

The Value of Forestlands

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It is by far the Island's largest conservation property, more than five thousand acres spread across the Vineyard's ample middle, spanning the towns of Oak Bluffs, West Tisbury and Edgartown. But as conservation properties go, the Manuel F. Correllus State Forest is also largely unsung. It's that vast swath of trees you drive by on the north side of the Edgartown-West Tisbury Road. It's the corner near the airport where Smoky the Bear reminds all who pass what the level of fire alert is today. The state forest is a place well known to hunters, and also to people who cut firewood to heat their homes. There is a long-standing program in the forest that allows Islanders to take firewood for free at certain times of the year.

But how many people know that the state forest also is responsible for protecting the Island's clean, deeply plentiful water supply? Or that it is a stopping place for warblers on their spring migration? Birders of course know this. And hydrologists know that the state forest sits over the Island's main aquifer. Bill Wilcox, the water quality planner for the Martha's Vineyard Commission, has test wells in the state forest that he uses to monitor water levels in the aquifer at different points throughout the year.

Forestlands are in the news this week, as a paper is released by the Harvard Forest about the need to conserve more forestland throughout New England.

"New England forests are at a turning point," declares the report which is titled *Wildlands and Woodlands: A Vision for the New England Landscape*.

Broadly drawn and punctuated with statistics and natural history narrative, the report identifies the key threats to the valuable forests that still cover much of New England, from the salt-blasted coastal forestlands of Rhode Island and Massachusetts to the rich and densely treed northern reaches of Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire.

Development and changing patterns of ownership are two such threats.

Across many pages, the report details a plan to accelerate conservation, partly through more purchases by state and private land trusts, and partly through the generosity of ecologically-minded landowners.

The lead author of the report is David Foster, director of the Harvard Forest, a three thousand five hundred-acre property situated seventy miles west of Boston that is Harvard University's center for research and education in forestry and ecology.

Mr. Foster has become a familiar figure on the Vineyard in recent years, where he has been actively involved in a forest study project in collaboration with the Polly Hill Arboretum. The project is mentioned in the report released this week. Mr. Foster will deliver a lecture at the Agricultural Hall in West Tisbury on June Eighth.

The Wildlands and Woodlands report makes for interesting reading, although the report lacks sharpness when it comes to explaining how the sweeping goals it outlines might in fact be achieved.

Nevertheless, the tone is upbeat and full of promise.

“We’ve been given a second chance to determine the future of the region’s forests,” Mr. Foster writes. “This report calls attention to the pressing need to couple New England’s existing conservation capacity and shared land ethic with a vision for the next century in which forests remain an integral part of our livelihoods.”

What can the Vineyard do for its part in this initiative? It will be interesting to hear what Mr. Foster has to say next month.

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