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Back to the land

Cultural Respect Agreement first in Eastern U.S.

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An historic agreement that will allow Native Americans to conduct their cultural practices on ancient native lands in Dennis was signed Monday between the Dennis Conservation Trust and the Native Land Conservancy Inc. based in Mashpee.

“It’s the first time since the Pilgrims landed on Cape Cod that we were welcomed back to an area we were disconnected from,” Ramona Peters, president of the conservancy, said at a signing ceremony for the Cultural Respect Agreement at the Sturgis Library in Barnstable. She said it has been awkward to make such a request from another group.

“We’ve kept to ourselves,” Peters said. “We’ve been busy surviving.”

The agreement is the first of its kind on land east of the Mississippi River, according to Mark Robinson, executive director of the Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts Inc, who has advised the conservancy since its founding in 2012 under Peters’ leadership, and helped draft the agreement.

The Dennis Conservation Trust voted recently to create the partnership with the Native Land Conservancy that will provide formal access to the trust’s 250 acres of marsh and dune edge land behind Chapin Beach and along Chase Garden Creek, Katherine Garofoli, director of the trust, said at the ceremony. “We’re very proud to be part of this.”

Robinson added that the estuary is a large piece of land and rich in natural resources, to which the land conservancy will have access. Carol Wynne, a member of the conservancy, called the agreement a “big step,” and said she is eager to explore the herbs and plants and other natural materials on the land.

“The estuary and barrier beach was a traditional place of gathering, ritual, ceremony and foraging by the indigenous people of Cape Cod, notably the sachemships of the Wampanoag Nation recognized in a 1670 atlas at Mattacheese and Nobsusset,” the conservation trust’s

press release stated. The agreement allows the Native Land Conservancy to conduct cultural practices, such as traditional spiritual ceremonies, seasonal celebrations, offerings and cultural education/interpretation for its members and invited guests “to honor the native people’s association with the property over thousands of years,” the release said.

At the signing, Peters said, “We are committed to an annual gathering for educational purposes and will invite the public and talk about the historic activities and how it was used.” She added that one of the native people’s favorite spiritual ceremonies is to give thanks and offerings, and to renew the commitment between human beings and living things.

Love Richardson and Shaman Brown, other members of the conservancy, said at the ceremony that their role is to preserve the land for the next generation. “We want to love it and conserve it for our children,” Brown said.

Joseph Masse, president of the Dennis Conservation Trust, was not able to be at the signing ceremony, but in a written statement said, “We admire what Ramona Peters and her native land trust is trying to accomplish. Their mission of ‘land rescue’ is broad, as it should be to include a larger vision of conservation and teachings and honor for the land.”

Other members of the conservation trust were present at the ceremony. Dr. Frank Dahlstrom said he hopes this first initiative is not the last. “I hope it starts the ball rolling,” he said.

Carole Bell, trust vice president and founding member, said she was too emotional to speak, but she humbly held out her hands to accept a gift of five wampum beads from Peters, who said they are to be returned in five years.

The agreement can be extended in five years. The Dennis Conservancy Trust has coordinated joint nature walks and educational opportunities with the Native Land Conservancy over the last two years.

The Native Land Conservancy is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the natural and cultural resources, habitats and ecosystems on lands generally in the Northeast. Its specific operating area extends beyond the Cape and Islands to the Merrimack and Blackstone Rivers, traditionally the greater homeland of the Wampanoag federation. Membership is open to all, but its board of directors is purposefully limited to natives, though not necessarily Wampanoag.

The conservancy is the first native-led land conservation trust east of the Mississippi River, according to its research. Most native land trusts operate in California and the new one in Dennis is modeled on similar easements there.

