

**Summary of Brownell testimony to the RI House Environment and Natural Resources Committee  
Hearing, April 4, 2024**

Old Growth Forest Protection Bill (H7293)

MAIN PREMISES:

- 1) The vital role of trees in a wide range of essential ecosystem services: removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere; filtering groundwater; providing habitat that encourages natural biodiversity of birds & other wildlife; precious natural seedbanks that assure the retention of genetic material that irrevocably connects us with our indigenous and our early colonial past; anchoring life-sustaining ecological communities; and mitigating effects of urban heat islands and rain shadows,
- 2) Negative viability of commercial harvesting in RI, the nation's 2nd most densely populated state, More emphasis needs to be placed on economic branding of RI as a major outdoor recreation/holiday destination.
- 3) Immense heritage imperative of conserving the scarce remnants of key climax forestry species, and the biodiversity of the ecosystems in which they play such critical roles.
- 4) Lessons to be learned from the New Zealand forest protection legislation and implementation.
- 5) This bill needs to become law in Rhode Island

**New Zealand** - History of Sustainable Native Forest Protection and Management

- currently protected native timber forests cover about 24% of total land area (+ about 4% plantation forestry)
- mid 1970s: beginning of significant grass roots environmental movements. Native Forest Action Council as a key player. Growing pressure to stop all commercial timber harvesting activities, especially central North Island and west coast South Island.
- Contrast: New Zealand's strong underlying environmental policy (Resource Management Act [RMA1991], focus on sustainability), low population density, low density industry, housing, roading, air & water pollution, rapidly growing economic importance of tourism (especially outdoor recreation). Rhode Island's lack of cornerstone environmental policy, high density population, widespread roading, housing, industry (but solid foundation of marine/coastal tourism and watershed management)
- RMA prioritizes the natural environment as the cornerstone of national policy. Any deviation from the fundamental protectionist approach requires a permit under the strict resource consent process.
- 2002: all native forest logging on public land ended. Beginning of targeted initiatives to encourage native timber industry players to shift into more sustainable income-generating enterprises like tourism, outdoor education and plantation forestry.
- Special legislation to allow harvesting of select windfall rimu trees under strict guidelines.
- Key drivers: NZ Green Party, Royal NZ Forest & Bird Protection Society, Nature Heritage Fund, Queen Elizabeth II Covenants (on private land)

## Rhode Island key talking points

- commercial native timber harvesting is totally unsustainable (environmentally & economically) due to severe historical overharvesting, outdated state policies and unjustifiable influence of a fragmented commercial timber industry ... need for more comprehensive policy on protection & management of Rhode Island's remaining natural heritage treasures.
- some positive RI environmental initiatives: (Walking RI - John Kostrzewa; Save the Bay; RI Rivers Council; watershed associations; Friends of Canonchet Farm; RI Landtrust Council; NarrowRiver Preservation Assn.; numerous parks, cycleways, ROWs; CRMC)
- less than 1% of total land area is covered in old growth forest (most of which is of questionable commercial quality/maturity) Option of Maximum Sustainable Yield does not exist. The few remaining remnants require total protection.
- high average cost of RI land ... already severe threats to agricultural, recreational, aesthetic uses ... priority issues (quality of life, traditional values, future of grandchildren vs unsustainable short term profits)
- issue exacerbated throughout USA by devastating natural and pollution-induced diseases of keystone native trees (as with American Chestnut & American Elm, spongy moth epidemic, etc.)
- need to follow the lead of progressive native forest management approaches in other New England states.
- need to re-work the current false fire mitigation narrative
- very limited progress to date regarding outcomes of the RI Natural Areas Protection Act (1993)
- need for a stronger RI independent environmental advocacy group (not influenced by profit-motivated special interests) such as the previous RI Natural Heritage Program (1978-2007)

Submitted by:

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Member, N. Kingstown RI Conservation Commission & Tree Board (October 2021 to March 2024)

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25 years active membership of NZ Tree Crops Association and NZ Farm Forestry Association (1990-2015)

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Owner/Operator of organic subtropical fruit orchard in NZ (1997-2017)