

Structure of the new Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program

Agency Mission

Section 17 of the Rhode Island State Constitution states, "...it shall be the duty of the general assembly to provide for the conservation of the air, land, water, plant, animal, mineral and other natural resources of the state, and to adopt all means necessary and proper by law to protect the natural environment of the people of the state by providing adequate resource planning for the control and regulation of the use of the natural resources of the state and for the preservation, regeneration and restoration of the natural environment of the state." In RIGL 42-122 (Natural Areas Protection Act of 1993), it states the purpose of the Act is, "To provide the highest level of protection to the state's most environmentally sensitive natural areas... To promote the health and welfare of the people of Rhode Island by promoting the preservation of areas of unique natural interest for scientific, educational, recreational, cultural, and scenic purposes as a link to the state's heritage... To allow significant public and privately owned lands of critical environmental concern to be designated as natural area preserves." In accordance with the State Constitution and RIGL 42-122, the mission of the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program is to find, monitor, and protect native biodiversity, old growth forests, rare forest ecosystems, and rare and endangered natural species in the state of Rhode Island.

Agency Description

The Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program shall be charged with protecting the state's natural ecology. Among its duties shall be to create the Natural Areas Preserve system to protect the state's Natural Heritage Areas, Old Growth Forests, and any other environmentally sensitive area in its natural state in accordance with RIGL 42-122. The Natural Heritage Program will conduct sitework before forestry operations and public land developments to ensure no Old Growth Forests, Rare Forest ecosystems, or endangered species are harmed. The Natural Heritage Program will inventory all Old Growth Forests in the state. The Natural Heritage Program shall analyze and develop science-based solutions to major challenges facing Rhode Island's native forests including loss of old forests and native biodiversity, invasives, tree diseases, and Climate Change. This agency shall investigate the problem of wildfires and find the most effective and least expensive methods using science-proved, unbiased solutions.

Why there needs to be a Natural Heritage Program and why it is necessary for it to be separate from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM)

Currently, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) is expected to balance economic, recreational, and ecological interests. However, for decades, the first two priorities have dominated DEM policy and are given precedence for funding while ecological concerns have been neglected. In 1993, the Natural Areas Protection Act of 1993 was passed into law, and required DEM to create Natural Area Preserves to protect Rhode Island's most environmentally sensitive areas in their natural state. Areas that could include rare forest ecosystems and habitats where endangered species live, Old Growth Forests, and Natural Heritage Areas. However, for the past 30 years, DEM has never designated even one Natural Area Preserve. Also, none of the Natural Heritage Areas which were identified by the old Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program are protected either. DEM continues to ignore RIGL 42-122 because leaving forests alone in their natural state would prevent them from using their only "technique" of managing the forest, which is logging that helps the timber industry.

In 2007, DEM along with the Nature Conservancy defunded the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program, which was the only state entity devoted to protecting native biodiversity and rare habitats. So, for the past 16 years, there has been no Natural Heritage Program in Rhode Island or anything resembling it in the state government. Meanwhile, DEM continues giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Wildlife Management Institute, a non-profit that promotes clearcutting of forests for unnatural early successional habitats which hunters prefer.

In FY 2022, DEM gave \$1,178,687.35 to the Wildlife Management Institute.

In 2022 and 2023, DEM opposed the Old Growth Forest Preservation Act H7066 and the Old Growth Forest Protection Act H5344 which would require DEM to protect Old Growth Forests which have a higher degree of native biodiversity. The latter bill would also require DEM to designate a minimum number of Natural Area Preserves in 2023 to finally get the Natural Areas Preserve system established. DEM claimed both bills would prevent them from managing their land, by managing they mean logging which helps the timber industry.

In 2022, DEM combined the Division of Agriculture and Division of Forest Environment into one Division, the Division of Agriculture and Forest Environment. This is in accordance with the old European based belief that forests are a crop and should be shaped by humans through logging. However, before the colonial period, most of Rhode Island's forests were wild, unmanaged by humans, and before the Native Americans arrived, all the forests were wild. The original wild forests contained far more biodiversity because of them being shaped by nature rather than humans. There are species in Rhode Island today that need natural wild forests, not managed tree farms, to survive. Otherwise, the Old Growth Forests that dominated Rhode Island's pre-colonial landscape, and the species that depended on them, will never return.

All these actions and inactions by DEM show how they have neglected the state's natural ecology. DEM never created the Natural Area Preserves in accordance with RIGL 42-122 because it doesn't help the timber industry or hunter groups. DEM defunded the Natural Heritage Program while continuing to fund programs that promote early successional habitat that damage mature and Old Growth natural forests, and which helps the timber industry and hunter groups despite it not being reflective of the state's natural history. DEM gives a large amount of money to the Wildlife Management Institute which helps the timber industry and hunter groups rather than fund a Natural Heritage Program that promotes biodiversity and ecology. DEM also doesn't understand the state's natural ecology or wildfire history and does not believe in unmanaged wild natural forests which are needed for native biodiversity, wildfire resistance, and Climate Change resilience.

DEM prioritizes what it believes to be the state's economic and recreational interests solely through logging. Logging and especially clearcuts harm the state's economic interests by degrading water and soil quality, by eliminating biodiversity, by destroying scenic beauty and recreational value, and by contributing to Climate Change. A small number of Rhode Islanders benefit economically from logging or hunting on state lands. The vast majority of Rhode Islanders want to recreate in natural forest areas, not clearcuts. Currently, Rhode Islanders have to travel to other states, such as New York to enjoy the natural beauty of protected public wild forests. Currently, Rhode Island has zero acres of protected natural areas on state lands. That is why we need a separate Natural Heritage Program that would prioritize natural ecology first and foremost, and the economic and recreational benefits of natural areas, which are much greater than logged areas. A Natural Heritage Program that would allow scientists to do the work necessary to protect the state's nature ecology without political pressure from DEM.

Staff

The Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program shall have a small staff including a Forest Ecologist/Biologist with knowledge of the state's natural history, a soil scientist, and an ISA Certified Arborist which is the most highly certified arborist.

Unclassified

- Director- The Administrator for the Natural Heritage Program shall be its Director who shall be appointed by the Governor with the consent of the Senate.

Classified (Appointed by Director)

- Fiscal/Grants Manager- Oversees the Finances for the Natural Heritage Program and is responsible for securing grants.
- Office Clerk/data control clerk
- ISA Certified Arborist
- Soil scientist
- Biologist/Ecologist
- Attorney with experience in Environmental law.

Funding

The Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program would be funded by the Rhode Island General Assembly and be part of the Governor's annual budget.

- Director- \$90,000
- Fiscal/Grants Manager \$67,000
- Office Clerk/data control clerk \$40,000
- ISA Certified Arborist \$55,000
- Soil Scientist \$85,000
- Biologist/Ecologist \$85,000
- Attorney with experience in Environmental law \$100,000

Total salaries- \$522,000

Benefits- Abt. \$344,520 including FICA, Health Benefits, Payroll Accrual, Retiree Health, and Retirement.

Operating Supplies and Expenses- \$60,000

Total Budget Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program - \$926,520

Rhode Island is the only state in the northeast with no Natural Heritage Program or anything resembling it.

- Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program [MassWildlife's Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program | Mass.gov](#)
- New Hampshire Natural Heritage Bureau [Natural Heritage Bureau | NH Division of Forests and Lands](#)
- Vermont Wildlife Diversity Program (Formerly called Nongame and Natural Heritage Program) [Natural Heritage Inventory | Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department \(vtfishandwildlife.com\)](#)
- Maine Natural Areas Program [Maine Natural Areas Program Home Page](#)
- Connecticut Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program [The Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program \(ct.gov\)](#)
- New York Natural Heritage Program [Home - NY Natural Heritage Program \(nynhp.org\)](#)
- New Jersey Natural Heritage Program [NJDEP | Database of Rare Biodiversity | Office of Natural Lands Management](#)
- Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program [Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program \(state.pa.us\)](#)
- Delaware Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program [Conservation Programs - DNREC Alpha \(delaware.gov\)](#)
- Maryland Natural Heritage Program [Natural Heritage Program \(maryland.gov\)](#)
- Virginia Natural Heritage Program [Virginia Natural Heritage Program](#)