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Shinnecock kelp farmers Donna Collins-Smith, right, and Danielle Hopson Begun check a line of sugar kelp being grown in Shinnecock Bay on eastern Long Island, New York. The lines are covered with rich, brown, translucent sugar kelp, which has a biting taste that is both salty and sweet. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

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The cold, bracing waters of Shinnecock Bay on eastern Long Island are a part of a long history of oppression and renewal, of struggle and solidarity.

Among the keepers of the stories are six women of the sovereign Shinnecock Indian Nation determined to protect the bay and the surrounding Shinnecock Hills from encroaching development.

"It's our ancestral land," said Tela Troge, a member of the nation, which is located in Southampton, Long Island, and one of the six Shinnecock women working to preserve the bay. "We've been here 12,500 years."

But the ancestral lands have long faced threats. Most recently, after the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, wealthy New York City residents fled to eastern Long Island, intensifying existing challenges of development and new homes in the area.

The overdevelopment is causing untreated wastewater to enter the bay, "killing a lot of the marine life and threatening Shinnecock's existence and reliance on what used to be a very abundant source of food," Troge said in a recent interview with Global Sisters Report.

"It's a crisis in our local bay, which the Shinnecock people depend on as a source of food and nutrition," she said.

The 200-plus-acre campus of the Sisters of St Joseph, Brentwood, in Brentwood, New York, includes farmland, as shown here by the work of a farm worker named Jimmy. In all, 28 acres are farmland, part of an easement with New York's Suffolk County since 2019. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

One way to correct that is the nurturing of kelp farming in the chilly bay waters, a small but important step the women say can lead to the bay's long-term health and sustainability. In this, the Shinnecock women have important allies: the Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood, New York, a Long Island-based congregation that has embraced a strong environmental ethic and whose charism centers on love of God and neighbor.

The sisters have publicly acknowledged on their website and other forums that their 200-plus-acre campus in Brentwood sits on "occupied indigenous land," which the Shinnecocks say white settlers stole beginning in the late 1850s.

Sr. Kerry Handal works with the Shinnecock women as a support person at a congregational vacation and retreat center in the hamlet of Hampton Bays, Long Island, which overlooks the bay and hosts high school groups and women's recovery and self-help programs.

"There has now been a shift for many women's religious congregations to move into the environmental realm," Handal said. "That happens to be one of the immediate needs of our Earth and our society right now."

Shinnecock member Rebecca Genia said the Brentwood sisters are "friends, sisters, allies, partners. At this point, they're almost like extended family. They are golden-hearted people."

Sr. Kerry Handal is pictured on the beach overlooking Shinnecock Bay on eastern Long Island, where the Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood, own property and are supporting members of the Shinnecock Indian Nation in a kelp farming project. "By partnering with [the Shinnecock] and supporting them in restoring the health of the bay, it is also a witness to those who live around us, that we use the bay but we care about its health and its restoration," she said. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Relations between the Shinnecocks and the sisters had long been cordial but solidified when the congregation offered space in their cemetery to rebury Shinnecock ancestors whose bodies had once been displayed as part of an exhibit at a local museum. The 2019 reburial at the sisters' Brentwood cemetery was a deeply restorative and significant gesture that meant much to the nation, the Shinnecock women said.

"It just went from there," Genia said. "They're kind and considerate. They are respectful of our heritage, our culture, our ways, and we just kind of hit it off."

Hitting it off resulted in other ideas. The kelp project originated in early 2021, when the Shinnecock women approached the congregation about raising sugar kelp in the waters off of the sisters' Southampton property.

Troge said the cultivation of seaweed is important to Shinnecock women because of its ability to combat ocean acidification.

Harvested sugar kelp raised by Shinnecock kelp farmers in Shinnecock Bay on eastern Long Island (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

"Quahog shells are important to Shinnecock because culturally and traditionally, these shells are used to craft wampum beads," she said. "Due to ocean acidification, the shells are deteriorating and making it impossible to continue this cultural legacy."

Sugar kelp, she said, has the ability to sequester carbon, which, in turn, helps combat the ocean acidification process. Sugar kelp also extracts nitrates from the water.

"Due to overdevelopment and lack of municipal sewer systems, there is an excess of nitrogen in the water," Troge said. "The cultivation of sugar kelp helps to combat these crises."

Handal said the congregation saw the importance of what the kelp farmers sought to do and offered not only the waters for farming and harvesting, but space in property cottages for kelp incubation, known as the Shinnecock Kelp Farmers Hatchery.

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Shinnecock kelp farmer Danielle Hopson Begun is pictured in the Shinnecock Kelp Farmers Hatchery, located on property owned by the Sisters of St Joseph, Brentwood. After incubation in the hatcheries, the sugar kelp is grown in the bay waters then harvested, dried and sold to local farmers for use as a rich, organically safe "soil amendment." (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

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Dried kelp raised by Shinnecock kelp farmers in Shinnecock Bay on eastern Long Island, to be used as "soil amendment" (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

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The return of native plants, which is seen as environmentally helpful, is one initiative by the Sisters of St Joseph, Brentwood, at their 200-plus-acre campus in Brentwood, New York. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

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The 200-plus-acre campus of the Sisters of St Joseph, Brentwood, in Brentwood, New York, includes farmland, part of a working farm. In all, 28 acres are farmland, part of an easement with New York's Suffolk County since 2019. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

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  Beekeeping and the production of honey is part of a 3-acre "Garden Ministry" initiative on the campus of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood, in Brentwood, New York. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

After incubation in the hatcheries, the sugar kelp is grown in the bay waters then harvested, dried and sold to local farmers for use as a rich, organically safe "soil amendment."

On one chilly spring morning, Handal looked on from the beach as Shinnecock members Donna Collins-Smith and Danielle Hopson Begun, both wearing waders, walked steadily through the cold water for several hundred yards to check the lines to see how the kelp were doing. Seemingly well — the lines were covered with rich, brown, translucent sugar kelp, which has a biting taste that is both salty and sweet.

Ultimately, the six Shinnecock women — whose other members include Waban Tarrant and Darlene Troge, Tela Troge's mother — hope that by helping to clean the waters off the bay, the kelp will attract fish the Shinnecock can harvest back into the waters.

"We're looking to develop ecosystems and to do what we can to save Shinnecock Bay and also demonstrate to others that they can come together and make a difference and even join the kelp movement to make a difference," Darlene Troge said.

Meanwhile, the wider kelp movement continues to grow.

Shinnecock members Donna Collins-Smith, right, and Danielle Hopson Begun are pictured as they prepare to check on kelp growth in Shinnecock Bay on eastern Long Island. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

In the 2019 documentary film "Conscience Point," Genia spoke of the struggles of the Shinnecock and their use of seaweed for medicine, beauty products and fertilizer. After the film aired on PBS, GreenWave, a global network of regenerative ocean farmers that promotes the development of kelp internationally, contacted the women about collaborating.

Toby Sheppard Bloch, GreenWave's New York reef organizer, wrote in an email to GSR that GreenWave, which provides training and technical assistance, "is enthusiastic about supporting the Shinnecock kelp farmers in their effort to grow kelp in their ancestral waters."

Bloch added: "We are honored to be in community with these amazing women and the Sisters of St. Joseph, participating in this radical reimagination of how the sacred feminine can protect and restore critical ecosystems while creating jobs that sustain the world in the process."

To Handal, the most important aspect of the project is the health of the waters and the act of witnessing and solidarity with neighbors, particularly with other women.

"By partnering with [the Shinnecock] and supporting them in restoring the health of the bay, it is also a witness to those who live around us, that we use the bay but we care about its health and its restoration," she said.

On a large campus, land put to many uses

Handal said it is not possible to grasp the entirety of the sisters' environmental commitment without seeing the Brentwood campus, which is the size of a small family farm, complete with woodlands, open space, native grass meadows and working farmland. Land and conservation easements with local and state authorities will protect the lands from any possible development.

The sisters' land ethic, which states that the congregation "will evaluate the consequences of all decisions made regarding the land in the context of our mission," is prominently displayed as visitors enter a cluster of administrative buildings.

Sr. Karen Burke, the congregation's coordinator of land initiatives, said the sisters are proud that their land ethic was released several months before Pope Francis' May 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, and that the commitment has encompassed a variety of land uses.

"This has been a seven-year journey," Burke said.

Burke is visibly enthusiastic for the work as she greets visitors and speaks of the transformation of the campus into meadows, farmland leased to local farmers, and grasslands that are reintroducing native plants and grasses.

When Burke talks about neighbors and displaying "love of God and neighbor without distinction," she is speaking not only about the immediate community of Brentwood but also the birds, animals and bees returning to the campus because of the planting of native plants.

"It's amazing," Burke said from behind the wheel of a golf cart as she gave a tour of the campus. "When I look at this space, I think of the sisters who came before us, but before them, the Indigenous who held and continue to hold this land as sacred."

A natural grassland meadow, included in 35 acres of open space and native grass meadows, part of an easement to be completed with Peconic Land Trust by the fall of 2022 (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Burke said the sisters' land might return to Indigenous groups someday. In the meantime, she and the sisters affirm the work of those who engage with the land, such as Amanda Furcall, the campus' landscape ecologist.

Furcall said she is heartened by the return of foxes and box turtles to the land and said working with the sisters has given her a greater appreciation for the connection between Earth and spirit.

"I can take care of the Earth, but the land can take care of me," she said. "The sisters like to say, 'All is one,' and that's the basis of ecology."

Farmer Teddy Bolkas, whose Thera Farms is one of the working farms on the sisters' property, said he can farm at reasonable cost and serve underserved communities in Brentwood, which has a large immigrant population, mostly from Central America.

Bolkas, 47, whose family immigrated to the United States from Greece when he was 7 years old, proudly offered samples of strawberries and sugar snap peas. He said he understands the challenges that immigrant communities face and is committed to "feeding the underserved of Brentwood" rather than selling his produce in Manhattan.

Sr. Clara Santoro, who was the congregation's general superior from 1986 to 1994 and who encouraged environmental awareness within the congregation at a time when it was still novel, said an environmental ethic and commitment perfectly matches the congregation's belief "that all is one."

It is also a new way of looking at religious life, she said.

Over lunch with Burke, Handal and Brentwood staff members, Santoro explained that a vow of poverty centers around not using more than is needed, that a vow of chastity means loving all, and that a vow of obedience can mean a commitment to creation and the harmony of Earth and all creatures.

"Obedience to the Earth community means responsibility and respect for all," Burke added.

Sr. Karen Burke, the coordinator of land initiatives for the Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood, right, speaks to Amanda Furcall, the campus' landscape ecologist. Furcall said she is heartened by the return of foxes and box turtles to the land and said working with the sisters has given her a greater appreciation for the connection between Earth and spirit. "The sisters like to say, 'All is one,' and that's the basis of ecology." (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

A possible cosmic convergence at work

Handal and Burke said the sisters have gained greater appreciation for many things through their work with the Shinnecock, including what Burke calls "the holiness of water."

The six Shinnecock women return the compliment.

"We feel like the universe has put us all together to accomplish this mission," Genia said.

Darlene Troge said the Shinnecock Indian Nation is in the process of healing itself "after generations and centuries of historic trauma, land theft, marginalization, and exclusion from economic development that goes to this day."

She notes that the sisters "come from a legacy of healing and collective well-being."

In coming together on those common values, Troge said, "it becomes very powerful to be in each other's presence and think of healing. How can we move ahead to heal the mother, the Earth, the waters, the air that we all breathe? How can we bring our different perspectives or different resources together to really save the water? We are water protectors."

Genia said that unlike other contemporary institutions, including the wider Catholic Church, the Brentwood sisters "have never tried to hide behind any excuses or said any cruel statements like other people say, like, 'Oh, it wasn't me, it wasn't us, it was somebody that came before us.' They never copped out like that. They have stepped up and said, 'We know whose land we are on. We know what has been done in the past.' And anyone who offers their cemetery to you is not just talking the talk. They're walking the walk."

And, of course, there is the sugar kelp project — aimed at protecting the cold, bracing water that is integral to the well-being and life shared on the eastern reaches of Long Island.

"Working with the sisters I believe is part of all the healing that has to take place. It's a huge picture, protecting the Earth, protecting the water, and we have to work together," Genia said. "It's what we want to do and we need to do and we're going to do. It's just wonderful."

This story appears in the **Transforming Sisters' Assets** feature series. View the full series.