

# THE VALUE OF RHODE ISLAND FORESTS

A PROJECT OF THE RHODE ISLAND FOREST CONSERVATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
& THE RHODE ISLAND TREE COUNCIL



Audubon Society of Rhode Island



Acadia Management Area



Roger Williams Park, Providence



Durfee Management Area

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rhode Island's forests and trees may seem like a green backdrop to our state landscape, but they are in fact hard at work generating a wide range of services and values. We depend on forests for the clean air we breathe and the wood we use. Forests are a place where humans and native wildlife can live and thrive by providing habitats for animals and livelihoods for humans. They also offer watershed protection, prevent soil erosion and mitigate climate change. Forest conservation brings economic benefits to Rhode Island cities and towns. The forest and wood products sector generated nearly 2,500 jobs with \$408 million in gross sales in 2016, while forest-based outdoor recreation contributes over \$720 million annually to Rhode Island's economy. Funded by a grant from the US Forest Service, this report outlines the benefits Rhode Island's forests provide and offers a range of potential strategies to encourage forest conservation.

## STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING FOREST CONSERVATION

Conserving forestland is a forward-looking investment in our state's future. A suite of adaptable strategies can be used to incorporate conservation principles into decision-making that impacts forestland.

- **Dedicate Funding to Forest Conservation and Management.** Strengthening or creating federal, state, and local sources of funding for forest conservation will allow more effective forest conservation programs and policies to be implemented.
- **Support Forest Acquisition for Conservation.** Forest acquisition is the most direct way of retaining forestland and preventing its conversion to other land uses. While funding is limited and often competitive, many sources and mechanisms are available including conservation easements and Regional Conservation Partnerships (RCPs).
- **Incentivize Forest Conservation Assistance & Stewardship.** Building participation in Rhode Island's Farm, Forest, and Open Space (FFOS) tax program will increase opportunity for private forests, farms, and open land to be assessed at current use values rather than higher values appropriate for developed land.
- **Incorporate Forest Conservation into Land Use Planning & Permitting.** Using "smart growth" principles, planners at the state and municipal levels can create communities that exist sustainably within their landscapes, are healthy and vibrant, and are accessible to everyone.
- **Support Market-Based Incentives for Forest Conservation.** A number of conservation programs target private funding. In addition, carbon offsets are an emerging finance tool that provides an opportunity for forest landowners to be compensated for making long-term commitments to storing carbon on this lands.
- **Actively Manage Rural and Urban Forestland to Maximize Forest Value.** Engaging landowners and other groups in active forest management practices can simultaneously build understanding of forests, support forest health, and support land conservation.
- **Provide Education & Technical Assistance to Forest Landowners.** Workshops and seminars hosted by state, local, and non-profit organizations are needed to engage individuals and community leaders in the understanding of Rhode Island's important forest resources, which should be properly managed for a broad range of benefits for both humans and the environment.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Tillinghast Management Area



Trustom Pond, South Kingstown



Peace & Plenty Park, Providence



Big River Management Area

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## THE CURRENT STATE OF RHODE ISLAND'S FORESTLAND

- More than half of Rhode Island — nearly 370,000 acres — is covered by forests.
- About 125,000 acres of forestland are permanently protected from development.
- Core forests are blocks of forested land greater than 250 acres in size. An estimated 213,000 acres, or 58% of the forested land in the state, is considered core forest. Such large, intact forests have high conservation value.
- Rhode Island is notable for its 286,000 acres of urban and community land with 52% overall tree cover. Rhode Island is in the top 5 of all U.S. states for urban and community land as a percent of total state land area.
- Most of forestland is privately owned. Individual properties are typically small, but they collectively control about 68% of the state's forestland.

## THREATS TO RHODE ISLAND'S FORESTS

- Forest fragmentation and conversion to other land uses are the greatest threats to Rhode Island's forests. Nearly 2,000 acres of core forest were converted to other land uses between 2011 and 2018.
- Invasive species – non-native, introduced organisms that have the ability to outcompete native species – can overwhelm the forest, especially when an area is fragmented, and create negative ecological and economic impacts.
- High densities of white-tailed deer eating tree seedlings and saplings influence the composition of species that are able to naturally regenerate.
- Climate change is also exerting complex pressures on forests, including an increase in heavy precipitation, changes in growing season, and increased numbers of forest insects and pests.

## THE BENEFITS OF RHODE ISLAND'S FORESTS

- Rhode Island's forests provide significant air quality benefits to the state by absorbing hazardous air pollution. Rhode Island's trees provide more than \$30 million annually in pollution removal benefits.
- Clean water is essential for drinking, safe recreation, a thriving economy, and healthy wildlife habitat, and forests play an important role in keeping Rhode Island's waterways safe and clean. More than 80% of Rhode Island's population relies on reservoirs surrounded by mostly forested watersheds for drinking water.
- Rhode Island's forestland sequester 500,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere each year, offsetting the annual emissions of more than 100,000 passenger vehicles each year.
- Forests support many of the outdoor recreational activities that Rhode Islanders enjoy, such as hiking, hunting, birdwatching, and camping.
- Trees and forests protect human communities from dangerous urban heat, flooding concerns, and the frontline impacts of climate change.
- The forest as a whole, and many resources within the forest, have cultural value and many of Rhode Island's rural communities are fundamentally characterized by surrounding forestland.
- Rhode Island's forests provide unique habitats that support thousands of wildlife species and close to 2,900 plants.
- Forest conservation brings economic benefits to Rhode Island cities and towns. The forest and wood products sector generated nearly 2,500 jobs with \$408 million in gross sales in 2016. Forest-based recreational activities annually contribute close to \$375 million to Rhode Island's economy and support 1,500 jobs. Fishing, hunting and wildlife-watching play an important role in Rhode Island's forest-based economy, with an estimated 503,000 residents and visitors participating each year, bringing \$348 million to the state's economy.

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