsh to learn about water fowl and wetlands. In a few weeks, they have a community clean up scheduled, where the Cayuga Lake Watershed Network, Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, and those interested in Canoga Creek will come together on their property to do projects.

“We’ll clean up the creek, clean out invasive species, put nesting boxes out, clean up the debris from the spring runoff, plant cattails and more grass, and things of that type,” he said.

The Tidballs believe any conservation-minded landowner who has a plan and is persistent can enter into a public, private partnership.

“If you can get networked with the watershed organizations, wildlife organizations, and the state it is amazing what things can happen,” Keith said. “As an example, we have our WRP, next door is the state land where DEC is working, and now Trout Unlimited wants to stock the stream on that land and think about clearing invasive species. There are changes happening in the neighborhood, and before long these things can start really making a wide-scale difference.”



# Project Turns Cattail Marsh into Wildlife Paradise

The Tidball Wetland Reserve Program easement is sandwiched between Scenic Route 89 and the shore of Cayuga Lake in the Town of Fayette. Before construction, the lowland was a dense cattail marsh and the upland field was riddled with erosion gullies.

A grassed waterway was designed by Dominic La Gioia, Soil Conservation Technician in Livingston County, to help with the upland erosion problems.

“There were a lot of skeptics in the neighborhood who thought the engineering we were working with wasn’t going to be able to handle it and would be washed out, but it turned out beautiful,” said Keith Tidball. “Last summer we put in warm-season, native prairie grasses in the whole field, which established pretty well for the first season. That was not only for nesting cover for water fowl, but also for upland birds, like song birds and pheasants, which are not native to here but are an important game species.”

Keith said around the first of this year, he was given the okay to get a team of contractors to go into the wetlands area with long-reach backhoes to make a series of potholes in the



mud, none of which would be more than three feet deep, so aquatic life, amphibian frogs, and nesting birds could take advantage of it without a predator cycle developing.

The pothole construction started in mid-March and was completed about a month later. Afterward, the contractors and the Tidball family did a lot of additional seeding, grading, and planting grasses in places where the soil was disturbed.

“Now, the big task is management and making sure that wherever any disturbed soil was left it is planted so we don’t get invasive species,” Keith said. “It is incumbent on a landowner to do a lot of the prescribed maintenance, including mowing and allowing for the time to do a lot of monitoring and collaborating where possible.”

“We are really happy here, and our children now have an innate understanding of the way nature and cycles work,” said Mo Tidball. “Our girls are four and six years old, and they already have a conservation vocabulary.”

“Like I said before, we have twin goals of cultivating a sustainable, grass-based agriculture and cultivating habitat, but it is all a part of recognizing that human occupation of the landscape is the deciding factor in the sustainability question,” Keith said. “We are part of a system, not the lords over it. That is what I noticed our children are realizing through the chores they do. They can talk about grasslands and birds and about why we have potholes in the marsh. They know it is a part of a plan that our family is committed to and that we care about.”

