

# Providence Journal

## Saving our woods

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The world just learned that a magnificent bird -- the ivory-billed woodpecker, with its fantastic red plumage -- is alive and well and flying through the forests of Arkansas. For ever so long, admirers of the bird feared it had become extinct because of human carelessness, as have so many other bird species.

When researchers finally caught the rare bird on tape, the news flashed around the world at nearly the speed of light. But it might not have been an accident that Arkansas has harbored the endangered animal.

Primarily known worldwide as the refuge of Bill Clinton, this small state voted in a conservation sales tax in 1997. The small tax, less than a penny on the dollar, has been used to protect Arkansas's disappearing forests, among many other laudable goals.

So to our way of thinking, Arkansas deserves to be known as the state that provided refuge to this outstandingly beautiful but very shy bird. In today's self-centered world, to vote in a self-tax is almost as awesome as rediscovering the ivory-billed woodpecker.

Now a group of Massachusetts researchers hope that their state will also ante up, in a different fashion. Researchers from the Harvard Forest, in Petersham, recently issued a report called "Wildlands and Woodlands: A Vision for the Forests of Massachusetts," calling for converting about half of all state-owned lands into "Wildlands," which would be completely left alone, to let nature follow its own course. Federal land similarly designated as "Wilderness" (some "Wilderness" land exists within the boundaries of Cape Cod's Monomoy Wildlife Refuge) has met with resounding conservation success.

The Harvard Forest report also calls for "protecting 2.25 million acres (nearly half of the state) as well-managed Woodlands, to support sustainable timber harvesting, extensive wildlife habitat, and human recreation and enjoyment."

That's a lot of acreage. But the researchers insist that this is necessary if human quality-of-life issues -- clean water, clean air -- are to be addressed.

Their fears are not without cause. A generally accepted statistic is that about 40 acres of Massachusetts is lost each day to developers who pave parking lots, put up massive oceanfront homes, cover the state with shopping malls -- and then walk away with the profits, often to their own protected estates.

We don't presume to know exactly how many Massachusetts acres should be preserved, or what their special status should be. That's for the scientists to think about, and, sadly, the politicians to haggle over.

But we do know that something needs to be done.

When Europeans arrived, almost the whole of the American Northeast was covered in hardwood forest. Within a century, much of that forest was gone. And by the end of the 19th Century, Pennsylvania had been denuded by coal interests seeking a cheap source of fuel. Gifford Pinchot responded by founding the Yale School of Forestry, in 1900, (the first such in the nation) and by founding the U.S. Forest Service, with the support of Theodore Roosevelt.

Nearly a century later -- and almost exactly 10 years ago -- in April 1995, environmental writer Bill McKibben delighted nature enthusiasts with "An Explosion of Green," an Atlantic Monthly article that touted the return of forests to the Northeast. Now the Harvard foresters say we are in danger of losing all that hard-won acreage.

That would be a tragedy. We thank the authors of "Wildlands and Woodlands" for getting this conversation started. Who knows? Massachusetts may have its own version of the ivory-billed woodpecker hiding somewhere deep in some long-forgotten forest.