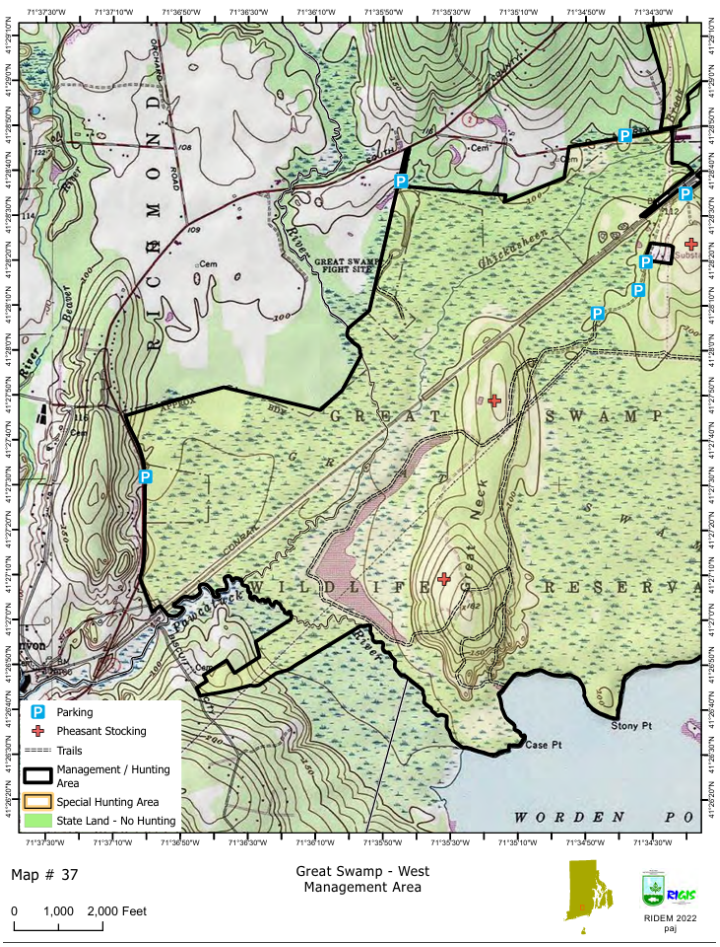
Why we should worry about management of the Great Swamp

The recent hubbub over the proposed logging project in the Great Swamp Wildlife Reservation (GSWR) has given the public a peak behind the curtain as to how DEM has managed one of southern New England's largest freshwater wetland ecosystems. The 32-acre logging project proposed in 2025 is just one more of the dozens of such projects conducted at the GSWR over the past 60+ years. But that history is unfamiliar to most people, and it should be understood before making judgements on the validity of any additional management activities.

First, let's take a look at the wide view. The USGS topographic map below shows the boundary of the GWSR in black. Note that the wetland complex extends beyond the reservation property lines – the several hundred acres above the northwest corner of Worden Pond and south of the Pacatuck River is primarily old growth red maple swamp.



Wildlife management has been conducted at the Great Swamp since around 1960, the first and most significant project being construction of a mile-long dike to create a waterfowl impoundment. This feature is clearly evident on the map as the large purple “L” west of Great Neck, an island of dry upland in the middle of the Swamp where most of the management for upland game species occurs. The recent view from Bing Maps clearly shows the degree of management that has transpired on Great Neck since the 60’s.

(2025 aerial)

The project in dispute is located in the center- right section of Great Neck, and the question is, why are folks objecting to a logging project that is proposed in an area that has been repeatedly subjected to multiple logging projects over the past 60+ years? The simple answer is, after 60 years we should know better.

Today, we understand that creating habitats for a few select species requires the destruction of natural ecosystems that contain thousands of species. We know from aerial photos taken before 1960 that the portion of the Great Swamp where the dike and impoundment would be built was forested, much of it part of the same old growth red maple forest that exists today south of the dike. Certainly, a wetland alteration on the scale of the Great Swamp impoundment would not be considered acceptable today.

Upland forests do not have the same legal protections afforded wetlands. Wetland laws explain to us the values of wetlands that need to be protected. Flood control, groundwater recharge, wildlife habitat, . Because there are no similar laws protecting forests people assume there is less value to retaining forests, especially in comparison to the value of lumber.

Great Neck represents a relatively small but significant tract of upland in the midst of a great wetland complex, enhancing biodiversity with unique habitats at the interface of upland and wetland. It is likely that forest clearing by humans occurred at Great Neck before European colonization,

and some might argue that creating fields for wildlife is simply a continuation of past practices.

However, we must not overestimate the impact wildlife managers have had in facilitating the introduction of invasive species into the Great Swamp. In the 1960s many plants recognized as invasive today, including multiflora rose, autumn olive, and were commonly planted in wildlife management areas. At the Great Swamp, fields become so overgrown with invasives that bulldozing is needed to clear them.

Great Neck also has added cultural significance as the most likely location of the Great Swamp Massacre. On December 19, 1675, a force of English colonists attacked Narragansett tribal members at their fort in the Great Swamp and killed more than 600 warriors and an equal number of women and children. To this day the exact location of the massacre has been disputed, although there is general consensus the site was not at the location of the monument erected in 1906. (Look closely at the topo for the "fight site" in the northeast corner of the GSMR).

An article by Kevin Padula (https://smallstatebighistory.com/the-search-for-the-site-of-the-great-swamp-massacre/) reviewed the evidence for the location of the massacre and cites one historical account:

The Fort was raised upon a Kind of Island of five or six acres of rising Land in the midst of a swamp; the sides of it were made of Pallisadoes set up right, the which was compassed about with a Hedg of almost a rod Thickness.

George M. Bodge, *Soldiers in King Philip's War*

The piece of "rising land" that has raised the most interest from archaeologists is Great Neck, the southern end rising to a point more than 150 feet above the surrounding swamp. Padula reports that when Great Neck was excavated in 1959 by professional anthropologists, "they found nearly 2,000 pieces of bone, pottery, sea shells, ornaments and stones. Then, in 1993 when a more complete archaeological study of the Great Swamp was conducted by members of the Public Archaeology Survey Team, they discovered some of the most powerful evidence to date…the teams inspected all of the plowed fields within the Great Swamp Wildlife

Reservation, nineteen in total" and "one in particular yielded artifacts that might finally indicate the location of the Great Swamp Fight."

Padula adds, "the exact location of these findings has been kept a secret by the team for the purpose of preservation, but they have disclosed that it is not at the site of the memorial." He then adds, "it is reasonable for one to expect even more research to be done considering what the monument means to the surviving Narragansett tribe today."

When the Great Swamp Wildlife Reservation was created in the 1960s there was little thought given to the detrimental impacts of management activities. There were no concerns about climate change, biodiversity loss, ecosystem services, or indigenous people's values. Today, more people are seeking answers to these critical issues, but natural resource managers continue to ignore them. Even worse, projects are greenwashed with absurd claims that logging can ameliorate climate change and improve biodiversity.

A 2022 paper by Caitlin Littlefield and Tony D'Amato at the University of Vermont, entitled ….suggests that logging of Northern hardwood forests to provide early successional wildlife habitats is an acceptable trade-off to retaining the forest for carbon sequestration and storage. Since publication, the conclusions of this paper have been widely cited to support logging projects throughout the Northeast.

But their idea is flawed. The trade-off, wildlife vs. carbon, is too simplistic and does not take into account the other values of retaining intact forests, nor does it address the detrimental impacts of harvesting trees – increased runoff and erosion into wetlands, soil damage, loss of forest species diversity, and spread of invasives. A lot more to think about than what the good ole boys did in 1960.

Management at the Great Swamp has never been conducted in a publicly accessible manner. Individual projects are announced to the public but comments from the public are ignored. Regarding the current project, DEM appears poised to proceed despite the call to delay the project until further study is done. There is no urgency to this project and the time can be taken now to prepare a Great Swamp management (stewardship) plan

that addresses how the reservation will be managed in recognition of the climate and biodiversity crises, and in recognition of the importance of this area to the Indigenous community.