



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Protecting Land Resources in Rhode Island

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Open space protection is vital to our health, our economy, and our well-being. Open space that surrounds waterways helps keep our drinking water clean and protects us from floods. Wildlife areas provide habitat for animals and offer endless opportunities to learn and explore. Forested areas clean the air we breathe. Parks offer a place to rest, play and learn. Working farms and forests provide essential agricultural products. Historic areas allow us to remember our past and help us connect with each other across the generations. Wide, open landscapes help us feel free and refreshed.

Unfortunately, demand for commercial and residential development threatens Rhode Island's remaining fragile resource areas. Left unchecked many areas of the state could be built out in the next 10 to 20 years. In an effort to protect the remaining open spaces, the State has embarked on an aggressive campaign to accelerate land protection efforts. In 2000, the state set a goal of protecting 35,000 acres by 2010. Since then Rhode Island has protected more than 12,000 acres through acquisition, conservation easements and development rights. In total, about 150,000 of Rhode Island's 700,000 acres are protected. That figure includes park lands, wildlife management areas and farmland.

DEM is the lead state agency for land protection. The Department provides financial and technical assistance and also coordinates with other state, federal and non-profit partners. With



Since 2001, partners have protected more than 12,000 acres of land including the 968-acre Shepard property (above) in West Greenwich.

limited state resources, partners play a significant role. The Nature Conservancy and local land trusts play a significant role in protecting land. The number of local land trusts has increased significantly from fifteen in 1992 to forty-six today.

With a state guide plan as the foundation, the Department and these entities partners identify and preserve key open space areas. Priorities include farmland, forests, critical water quality and habitat protection areas, and land contiguous to existing greenways and greenspaces. Funding for

open space protections comes from a number of sources including bonds, both state and municipal, transfer taxes – both Block Island and Little Compton assess special transfer fees on real estate transactions to support open space preservation efforts, municipal capital budgets and private donations.

Skyrocketing property values have stressed these funding sources, however, public support for preservation of open space continues to remain strong. Local communities, such as West Greenwich which passed a \$8 million local bond issue in April of 2006 to protect the 1800 acre Tillinghast Pond Management Area and Jamestown, which last month passed a \$3.5 million bond issues with a unanimous vote to preserve two highly visible farms in Town, have been shining examples of the real force behind land conservation. This force is the citizens of the State of Rhode Island who want to preserve their heritage, their landscapes and their land for future generations.

With the Nature Conservancy as the lead, the Pawcatuck Borderlands Project provides a great example of how numerous partners have teamed up to preserve a critical open space area. The Borderlands is a 136,000-acre critical forest and watershed area that encompasses parts of 10 communities along the southeastern and southwestern CT-RI border. The area is the largest unfragmented greenspace between Boston and New York. (A satellite view of the Pawcatuck Borderlands at night is the only strip of darkness between Washington D.C. and Boston, Massachusetts). It includes abundant wildlife ranging from bears to songbirds, hardwood forests, pitch pine woodlands, wetlands and several rivers.

Forty percent of the area is protected by the Pachaug State Forest in Connecticut and the Arcadia Management Area in Rhode Island. Another 1800 acres has been preserved thanks to the efforts of the Nature Conservancy and numerous partners, including DEM, the Town of West Greenwich, the RI Department of Transportation, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the USDA's Forest Legacy Program. This fall, West Greenwich and all RI residents can enjoy the benefits of the acquisition with numerous fall activities, including kayak tours on Tillinghast Pond, shore fishing on the pond, and hikes on the numerous trails throughout the area.

Interviews:

Lisa Primiano, Supervisor, DEM's Land Acquisition Program, talked about the benefits of protecting open space and state efforts to accelerate land acquisition.

Kevin Essington, Program Director, Borderlands, The Nature Conservancy, talked about the Borderlands and upcoming fall activities.



DEM Land Acquisition Supervisor, Lisa Primiano, talks with Channel 10 reporter R.J. Heim.