



Save Rhode Island's Forests

By Nathan Cornell

President of the Rhode Island Old Growth Tree Society

and

Carl Ross

No State-Owned Forestland is Protected from Logging!

- “Currently, Rhode Island laws do not provide protection for forestland apart from existing wetland protection laws (Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management- DEM).”

[10-12-2023 Special Legislative Commission to Evaluate and Provide Recommendations on Proper Forest Management for Fire Prevention \(devosvideo.com\)](https://www.devosvideo.com/10-12-2023-Special-Legislative-Commission-to-Evaluate-and-Provide-Recommendations-on-Proper-Forest-Management-for-Fire-Prevention)

- Rhode Island is the only state in New England where there are no protected Wildlands (forests protected in their natural state from logging) on public land including state-owned and municipal owned land.

[Wildlands in New England: Past, Present, and Future - Wildlands & Woodlands \(wildlandsandwoodlands.org\)](https://wildlandsandwoodlands.org/wildlands-in-new-england-past-present-and-future)

- Therefore, all forests on public land including Old Growth Forests and the state’s Natural Heritage Areas are open to logging.

What is an Old Growth Forest?

Old Growth Forests are forests which have unique characteristics that develop over time as the forest naturally ages.

These characteristics include:

- A group of old trees growing in a forest environment.
 - Balding bark.
 - Stag-headed tree crowns.
 - Tree snags.
 - Coarse woody debris on the forest floor.
 - An abundance of lichen and moss.
 - A great diversity of native tree species.
 - Pit and mound topography, and undisturbed soils.
-



Why Old Growth Forests are Important

- “Old-growth forests not only have a high degree of structural diversity, but also contain a wide variety of tree species, herbaceous plants, insects, mosses and fungi, and deep, carbon-rich soil with an associated soil microbiome.”

[Forest-clearing to create early-successional habitats: Questionable benefits, significant costs \(harvard.edu\)](#)

- “Carbon storage is typically greatest in old forests and disproportionately in the largest trees... forests can continue to accumulate carbon for many decades if undisturbed.”

[ClimateForestryCommitteeReport_2023.pdf \(harvard.edu\)](#)



RI Species that Live in Older Forests


(Pictures from National Audubon Society)




- Old Growth Forests (late-successional habitat) are more biodiverse than younger forests (early-successional habitat).
- Some Rhode Island species that primarily live in late successional habitat include:
 - Cerulean Warbler- RI Endangered Species
 - Wood Thrush
 - Pileated Woodpecker
 - Prothonotary Warbler

Are there Old Growth Forests in Rhode Island?

- **YES!** While very rare, Old Growth Forests 150+ years old have been identified in Rhode Island exhibiting numerous Old Growth Forest characteristics.
- These Old Growth Forests include the 250-year-old Oakland Forest in Portsmouth and at least two 150+ year old forests in the Great Swamp in South Kingstown which have been confirmed through tree coring.



Oakland Forest (OGFN)



Great Swamp Forest

Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program (1978-2007)

- The Natural Heritage Program created and maintained the Natural Heritage Database which is the rare and endangered species list in Rhode Island.
- The Natural Heritage Program conducted environmental reviews before developments on state land, and upon request, private land, to make sure no rare or endangered species would be affected.
- The **Natural Heritage Program was never properly funded or well staffed.**
- **Since DEM defunded the Program in 2007, no state agency has been doing the important work of the Natural Heritage Program for 17 years!**

Natural Areas Protection Act of 1993

RIGL 42-122

- This piece of legislation passed into law by the Rhode Island General Assembly **required DEM to designate Natural Area Preserves** “to provide the highest levels of protection to the state’s most environmentally sensitive natural areas.”

webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/Statutes/TITLE42/42-122/INDEX.HTM

DEM never complied with the Natural Areas Protection Act of 1993

- **DEM NEVER EVEN DESIGNATED ONE NATURAL AREA PRESERVE** in the **32 years** of the **law's existence!**

[1990s Law Designed to Build Natural Area Preserves Instead Created a Mystery - ecoRI News](#)

- **None** of Rhode Island's most environmentally sensitive areas are **being protected** and **ALL FORESTS ON STATE LAND ARE OPEN TO LOGGING!**
- DEM as of 2025 has **NOT** created any Natural Area Preserves.

DEM's Division of Forest Environment continues to get funded to CLEARCUT State Forests

- While the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program was defunded in 2007, DEM's Division of Forest Environment, now the Division of Agriculture and Forest Environment, proceeded to log thousands of acres of state-owned forestland.



(2024 DEM CLEARCUT in the Arcadia Management Area)



More Aerial Photos of DEM Clearcuts

- The first aerial photo in the top right is the 2020 Arcadia Management Area clearcut by DEM which consisted of 195 acres, mostly in a Natural Heritage Area where rare and endangered species live.
- The second aerial photo on the bottom right is the 35-acre 2015 Nicholas Farm State Management Area DEM clearcut.

[State Land Stewardship: Forest Thinning and Timber Harvests | Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management \(ri.gov\)](#)

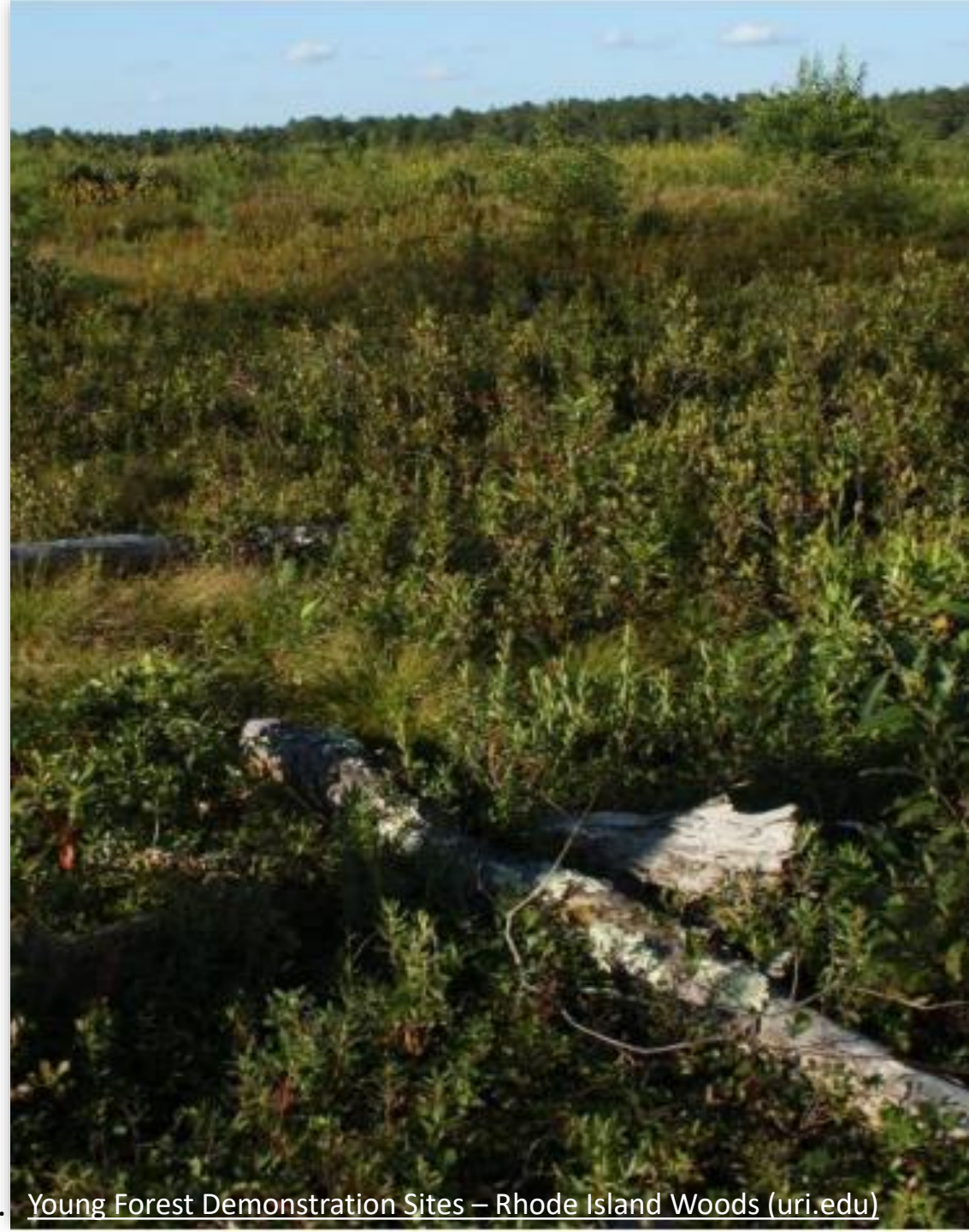
[Young Forest Demonstration Sites – Rhode Island Woods \(uri.edu\)](#)



How LOGGING HURTS, Not HELPS, Forests

Logging natural forests:

- Causes loss of biodiversity.
- Causes invasives to thrive on the forest floor.
- Degrades water and soil quality.
- Creates tick habitat.
- Makes forests more susceptible to fires.
- Causes the vast majority of the carbon stored in a forest to be released into the atmosphere as air pollution contributing to Climate Change.
- **In clearcuts, there is no forest left!**





Old Growth Forests Managed by Nature

Meanwhile, Old Growth Forests:

- Contain more native biodiversity.
- Have very few if any invasives.
- Improve water quality.
- Protect soil.
- Are more resistant to fires.
- Store more carbon than second growth forests making them important **Carbon Sinks.**

Largest RI Wildfire in over 60 years started in a Clearcut

- The 2023 Queen's River Preserve Fire, the largest RI wildfire in over 60 years, started in a Clearcut created by The Nature Conservancy and NRCS.
-



2011 Before Clearcut

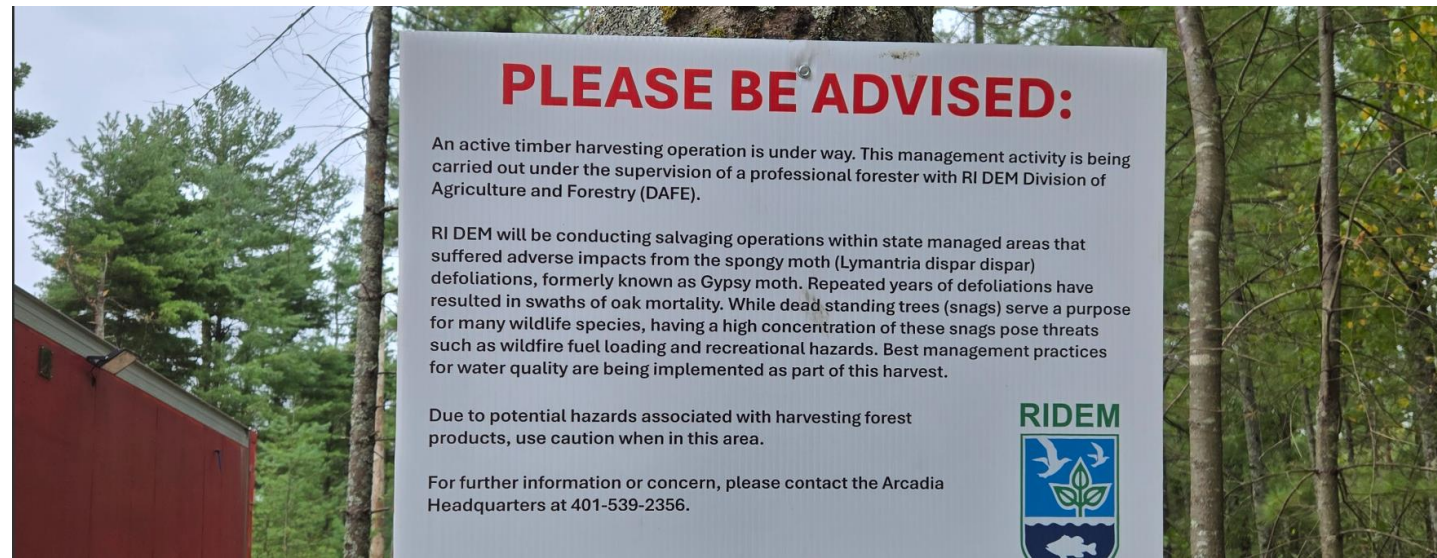


2014 after first Clearcut



2018 After 2nd Clearcut

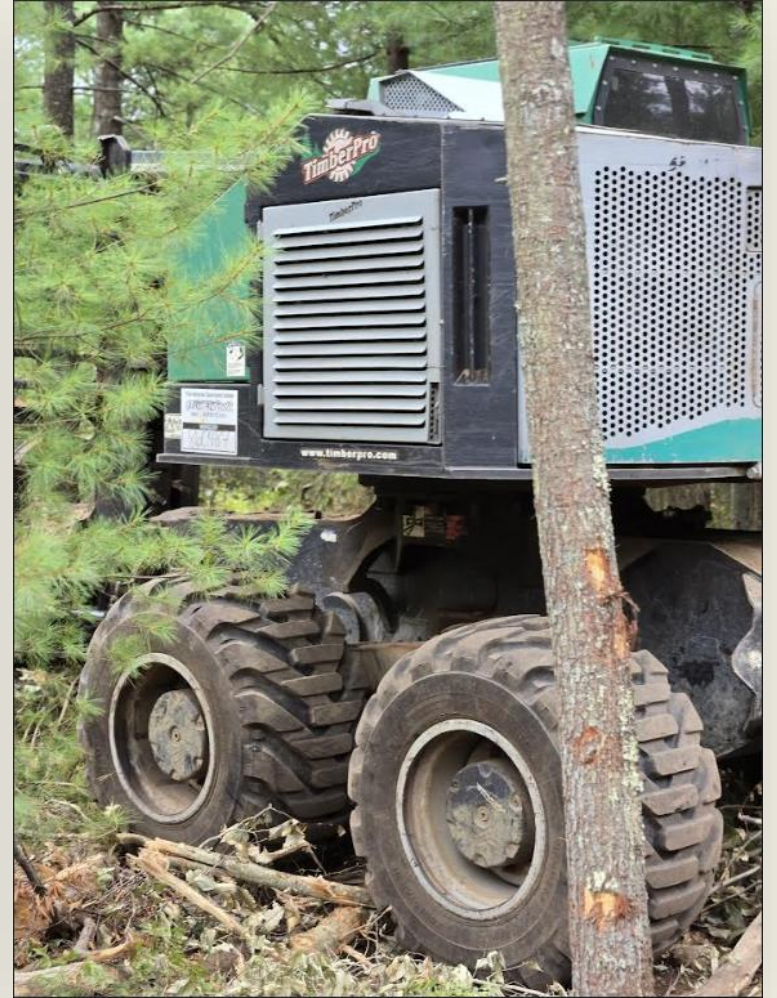
Current DEM Logging Project off Dawley Park Rd.



Current DEM
Logging Project
off Dawley
Park Rd.



Current DEM Logging Project off Dawley Park Rd.



2026 Old Growth Forest Protection Act

- **Prohibits Clearcutting of Forests** on state-owned land.
- **Prohibits logging in Old Growth Forests** on state-owned and municipal owned land.
- **Prohibits logging in the Natural Area Preserves.**
- **Brings back the RI Natural Heritage Program** to once again **identify, monitor, and protect native biodiversity,** including rare and endangered species, because no state agency is currently doing that work.
- The **Natural Heritage Program** would be given the **authority to designate and manage Natural Area Preserves** on state land since DEM has failed to do this.
- The new **Natural Heritage Program** would be **required to inventory Forests** before **Logging operations on state land.**

What if We Do Nothing?

- Rhode Island will lose its Old Growth Forests and Natural Heritage Areas
- Rhode Island's Rare and Endangered Species will not survive.

The Old Growth Forest Protection Act would be the most important forest and native biodiversity legislation in Rhode Island's history.





What you can do?

Email your legislators to ask them to support and co-sponsor the Old Growth Forest Protection Act bill.

Walk with Legislators through DEM Clearcut this Saturday, September 27th, at 1:30 p.m.

Location: Arcadia Management Area at the north end of Frosty Hollow Rd. West Greenwich, RI



Thank you

Email with any questions or comments, or if you
want to join the Old Growth Tree Society.

ncornell.ogts@gmail.com

saveriforests.org