

## Sister Island paradise

Owner gives land to Rideau Valley Conservation Foundation to preserve its natural setting

By TOM VAN DUSEN, OTTAWA SUN

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**Sister Island in Upper Rideau Lake was given to the public by its owner, Dr. Eva Furesz, who would like it to be used as a research destination. (Submitted photo)**

NEWBORO — Viewed from the water, it doesn't look like a prize catch. It's well-treed with five small cabins on it, but otherwise nondescript.

However, any island in Upper Rideau Lake, even if it's only an acre of land like this one, it's worth a small fortune to cottagers. And it also provides habitat for the Black Rat Snake, an at-risk species in the Rideau watershed, making it a gem for conservationists.

The Rideau Valley Conservation Foundation is

thankful that, rather than sell it to the highest bidder, the island's owner Dr. Eva Furesz decided to gift it to the people of Eastern Ontario in return for a fair market value tax receipt.

At Furesz's request, the amount of the receipt hasn't been released. Such gifts carry extra tax benefits that make them an attractive option for prospective donors, said Kristy Giles, conservation lands planner with the Rideau Valley Conservation Authority.

Furesz and family enjoyed 30 years of summer peace and quiet on what's legally known as Sister Island. But when the children grew up and moved away, Furesz found that maintaining the dock, cabins and paths had become too much of a burden.

She decided to dispose of it ... but she didn't want the natural character of her island paradise to be destroyed and she wanted to be able to continue visiting it.

That's why she decided to give it to the foundation, which has an active land procurement plan and established track record in managing donated parcels. The transaction took more than a year to finalize, terminating recently with

transfer of title.

Such transactions can cost the foundation up to \$15,000 in appraisal, surveying and legal fees, plus ongoing property taxes, maintenance, monitoring and signage expenses.

Some trusts and conservation groups only accept such gifts if they come with attached maintenance money, said authority spokesman Charles Billington, noting that the Rideau foundation has set up a fund to offset the cost of accepting lands on behalf of the public.

Market value aside, not all offers are accepted by the Rideau foundation. Sister Island — now informally referred to as Dr. Eva Furesz Natural Area — was assessed by Giles, who prepared a positive report on its environmental merits.

Islands are near the top of the list of lands coveted by the foundation which is interested in preserving ecologically sensitive and unique water-related parcels such as designated wetlands, shoreline and aquifer recharge areas.

Properties gifted in perpetuity allow for enhanced water quality and fish habitat protection through simple shoreline plantings and buffers, Giles said.

Topping up the natural value of “Eva’s island” is the documented presence of the Black Rat Snake which, although harmless, can grow to an intimidating eight feet in length.

While no black rat hibernacula — winter hibernation quarters — have been identified on the island, several individuals have been spotted, Giles explained.

The main purpose of the tiny acquisition is nature preservation.

Public access isn’t restricted, but it won’t be marketed either because high level of use could have a significant negative impact, Giles noted. The donor would also like to see the site become a research destination.

“I draw great satisfaction from knowing that my little island will remain as my family enjoyed it for so many years,” Furesz indicated, adding that the small piece of wilderness is “good for the soul.”