

The Tide of Moriches

Meet Your New Baykeeper

By Tara Smith
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In May, the nonprofit Peconic Baykeeper named Sean O'Neill, 34, their new baykeeper. A Sachem High School graduate, O'Neill received his bachelor's degree in natural resource management from the University of Delaware and his master's in environmental economics with a focus on fisheries from the University of Rhode Island.

He lives in Center Moriches with his family and spent the summer on the water and getting to know the community. But his work doesn't stop in the colder months. He was recently interviewed by the *Moriches Tide* about his background, vision and new initiatives.

Moriches Tide: You were hired in May, but you're no stranger to environmentalism. What were you doing before becoming baykeeper?

Sean O'Neill: Before becoming baykeeper, I spent two years as the director of education and outreach for the Perfect Earth Project, an environmental nonprofit based in East Hampton. I helped educate about and promote organic landscaping. Before that, I spent six-plus years at the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation as a pesticide control specialist.

MT: What did that entail?

O'Neill: A lot of the work revolved around pesticide law enforcement, groundwater contamination concerns and projects to help agriculture.

MT: All of your past endeavours are indirectly related to our waterways. When did you decide that working on the water was something that you wanted to pursue?

O'Neill: From high school, all the way through grad school, I worked on and off in the fishing industry, out in Orient and Point Judas in Rhode Island. I started fishing with my grandpa when I was 5 years old; that's my connection to the water. I boat and fish every second I get—or in the free time my family allows me—on Moriches Bay, so I have always supported the restoration work of the Moriches Bay Project and other local initiatives.

MT: What is your main goal as baykeeper?

O'Neill: I want to enhance water quality. For drinking, but also for commercial and recreational reasons; basically making the water more drinkable, swimmable and fishable. Our primary

mission is the protection of our water, a precious natural resource.

MT: Recent studies have shown a decline in water quality all across Long Island. What's the biggest threat?

O'Neill: Nitrogen pollution. The regulatory system has sort of failed Long Island and created a mess of polluted drinking water.

MT: How bad is it?

O'Neill: Bad and getting worse, I'd say. Water quality really depends on where you are, though. There are certain areas in the Peconic where it is still quite good. In other areas, that's not the case. The scallop season was historically bad this year. Big rust tides in the Peconic and on the South Shore, the Shinnecock and Moriches bays experience harmful algal blooms, red and brown tides on a yearly basis. They're in need of remediation.

MT: What are some things you are doing to combat this?

O'Neill: Last summer, we got our 1970 Dyer, *Kathy*, back on the water. We didn't have full staffing last year, but we got it up and running so that we could conduct weekly water patrols. While patrolling, we would test for water quality and pollution. We partnered with the Surfrider Foundation of Eastern Long Island to test water at Stony Brook Southampton to make sure local beaches were safe to swim as well as surf in. We also worked closely with habitat preservation initiatives in rivers, streams and tributaries—wherever there is freshwater flowing—to promote wildlife and clean up the area.

The boat's out of the water now, but pollution abatement is done when there's a big algal bloom.

MT: With the boat out of the water, what's the winter like?

O'Neill: We recently got more involved with fisheries management, becoming a voice for protecting certain fisheries like bunker. That's more of a federal process, but we are going to the meetings and having more of a presence.

Locally, we have made more of an effort to insert ourselves into discussions with county and town officials. We're reviewing the county sanitary code and trying to fight for the best regulations when it comes to septic tanks and sewage. We go over their policies and look at new amendments to see if there are positive changes.

MT: What did you find in reviewing these policies?

O'Neill: Tons of troubling information. One big issue is that none of the plans have called for a net reduction in nitrogen. We should be reducing nitrogen. Current proposals are saying that new developments must be treated better, which is great, but the current levels have already led to all of these problems. We need more effective ways to protect from nitrogen pollution.

MT: How can the public get involved?

O'Neill: Education programs. We partner with the Peconic Estuary Program to educate local high school students on environmental education. Citizen science programs are vital to preserving our bays and waterways.

MT: Why is this cause so important to you?

O'Neill: I work on the water, but spend a lot of my free time out there as well. But this isn't just for me. I want to make sure that this stays a traditional way of life for Long Islanders. If we lose [our waterways], then why do we live here and pay such high taxes? It's the one thing that makes Long Island, Long Island. If we can't go to the beach anymore, what's the point?

I hope to help preserve and protect the water for my family, and everyone on the island, for generations to come.