

## Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 3079 State of Rhode Island General Assembly

Chairperson and Members of the Senate,

I respectfully submit this testimony in support of Senate Bill 3079, which recognizes and affirms the historical land use, subsistence practices, and cultural heritage of the Narragansett Indian Tribe within the State of Rhode Island, and I write to further urge the inclusion of provisions ensuring equitable access to traditional fishing practices for tribal citizens.

For thousands of years prior to European colonization, the Narragansett Indian Tribe stewarded a vast and interconnected landscape that encompassed most of present-day southern and western Rhode Island. This region—often referred to historically as “Narragansett Country”—extended west of Narragansett Bay, from the Providence River to the Pawcatuck River, and included inland forests, river systems, coastal salt ponds, and ocean shoreline environments.

The Narragansett people practiced a highly sustainable and seasonal system of land use, rooted in deep ecological knowledge and cultural tradition. Their subsistence practices were not confined to fixed boundaries, but instead reflected a dynamic relationship with the land and waters:

- **Inland forest regions**, including what are now South Kingstown and the Great Swamp area, served as primary hunting grounds for deer, turkey, and other game. These areas were actively managed through techniques such as controlled burning to maintain healthy ecosystems and support wildlife populations.
- **River systems**, including the Pawcatuck River and its watershed, functioned as vital corridors for transportation and seasonal fishing. These waterways supported fish runs that were essential to the Narragansett diet and economy.
- **Narragansett Bay and coastal salt ponds**, including Point Judith Pond, Potter Pond, Green Hill Pond, and Ninigret Pond, were central to fishing and shell fishing activities. These rich estuarine environments provided quahogs, oysters, and a variety of fish species, and supported seasonal coastal settlements.
- **Ocean shoreline areas** in what is now South County were used during warmer months for intensive fishing, shellfish gathering, and community life, reflecting a cyclical pattern of movement between inland and coastal environments.

This seasonal round—winter inland hunting, spring and fall river fishing, and summer coastal harvesting—demonstrates a sophisticated system of environmental stewardship that ensured the long-term sustainability of natural resources.

However, beginning in the 17th century, colonization, land dispossession, and environmental disruption severely restricted the Narragansett Tribe’s access to these traditional hunting and fishing areas. The loss of land and ecological balance not only impacted subsistence practices but also disrupted cultural continuity and sovereignty.

**In addition, I strongly urge the inclusion of language within Senate Bill 3079 to provide that enrolled citizens of the Narragansett Indian Tribe be granted freshwater and saltwater fishing licenses free of charge upon presentation of a valid tribal identification card.** This provision would:

- Acknowledge the Tribe's inherent and historical rights to fish within their ancestral waters
- Remove financial barriers that disproportionately impact Indigenous communities
- Support the continuation of cultural, subsistence, and ceremonial fishing practices
- Align state policy with principles of equity, recognition, and respect for Tribal sovereignty

Such a measure would not create new privileges, but rather recognize longstanding traditions and rights that predate the formation of the State itself.

Senate Bill 3079 represents an important step toward acknowledging this history and honoring the enduring relationship between the Narragansett Indian Tribe and the lands and waters of Rhode Island. By formally recognizing these traditional use areas and practices—and by ensuring meaningful access through measures such as no-cost fishing licenses—the State affirms its commitment to historical accuracy, cultural respect, and meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities.

I urge the Committee to support Senate Bill 3079 and to adopt the proposed amendment to ensure that its intent is fully realized in practice.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,  
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NIT Land & Water Resource Commission, Vice-Chair