

A shared gift and a shared responsibility - Rhode Island's forests

Those of us who care about and manage the region's woodlands have often heard the statistic that Rhode Island is still heavily forested, with about 55% of the state still in woodland cover. Add to this the canopy that presents itself in Google Earth from fifty thousand feet above our suburban and urban areas, and one would think that there's plenty of woods to provide wildlife habitat, protect water quality, yield forest products like firewood and lumber, filter the air and produce oxygen, and support outdoor recreation and tourism.

Despite that image, the ability of our woodlands to sustain our landscape and provide all those benefits is threatened by their continued loss and by fragmentation of the canopy. The rate at which the construction of roads, subdivisions and other human development continue to break up large, contiguous blocks of forest into an increasing number of smaller pieces is alarming. Fragmentation divides up the resource, and these islands of woodland provide limited benefits.

If you're from an urban area, the woodlands beyond I-295 may seem endless, as they must have seemed to the colonists who arrived here in the 1600's. Yet, by 1800, much of our woodlands were gone, cleared for farms, cut for masts, lumber for houses, and firewood, or burned. They've grown back, but now they're being permanently lost to development, where the forest will not grow back.

We all see development happening, a cut here and a cut there. Death by a thousand cuts as the old saying goes. Commercial development in wooded areas, a proposed power plant in the middle of large conservation areas, and the latest threat: poorly-sited renewable energy projects that clears large swaths of woodlands.

As climate change impacts progress, and sea levels rise, the retention of large, intact forested landscapes becomes increasingly important. The Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4) has acknowledged this, noting the "critical role" of forest retention as a "key mitigation strategy" in its *2016 Rhode Island Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Plan*.

As the threats continue to mount, what can we do to protect this forested landscape? First, we must recognize its value and prioritize actions to prevent additional loss. Most decision-makers and Rhode Islander's agree that our woodlands are beneficial, and are good things to have around. But a lack of awareness as to the limits of this resource is a prescription for disaster.

The Rhode Island Woodland Partnership (RIWP) is a coalition of educators, scientists, policy makers, preservationists, and business leaders. RIWP believes that preventing the loss and fragmentation of Rhode Island's woodland is critical to protecting all our other natural resources, such as clean drinking water and the other social and economic values they provide.

We encourage and promote the protection of the remaining forest cover in Rhode Island through the application of policies that discourage further forest fragmentation and encourage development patterns that conserve the landscape values of larger, unbroken tracts of land.

We implore thought and community leaders at all levels to take actions to protect our remaining woodlands from loss and fragmentation by poorly-planned and poorly-sited development. Each of us should take a leadership role to make sure that no state or local policy results in and/or encourages the loss of woodland. State Guide Plans and Town Comprehensive Plans have been developed and must be followed by state law.

In every election cycle since 2004 nearly 65% of Rhode Island voters approved open space, recreational and agricultural bond referendums. This is a statistic that state leaders should take to heart. Rhode Islanders love their special places, and protecting them is a fundamental responsibility that we all share.

The full text of the Woodland Partnership's Position Paper on the Loss of RI's Forests, its Strategic Plan and its Position Paper on Climate Change, is available at the following web address:

<http://rhodeislandwoods.uri.edu/ri-woodland-partnership/>

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