

Delaware Wildlands honors Martin for years of service

Retiring lands manager feted for efforts on behalf of nature

By Dennis Forney

dnf@capegazette.com

Peter Martin retired this year after more than three decades managing the Kent and Sussex County holdings of Delaware Wildlands Inc. The private organization, which has preserved and protected thousands of acres of significant natural areas in Delaware, honored Martin recently for his years of service.

Before the ceremony at Delaware Wildlands' Roman Fisher Farm on the edge of the Great Cypress Swamp in southern Sussex County, Martin spoke about farmer Chip West, who served as master of ceremonies. West's family has farmed land and hunted deer around and in the swamp for centuries.

"Chip calls the swamp his church," said Martin. "It's not for everyone, but I know what he means. It's a place where I feel right, where I feel comfortable."

After serving his country as a Navy captain, Martin - a decorated Vietnam veteran - went to work as an ecologist and property manager for Delaware Wildlands. Board Chairman Charles Gummey said the organization equipped Martin with a pickup truck and directions to their forest, marsh and swamp holdings. "His job was to plant trees, manage hunting leases, improve the ecology and remove

trash."

Gummey said Martin was resourceful at his job. "If he found a couch in a ditch in the swamp, he would haul it out into the middle of the road and then call DelDOT and ask them when they were going to come and remove the couch that was blocking the road."

Sustainable plan developed

Martin developed a sustainable forest plan for the Great Cypress Swamp, was instrumental in the effort to reintroduce wild turkeys into Delaware and the swamp, took a leadership role in having the swamp certified by the Quality Deer Management Association as the first such property in Delaware, and led the restoration effort for the Roman Fisher Farm. That effort includes the construction of a guest house and meeting building constructed largely with cypress and cedar boards milled from trees harvested from the swamp in keeping with a sustainable forest plan.

For more than a decade, Martin has championed the restoration of stands of bald cypress and Atlantic white cedars in the swamp. In the 18th and 19th centuries, most of those stands were harvested by European settlers and their succeeding generations primarily for the durable shakes and shingles that clad so many

homes in Sussex County.

Joe Hamilton of the Quality Deer Management Association said Martin has been involved in their efforts "every single step of the way since the late 1990s." He said preservation and restoration efforts in the Great Cypress Swamp benefit more than just deer hunters. "The prothonotary warblers, the bald cypresses, the white tails - they bring us all together. These efforts have had positive impacts on thousands of acres and on thousands of people. Ceremonies like this always take me to the nicest of places with the nicest of people," said Hamilton. "Some people have to die to get that combination."

Delaware Wildlands officials announced at the ceremony that the organization is naming the Roman Fisher Farm guest house the Peter S. Martin Guest House in his honor.

Chip West and Delaware Congressman John Carney - who get together each year on opening day of turkey season at the swamp - also spoke kindly of Martin's efforts. "Places like this and the efforts of people like Martin are good for the heart and the mind, the spirit and the whole body," said Carney.

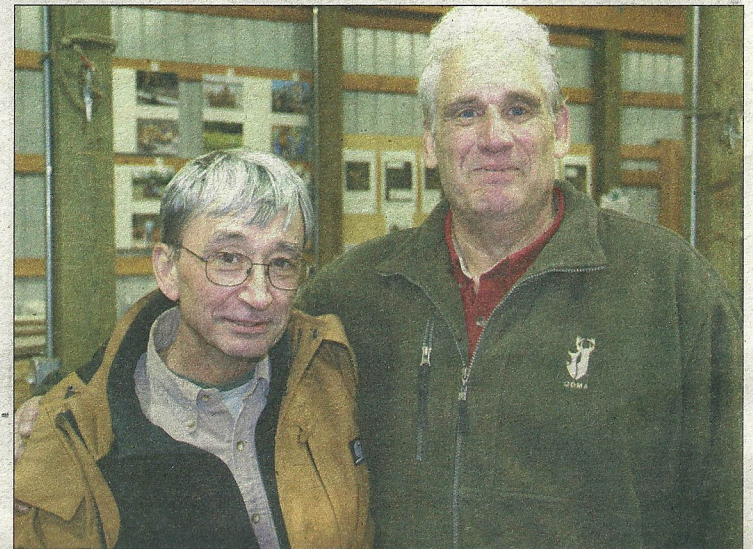
Martin's son Andrew has been working alongside his father for many years and is taking over as manager for Delaware Wildlands' southern holdings.

Unassuming as always, Martin accepted his awards and honors graciously. "It hasn't been a job for me, it's been a joy."



DENNIS FORNEY PHOTOS

PETER MARTIN SHOWS a plein air painting of bald cypress trees by Denise Dumont presented to him by board members of Delaware Wildlands. In the background is Kate Hackett, executive director of Delaware Wildlands.



Chip West, right, served as master of ceremonies for Peter Martin's retirement ceremony. He is shown with Martin before the festivities began.