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Sea Grant CONNECTICUT

Volume 26, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2026

WRACK LINES

WHERE CONNECTICUT MEETS THE SOUND

BUILDING COMMUNITY AROUND THE PLACES WE LOVE

SIX LAKES • TOMAS KOECK • RIVERFRONT RECAPTURE • OUT OF EDEN • MYCOAST CT • LAND CONSERVATION COUNCIL CONFERENCE

Sea Grant
CONNECTICUT

Volume 26, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2026

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From the Editor

Paul Salopek started his journey around the world, mostly on foot, in 2013.

He set out from Ethiopia where humans first walked out of Africa some 60,000 to 120,000 years ago.

Thirteen years later, Salopek is still on the move, following the migration paths of our ancient ancestors. His final destination is Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of South America. He filed one of his latest dispatches in early March, from Glenn Highway in Alaska.

The *National Geographic* photographer and journalist began this "storytelling walk across the planet" to "enhance cross-cultural understanding through slow journalism and education," according to the Out of Eden project website. He's traversed war-torn regions of the Middle East, the Silk Road through central Asia, then India, China, South Korea and Japan. Barred from entering Russia to reach the Bering Strait, he hitched a ride on a container cargo ship in Japan to cross the Pacific Ocean. He eventually reached Shishmaref, Alaska, located on a barrier island in the Chukchi Sea on the far western edge of North America. The community of about 600 mostly Iñupiaq residents has existed for at least 400 years but is now threatened as the sea level rises and houses are literally falling into the surf. In 30 years, experts say, it will be entirely underwater.

Still, the community hangs on, hunting seals and caribou, fishing for smelt, herring and salmon, gathering wild tundra berries, making art out of walrus ivory and even taking the time to treat a stranger as a friend.

"I was welcomed everywhere with kindness," Salopek wrote. "This was, it must be said, a familiar feature of walking the Earth, especially among the less affluent curators of our planetary home. It was easy to be humbled in Shishmaref."

Wherever he went, even aboard one of the seemingly soulless warehouse ships that traverse the globe, he encountered humans being sustained by living in community even in the harshest circumstances. It is perhaps the human superpower we need most to cultivate in our world today as it faces enormous environmental challenges. Individual actions small and large can add up, but none of this can compare to the collective power of joining with others.

This issue highlights some inspiring examples of the power of community right here in Connecticut. From the Riverfront Recapture group on the Connecticut River to the Six Lakes Park Coalition in Hamden and MyCoast Connecticut users along the shoreline, state residents are finding connection and purpose in coming together for a common goal. That's true, too, for the participants in a statewide conference on conservation and the celebrated young photographer using film, gallery exhibits and a book to bring people together to enhance their appreciation of nature and motivate actions to take better care of it.

Author and environmental activist Bill McKibben perhaps said it best in a program at The Connecticut Forum on March 12. He was joined by journalist Elizabeth Kolbert and former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan in a discussion at the Bushnell Performing Arts Center titled, "The Future of the Environment."

"The most important thing an individual can do," he told the 2,000 or so people in the audience, "is to be a little less of an individual and join together with others in movements large enough to make change."

The Out of Eden project can be found at: https://outofedenwalk.nationalgeographic.org/

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Cover, Justin Farmer, left, talks about the Six Lakes property to a group as part of the Six Lakes Park Coalition's efforts to build community support for getting the area cleaned up and turned into public open space. Photo courtesy of the Six Lakes Park Coalition
Above, In 2013, *National Geographic* Explorer Paul Salopek set out on foot to retrace our ancestors' global migration. (Map by Sam Guilford/*National Geographic*)

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Maggie Cozens is the Long Island Sound Partnership outreach coordinator with Connecticut Sea Grant and UConn Extension. She works to increase appreciation, stewardship, awareness and understanding of Long Island Sound through the development of engaging and inclusive outreach and educational programming. She holds a Master of Science in Environmental Science from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, with a special focus on salt marsh and wetlands conservation.

JOHANN HEUPEL

Johann Heupel is a shorebird biologist for the Connecticut Audubon Society, having graduated from UConn Avery Point's Marine Science and Maritime Studies programs as a University Scholar in 2022. With a passion for environmental outreach and public education of history, and a background in museum and conservation work, Heupel will be beginning a Master's of Environmental Science and Management program at URI this fall with a focus in Environmental Communication and Outreach.

OWEN PLACIDO

Owen Placido is an assistant extension educator focused on nature-based approaches to climate adaptation. He works to connect individuals and communities to resources that can help them adapt to climate impacts, implement nature-based solutions and restore critical habitats in the Long Island Sound watershed. He is interested in how science, art and the environment intersect to create a sense of place. Owen joined Connecticut Sea Grant in 2023 after earning his Master of Science in environmental science from the University of Rhode Island.

PAUL SALOPEK

Paul Salopek was born in the United States and raised in Mexico. As a writer and journalist, he has traveled to more than 50 countries and has earned two Pulitzer Prizes for his reporting on human genetics and war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Paul has worked as a commercial fisherman in the Atlantic and Pacific ocean, mined gold in Australia, and managed a cattle ranch in Mexico. He was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University and taught journalism at Princeton University.

JUDY BENSON

Judy Benson has been communications coordinator at Connecticut Sea Grant and editor of *Wrack Lines* since 2017. Before that, she was a newspaper reporter and editor, concluding her journalism career at *The Day* of New London covering health and the environment. She is the author of two books, the latest titled, *The Book of Todd*, a collaboration with her late husband published in cooperation with New London Librarium (nllibrarium.com). She earned both a bachelor's degree in journalism and a Master of Science in natural resources from UConn.

Several streams and wetlands can be found throughout the Six Lakes property. Photo: Judy Benson

Six Lakes: will this notorious brownfield ever become an urban oasis?

By Margaret Cozens

Nestled in the bustling community of Hamden lies an unlikely landscape.

About halfway up Putnam and Treadwell avenues, you can catch a glimpse of what seems to be a hidden forest. From the road, the place looks quiet and unassuming. Inviting, even. A pond can be seen between the winter branches. Birds fly back-and-forth between the treetops.

Looking closer, though, a chain link can be seen along the forest edge. The fence extends as far as the eye can see in either direction, along with several "No Trespassing" signs.

Apparently, there is more to this space than meets the eye.

A tarnished hidden jewel

This area, formally known as the Olin Powder Farm—and more recently as Six Lakes—is a 102-acre parcel of land in Hamden. Only eight miles north of New Haven, the town is a diverse community with 60,000 residents, of whom 25% are black and 12% Hispanic, making it one of the most diverse in the state.

Named for its glacial "kettles" or pond-like bogs, Six Lakes is a combination of oak and pine forest and red maple swamps. One of the bogs is even "floating," a buoyant mat of living vegetation that floats atop a water body, an unusual feature for Southern New England. The 150-year-old forest surrounding the ponds is home to a rich ecosystem including otters, muskrats and countless birds.

"It's a beautiful spot for anybody who lives in this heavily developed place to step into and feel like you're in a different world," said Kathy Czepiel, Hamden resident and Land Protection Specialist at Save the Sound. "It's just shocking what's hidden in this heavily developed neighborhood."

Despite the parcel's natural beauty, the public is not permitted to access the site. Public walks, once permitted, have been prohibited for over a decade.

"It has so much potential as a wonderful rejuvenating space for people in the neighborhood," Czepiel said.

"But, of course," she added, "it's very contaminated."

Horrible black smoke

Beyond the seemingly placid surface of Six Lakes lurks an insidious legacy of environmental injustice.

Originally owned by the Winchester Repeating Arms Co., Six Lakes served as attractive testing ground for the prominent arms manufacturer: all those ponds provided insurance against the flammable materials getting out of control. In 1932, Winchester was purchased by the present owner, the Olin Corp. chemical company, which used the area primarily for waste dumping. Batteries, hazardous byproducts, and other industrial debris were incinerated and buried on the property in the decades before environmental laws prohibited the practice. Highly toxic chemicals including polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs accumulated over time, with the potential to remain in the environment for years to come.

In 1966, a neighbor called the town health department to report "horrible black smoke" coming from the Olin property. Upon further investigation, the Hamden director of health issued an abatement order to Olin, citing the severe health threat that the ongoing burning and burying of materials was having on adjacent communities.

Among the communities touched by this contamination is the Newhall neighborhood, an 11-block area abutting Six Lakes and a state-designated environmental justice community. Originally swamps and wetlands, the area was drained and filled in the 1800s and again in the 1950s. The fill, dug up from the adjacent Olin Powder Farm, was heavily contaminated. By the 1950s, the area was built up with suburban homes and businesses. These structures were built directly on the contaminated and structurally unsound fill, which were then sold to primarily black and brown residents.

A public health and environmental justice crisis ensued. Soil testing of the fill revealed significant levels of lead, arsenic and other carcinogens. Many homes were reported to be crumbling directly into contaminated soil, due to the unstable nature of the landfill they were built on. By 1986, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (now CT DEEP) ordered Olin to clean up the property, a job that remains incomplete.

After much public outcry, remediation of the Newhall neighborhood took place in the early 2000s. At the same time, CT DEEP and nearby residents began re-investigating the remediation of the adjacent Olin Powder Farm.

"The legacy of the Newhall and Six Lakes is intertwined," said Justin Farmer, former City Councilor for Hamden's 5th District. "Without Newhall, the Six Lakes project may have never happened."

Years of back-and-forth between CT DEEP and Olin regarding the site's cleanup yielded little movement. Olin officials did not respond to a request for comment for this article.

Justin Farmer, former member of the Hamden City Council, leads a community meeting about Six Lakes in 2024. Photo: Judy Benson

By the time Farmer was elected to the City Council in 2017, progress at the site had all but stalled.

The Six Lakes Park Coalition

Farmer, 31, has lived in the Newhall neighborhood for most of his life. Growing up in the area, he was familiar with the Olin property, having seen it from the Farmington Canal Rail Trail, a recreational pathway. He even admits to having snuck onto it very briefly as a kid.

"Just once or twice for a couple of seconds," he explained with a laugh.

When he was elected to the City Council at the age of 21, members of the community approached him about the deserted property.

"People were coming up to me, saying something should really be done about this space," he said. As Farmer began to uncover the history of property, several alarming truths emerged, along with excitement about the opportunity the property held.

He recalled thinking: "You mean there is a whole entire 100-acre forest in the middle of the hood where black and brown folk don't have access to green spaces?"

At this point Farmer reached out to Save the Sound, an environmental nonprofit based in New Haven where he had interned in the past. He also reached out to the Hamden Land Conservation Trust, the original champion for the property's remediation. The group tried unsuccessfully to purchase the property from Olin in 1969.

"I know a lot about how to organize, I know how to agitate, but I did not know a lot about property and environmental law," Farmer said.

With a team made up of Save the Sound, the Hamden Land Conservation Trust, Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut (CONECT), and neighborhood residents, Farmer coalesced a committee focused on creating a vision for the property. Together, along with many others, the group formed the Six Lakes Park Coalition, with the ultimate goal of transforming the space into a public park.

The first step was determining the extent of contamination on the site.

“It became evident that there was a lot more contamination than Olin had let on,” said Farmer.

As a brownfield—one of 450,000 sites nationwide hampered from redevelopment by contaminants—Six Lakes would have to undergo a process of remediation before it could be sold and opened to the public. As a part of the 1986 consent order, Olin accepted responsibility to clean up the park, while retaining the right to determine the level of cleanup, which could be lower than what would be required for a public park. Cleanup would involve several phases of testing and hazardous waste removal, which can be slow-going and expensive. In fact, some of the original testing done on-site happened so long ago the results were no longer relevant. Essentially, the team had to start from scratch.

“Six Lakes Park Coalition has been really instrumental in getting that process restarted and keeping on top of it to make sure that years don’t go by between rounds of testing,” said Czepiel.

Due to the work of the Coalition, testing has been completed in phases, but there is at least one more round of testing yet to be completed. After that, the team will be able to draw up a remediation plan and, finally, a budget for re-imagining the space.

“Our next step is to make sure that this just moves along,” Czepiel said. “We’re advocating for thorough and expeditious testing of the site. That’s our mission.”

A community vision

In 2024, the Six Lakes Park Coalition conducted a robust visioning process with the community. The team held four in-person workshops and deployed a survey which gathered about 175 responses.

Community members indicated they were interested in connecting to the space. They highlighted access to green space for passive recreation and access to educational opportunities, such as after-school programs and field trips, as their major hopes for the park.

Respondents also indicated the potential park’s role in facilitating community connectivity.

“[Six Lakes] could be a connector among different neighborhoods. A way to bring people together,” explained Czepiel.

Farmer envisions Six Lakes becoming a vibrant cultural park honoring the history and diversity of the area’s land and people.

“[Hamden] is a snapshot of what ‘true’ diversity looks like in its best sense,” he said. “We could potentially have art installations on the property to highlight the major cultures and communities in the greater New Haven area. We could center the first nation of Wangunk and Quinnipiac people who inhabited these lands originally while simultaneously highlighting new immigrants. We could have celebrations, food trucks and space for art displays.”

Local residents discuss their aspirations for the Six Lakes property at a community meeting in 2024. Photo: Judy Benson

Over time, more than 1,200 members of the community have signed onto the project to receive the newsletter, participate in clean-ups and advocate on the Coalition’s behalf. Public meetings are often well attended, bringing people from across Hamden’s many communities together.

“When we have a community meeting, 100-plus people come out,” Farmer said. “When we have a cleanup, we get people to show up. When we had a perimeter walk, we had 100 people walk two miles around the circumference of the property.

“I am excited because it shows what the community is willing to do.”

First affected, first in need

Despite progress, the road to change is a long one paved with challenges.

“It’s hard to keep people engaged,” Farmer said. “The average brownfield cleanup takes four to seven years, at least, to remediate. And we’re talking about one acre or half-acre lots.”

At 100-plus acres, Six Lakes could feasibly take much longer than that.

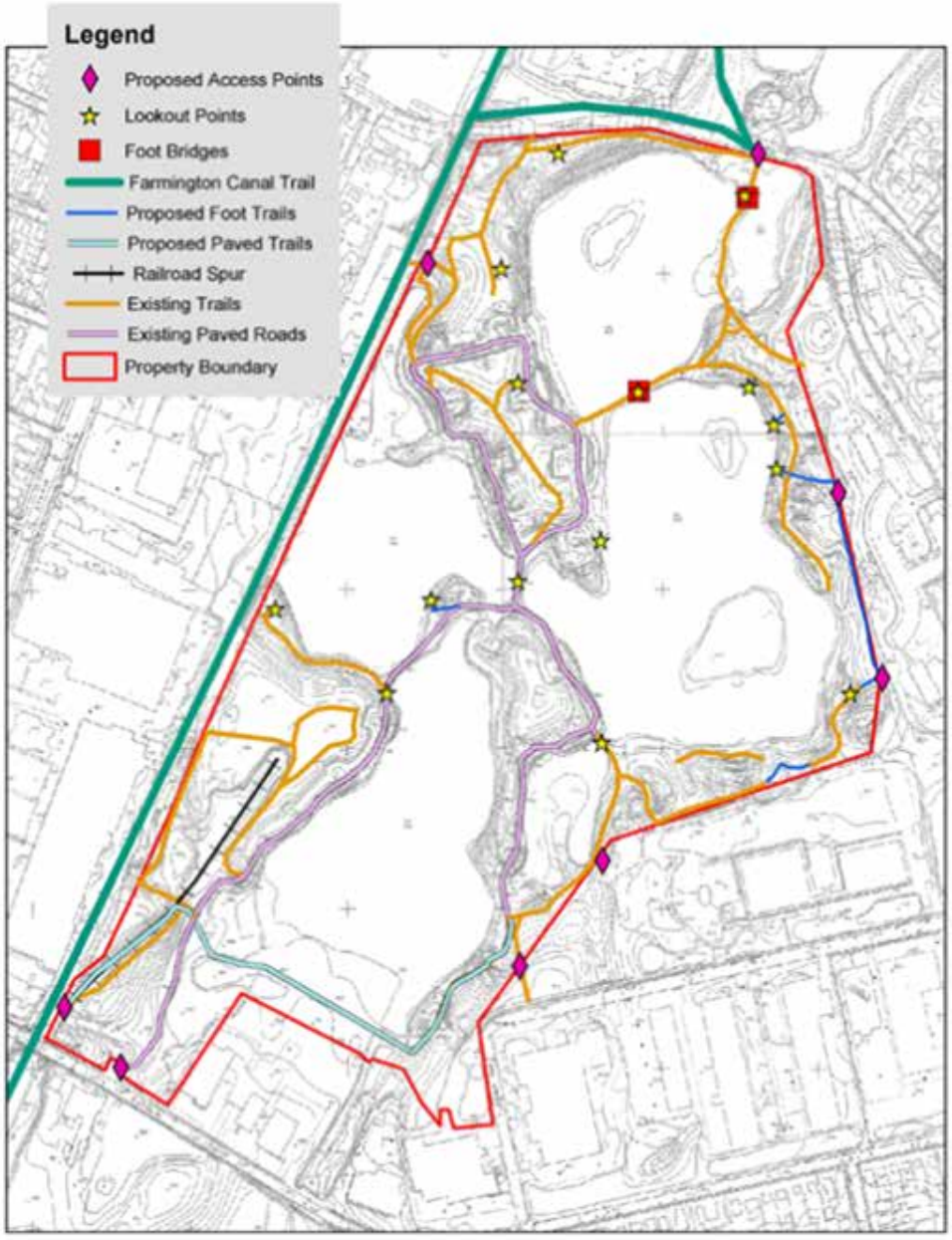
Fortunately, the project has enjoyed support from several elected officials and partner organizations, such as CT DEEP, the West River Watershed Coalition, The Connecticut Land Conservation Council and many others.

"Officials from the Hamden Legislative Council all the way up to our federal elected officials have been really supportive," Czepiel said. "In particular, (state) Sen. (Martin) Looney has been championing this for decades."

Currently, the Six Lakes Park Coalition hosts annual public meetings and perimeter cleanups. They also provide updates to members on progress involving Olin and CT DEEP. The coalition reached out to CT DEEP Commissioner Katie Dykes asking for an honest, factual discussion of process, barriers, and opportunities regarding the role the state can play in creating this public space for the people of southern Hamden, particularly those living in the adjacent Newhall neighborhood. In March 2026, the commissioner agreed to meet with the Coalition and others to address questions and hear community concerns. As of the time of this article's publication, the meeting has not occurred.

As the movement persists, Farmer stressed that its major strength lies in its grassroots origins. Maintaining agency and inspiring active engagement at the community level will be essential to the Coalition's staying power, he emphasized.

"If any of us are to succeed we need to have seats at the table for the first affected, first in need," Farmer said. "Ultimately, it's the people closest to the problems that are closest to the solutions."



A map of the Six Lakes property shows proposed trails and footbridges in a future public park. Image courtesy of the Six Lakes Park Coalition

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Tomas Koeck saw his first barred owl in a preserve near his home in Fairfield. Photo: Tomas Koeck

Telling the story of nature and the people who care for it

By Johann Heupel

Tomas Koeck's first feature-length film, *Flyway of Life*, premiered on Earth Day just over a year ago, the pinnacle of years of hard work for the young photographer and filmmaker.

The film was an enormous undertaking, documenting one of the most populated bird migratory pathways in the world, released alongside multiple gallery exhibits of photos from his expeditions and a coffee table book full of stunning wildlife photography that Koeck shot for the movie. Now, after the whirlwind of 2025, Koeck, 27, reflected on his love of nature, his career thus far and the community of dedicated scientists, naturalists and volunteers he's met along the way.

For Koeck, there is no future for nature without conservationists and caring citizens across the globe, as the birds and other wildlife he showcases connect people to faraway places and to each other.

"When it comes to the storytelling," he said, "I am trying to share empathy through the screen, get everyone engaging at these community-oriented events, and hopefully they walk away with a spark ignited to spread their empathy around the world."

Two of those community events took place at UConn's Avery Point campus, where Connecticut Sea Grant is based. CTSG helped fund publication of his book through its Arts Support Awards Program, leading to an exhibit of his photography at the campus art gallery and a public screening of *Flyway of Life* in the campus theater. More recently, Koeck showed two additional films and participated in a panel discussion as part of a campus lecture series. According to Koeck, these were incredible opportunities that brought his vision to life.

"Connecticut Sea Grant has been supporting artists for 15 years now through our Arts Support Awards program, and it is clear with each new awardee, how successful this program has been in nurturing new art and artists," said Syma Ebbin, research coordinator at CT Sea Grant. "Tomas is no exception, now nominated for a New England Emmy for his new work. Tomas is a talented photographer and filmmaker who integrates his passion for wildlife conservation with his artistic vision to promote public awareness of the issues facing wildlife and encourage sustainable behaviors."

Koeck grew up in Fairfield, near a woodland preserve owned by the Connecticut Audubon Society. The 150-acre Larsen Wildlife Sanctuary was the backdrop of his childhood and shaped his connection to nature.

"This has been my backyard since I was in a stroller, where I would go looking for different trees, and where I saw my first barred owl," he recalled. "I had only seen an owl in books but calling through that quiet forest were the echoing calls of a barred owl. My mom called back, it came closer, we saw it, and it flew away silently into the snow. That was a memory seared in my head."

The electric feeling of connecting with wildlife stuck with him, and his early college endeavor to be a tree scientist was not as exciting as showcasing nature to viewers. High school adventures with low resolution photography gave way to professional grade lenses in college, and the joy he found capturing photographs of local wildlife, spreading his excitement for nature drew him back home to Fairfield.

Sacred Heart University, a private Catholic university in Fairfield run by laymen, welcomed Koeck into the School of Communication, Media and the Arts. There, he met program Director James Castonguay, who would become the executive producer of *Flyway of Life*.

Koeck was determined to stand out, to help at after-hours events and attend extracurriculars, to take advantage of opportunities to fund student projects. It made an impression on Castonguay.

"Tomas was the complete package from the beginning, motivated and disciplined, with an incredible aesthetic talent. He took advantage when we brought back the local newspaper the *Easton Courier,*" Castonguay said.

Tomas Koeck photographs nesting shorebirds at Milford Point in Milford. Photo: Collin Moura

As part of a class, Koeck suggested he author a weekly nature column with photos of local wildlife he had seen. With few expectations, Castonguay was blown away by the results—incredible photographs of charismatic raptors and backyard critters alike.

"He took these photos that captured these unbelievable moments, we started publishing them, and he won a Society of Professional Journalism award," a rarity for students, Castonguay said.

Tomas Koeck walks across the stage at the first screening of his movie *Flyway of Life* at Sacred Heart University. Photo: Jackson Sokoloski

Koeck had greater aspirations for his next project, an expedition to the boreal forests of Minnesota to film owls. Needing a small budget of $2,500, Castonguay took a chance on Koeck and found funding for the 10-minute film. Partnerships with Canon cameras and the National Audubon Society helped buoy the project to success.

Although he aimed to film many birds in the taiga of the northern United States, he desperately wanted to capture footage of a great gray owl—a bird he almost didn't see. On his last day of filming, after days of not seeing the elusive predator, he caught the photograph that became his trademark.

When you watch the film, titled *Sentinels of the Boreal*, you'll notice the focus is not solely upon wildlife. While many documentarians mention conservation without showing the scientists and naturalists involved, Koeck gives the stewards of the wilds their due, a theme that makes *Flyway of Life* special.

The film began as the cornerstone project of Koeck's master's degree, spanning the vast network of diverse habitats within the Atlantic flyway, a migratory route that supports hundreds of types of birds requiring rest, food and breeding grounds. While species differ in how far they travel along the flyway, birds that rely on habitats from northern Canada to central America are all impacted by the perils of travelling across the continent.

Mirroring the seasonal voyage of birds, Koeck and his crew began *Flyway of Life* in the springtime of a Costa Rican cloud forest. Here, the conservationists of the Finca Cántaros Environmental Association who track migrating birds, have transformed more than 200 acres into crucial habitat for the migratory warblers we love in New England, and also teach local school children about the environment.

The film then follows the birds as they travel north to the Everglades National Park in Florida, an environment that once had an undeserved bad reputation, until environmental activist Marjorie Stoneman Douglas led the campaign for its preservation.

"Everyone had this idea of it as this boggy, dirty, mucky swamp—but it is this clean, beautiful, vibrant environment," Koeck said.

With the help of fellow Sacred Heart student Collin Moura, Koeck set out to capture the abundance of the Everglades. He ended up focusing on an unexpected returning bird—the American flamingo.

"We weren't expecting to find flamingoes, we went down there with the goal of filming the roseate spoonbills, but we ended up spending our time chasing around another charismatic, pink bird," said Moura, adding that the population was wiped out a hundred years ago by hunters looking for feathers to make women's hats.

Unlike some nature films that focus on stunning landscapes and closeups of wildlife alone, *Flyway* takes the time to explain the impact of development on these migrating birds. Back in his hometown of Fairfield, he follows a group of bird banders working at the Connecticut Audubon Birdcraft Museum, who operate the oldest continual

Koeck describes the Everglades National Park as a "clean, beautiful, vibrant environment." Photo: Tomas Koeck

Koeck unexpectedly found American flamingos when he traveled through the Everglades for *Flyway of Life*. Photo: Tomas Koeck

banding station in the state. Here, many warblers that overwinter in Central America rest in this small preserve next to the bustling I-95 corridor, as their populations continue to decline on their path through the gauntlet of the Northeast. The skyscrapers of New York City are emblematic of the modern United States, yet it is also along the primary route for the swaths of birds that take to the skies every night, northward in spring and southward in fall.

More than a billion birds die nationwide each year after collision impacts with buildings, vehicles and towers, according to the American Bird Conservancy. The heartbreaking work of the volunteers of the New York City Bird Alliance, walking the city each morning during migration to collect the bodies of birds that died after flying into the large glass buildings, is something most documentarians would avoid showing. It grounds the scenes of warblers in blooming trees with the grim reality.

The hope is in the chance for action. Data from bird banders reveal the undeveloped sanctuaries these birds rely upon, and new types of bird-safe glass are being installed in buildings across New York City.

Hope is palpable in the way Koeck frames bird conservation along the Atlantic Flyway, in the efforts of the Audubon Alliance in Connecticut to protect shorebird nesting grounds on crowded beaches, and in the Loon Preservation Committee's community events that raise awareness of the dwindling habitat for common loons in the north woods of New Hampshire. He does not dwell on the bleak circumstances of wild creatures. Rather, he focuses his storytelling on the perspectives of people working tirelessly to preserve their future.

"The most ethical way to tell a story is through science, based in reality," Koeck said.

Yet he also emphasizes the passion of the experts he works with, trying to capture their "lightning in a bottle" to inspire advocacy, kindness and change.

He highlights why the preservation of nature is not only important for the future of birds—but to maintain a thriving ecosystem for all living things. The wolves that live in the tundra of Manitoba in Canada are a classic example of charismatic megafauna, connected to the small warblers and shorebirds that breed there in a strange way.

"When wolves are taken out of an environment, ungulate species destroy the undergrowth of the forest," Koeck said, referring to a study he had read. "This keeps birds from being able to migrate, and then the warblers disappear. When wolves are reintroduced, the warblers return."

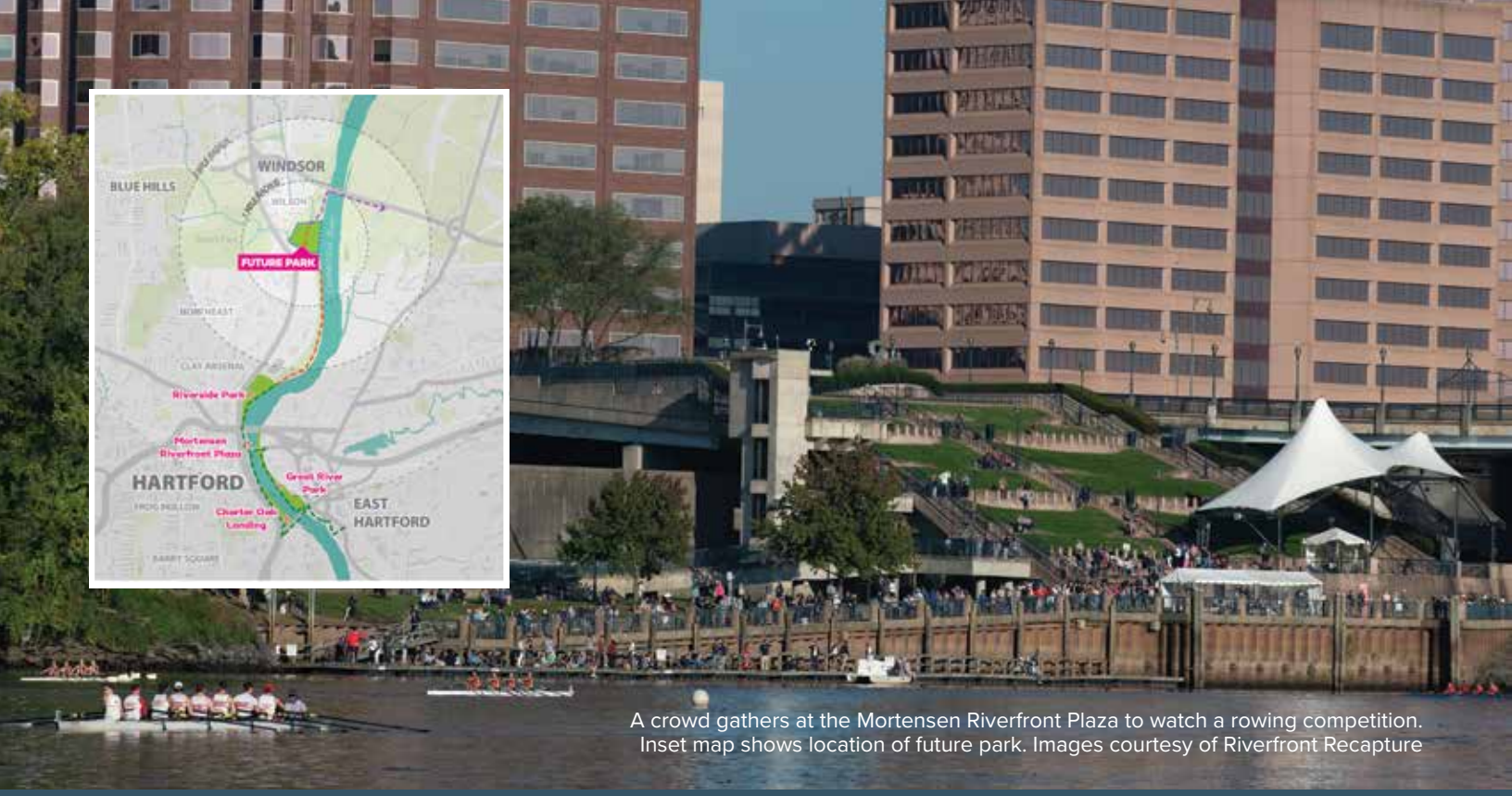
His close encounters with wolf pups bring the hopeful feeling to a crescendo, a sign that the environment may be back on track.

Several themes stand out in *Flyway of Life*, particularly the importance of ethics, science and empathy in the stories Koeck tells.

"It shows empathy for the environment, but also for humans—a sincere appreciation for the wild world," Castonguay observed. "The heart of his filmmaking is people who have profound empathy for animals and the environment, providing a model for people to do their part. It's a filmmaking of care."

These qualities have catapulted Koeck to new heights, as he was recognized by the prestigious Explorer's Club as one of their 50 People Changing the World in 2026, nominated for the 2026 New England Regional Emmy Awards, and sent on assignment for *National Geographic*—all thanks to the support of Sacred Heart University. His production non-profit, Silent Flight Studios, is empowering young storytellers to find perspectives that matter, producing entertaining and educational films that promote conservation. The way these stories are told matters. If they do not focus on facts and education, if the production makes a negative impact on the environment, or if it does not invoke compassion for nature—what is the point of filming? *Flyway of Life* is a call to action for both the audience and other documentarians on how to care for the world around us.

For information on viewing Flyway of Life, visit: www.flywayfilm.com. To learn about Koeck's other projects, visit: www.silentflightstudios.org.



A crowd gathers at the Mortensen Riverfront Plaza to watch a rowing competition. Inset map shows location of future park. Images courtesy of Riverfront Recapture

Riverfront Recapture: restoring the CT River with oars, parks and people

By Owen Placido

Like many cities on major rivers, Hartford for many years turned its back on the Connecticut River, the natural resource that led to its founding. But since 1980, the local nonprofit Riverfront Recapture has been working to reconnect the community to its signature water body.

“The Connecticut River is evolving.”

That’s how Mike Zaleski, the chief executive officer of Riverfront Recapture, characterizes the current state of Hartford’s signature natural feature.

That evolution—set amidst the constant writhing, shifting, tumbling motion from headwaters in Canada all the way to Long Island Sound—isn’t only about the ecology of the river. Our communities can evolve too, changing how we relate to and interact with the environment. At Riverfront Recapture, the evolution of the Connecticut River and the communities along its waterfront are always at the forefront.

To understand the work of Riverfront Recapture, you must journey back in time to the early 20th century, as Hartford was shifting from an inland port city to an industrial waterfront. The Connecticut River was evolving as it always has, but so was the structure of the waterfront in Hartford. Major floods in New England in 1936 and 1938 led to the federal Flood Control Acts, which precipitated the construction of dikes and levees throughout the nation, and crucially, in downtown Hartford. These barriers were constructed to protect the expanding financial district from floodwaters but, in effect, sealed Hartford off from its river. Add in the construction of the interstate highway system some years later, and that disconnection was literally cast in concrete. The river was no longer easily accessible to the residents of Hartford, and there were not only recreational costs, but also extensive ecological damage.

“It was decades of the city and region turning its back on the river,” Zaleski said. “The river became a dumping ground.”

Ravaged by pollution, industry and disconnection from the city, the natural centerpiece of Hartford was no longer a place where the community could access the water for recreation.

Mike Zaleski, chief executive officer of Riverfront Recapture, talks about the history of the group and its plans for the future. Photo: Judy Benson

"It was *not* a place that you wanted to gather," Zaleski said.

Luckily, the story doesn't end there. Environmental legislation of the 1970's such as the Clean Water Act laid the groundwork, and in 1980, Riverfront Recapture emerged to bring Hartford back to its waterfront. Riverfront's formation was initiated in part by an insurance executive from Chicago, Rory O'Neil. Having experienced firsthand how Chicago was linked to Lake Michigan and the Chicago River, O'Neil wondered why Hartford couldn't have the same relationship with the Connecticut River. After a public seminar, and a partnership between public and private local groups, Riverfront Recapture was founded as a non-profit organization tasked with generating a plan to reconnect Hartford to its waterfront. Federal funding in 1983 put the wheels in motion, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Today, Riverfront Recapture is an active nonprofit organization that manages 452 acres of public parks and trails and estimates that more than one million people visited its park system in the past year. Powered by a small core staff and numerous volunteers, and funded through a combination of grants, individual and corporate donations, and a partnership with the Metropolitan District Commission, the group has continued to expand on accomplishing its vision since inception.

The unifying theme of all that Riverfront Recapture has worked towards is access: access to the waterfront, access to the water, access to gathering and opportunities for recreation.

"Our mission is to connect people to the Connecticut River," Zaleski explained. "We want to recapture access to the Connecticut River."

Why parks?

That goal is manifested in the work that has been done by Riverfront Recapture, and its plans for the immediate future. Over the past 40 years Riverfront has participated in the construction or restoration and now management of public parks at Charter Oak Landing, Riverside Park, Great River Park and the Mortensen Riverfront Plaza. These places have become treasured points of community gathering—from summer concert series to nationally recognized athletic events.

For Marc Nicol, the director of park planning and development at Riverfront Recapture, the waterfront parks are a critical way to shape the connection between people and the Connecticut River.

"When I first started work on the Connecticut River, the river had 'C' or 'D' water quality grades. Now it is a 'B' to an 'A' depending on the weather and season," he said, referring to the changes he's witnessed over the past couple decades.

But dramatic improvements in water quality aren't the only ways he's experienced a shift.

"The feeling in the parks—there's more and more people who come in on a daily basis and feel like it's their own," he said. "People feel safe in using them, having picnics. That is something that has definitely changed for the better."

Out on the river

One of Riverfront's key offerings is the Community Rowing Program. The program welcomes thousands of participants each year, offering classes for youth, adults and beginners year-round.

Gretchen Gregg, secretary of Riverfront Recapture's Board of Directors and the race director for the annual rowing regatta, has long been passionate about Riverfront's rowing programs. She was first drawn to the organization, and the parks, when the Greater Hartford Jaycees Community Boathouse was built in Riverside Park in 2002.

"The building of the boathouse made you wonder what's down there," Gregg explained.

That spark of curiosity led her to begin decades of involvement with the rowing program.

"It's something that has mattered a lot in my life," she said.

Funding obtained by Riverfront allows high school students from Hartford and East Hartford to participate in rowing

The boathouse located in the Riverfront Recapture park holds dozens of rowing skulls used in the many rowing programs for youths and adults offered by the organization. Photo: Judy Benson

programs at no cost. This allows young people to see the world from a different angle, earn college scholarships and get out on the water—something that was not safe or possible just a few decades ago.

Gregg is still impressed by the impact she notices on participants in the rowing program once they get down to the river.

“I’m amazed by the number of people who are so impressed with the park and boathouse when they visit that have never been there or had no idea it was there,” she said. “Parents, people, supporting kids and crews— it’s quite spectacular.”

Future park

The latest expansion of the riverwalk and park system has been in development for several years and is approaching implementation. From the ground up, the as-yet unnamed “future park” being planned on the Hartford-Windsor line will be an embodiment of the principles of harmonious design between community and nature.

The site for the future park, first acquired by Riverfront in 2019, didn’t start out as a place for people to enjoy and access the water. Much like the historic waterfront in downtown Hartford that inspired the formation of Riverfront Recapture, it was a relic of an industrial past, cut off from nature, separate, isolated and in need of some love.

The site for the future park has a long history—a progression from historical agriculture use to degradation from industry. A public park with 60 acres of natural habitat will be a complete turnaround from what exists presently—a vacant lot that was used for storing heavy equipment and machinery. In the 1950’s the site was used to mine silt, clay and rich floodplain soil for construction projects, literally taking the natural environment of the Connecticut River and shipping it away, piece by piece. Rich, fertile silt that abounds in the floodplain soils of the Connecticut was ripped out and delivered elsewhere, to be put in use far away from the ecosystem that generated it, and the people who call that place home. This separation, this disconnect, stems from the same mindset that led to the barriers erected between Hartford and the Connecticut River historically. It’s a framework that cuts people off from the environment.

The location of the new park is crucial. The North End of Hartford has not had a waterfront park close to home. That was a main motive for choosing this site in the first place.

“This new park helps us accomplish our mission by giving the North End of the city an opportunity to access the river in their neighborhood,” Zaleski explained.

The new park will be connected to the rest of the burgeoning riverwalk system. A 2.2-mile trail will link the park to the boathouse in Riverside Park. And just one step further north is Windsor Meadows State Park. With this new addition, Capital Region residents can conceivably walk or bike the 10 or so miles from Windsor to East Hartford all without using a public road. Adding the future park to the integrated system of trails and parks in the area ensures that, like a healthy ecosystem, this piece of the puzzle will thrive synergistically with the rest of the nearby public space.

“This park will provide a unique opportunity for Riverfront Recapture,” Nicol noted. “All our other parks are linear, controlled by flood control infrastructure, and may spend at times weeks under water.”

The master plan for the future park proposes to take full advantage of that fact by removing contaminated material and creating a cove off the Connecticut River where beginners can safely enjoy paddle sports.

“We are going to remediate the property to a standard to which we can welcome the public, clean up the mistakes of the past and make it a space where the community can come to the river,” Zaleski said.

People make the difference

As an organization, Riverfront Recapture exemplifies what is so powerful about connecting environmental revitalization with the priorities of people living in a place. Parks are a huge element of this—actively used sites that provide incredible opportunities to communities and to the ecosystem at the same time.

“Really successful parks have a community present—people who live near parks who take pride and ownership,” Nicol said. “As more people move into apartments downtown, there is more of that sense of ownership … it’s them, it’s part of their soul, part of their being … neighborhoods are critical for a successful park.”

When asked about the most important guiding principles in environmental stewardship, Zaleski summed it up simply.

“We need to continue to support the public parks and provide people with the opportunity to get outside,” he said. “There are physical and mental health benefits to people having access to open space. These are the gathering places for the community that contribute to quality of life. Don’t underestimate the power of these public spaces.”

The Sounds of Summer festival in 2023 drew hundreds of people to the Riverfront Recapture park for live musical performances. Photo courtesy of Riverfront Recapture

12 Questions with Paul Salopek

Editor's note: In 2013, National Geographic *Explorer and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Paul Salopek set out on foot from Ethiopia to follow the trails blazed by the first humans who migrated out of Africa some 60,000 to 120,000 years ago. His Out of Eden Walk (https://outofedenwalk.nationalgeographic.org/) is a storytelling journey to "explore human conditions at boot level, across borders and cultures, and makes connections between ordinary peoples' lives and the global headlines of our day," according to the Out of Eden website. In March,* Wrack Lines *editor Judy Benson and her Connecticut Sea Grant colleague Margaret Cozens caught up with Salopek via Zoom to chat about his amazing journey. After he crosses Canada and the United States, his trek will continue through Central and South America to its final destination at Tierra del Fuego.*

Left: *National Geographic* Explorer Paul Salopek walks near Birah Sharif, Bihar, India, in 2019. Photo: Paul Salopek / *National Geographic*.
Top: *National Geographic* Explorer Paul Salopek leads a pair of camels across Ethiopia's Afar desert, at the beginning of the Out of Eden walk in 2013. Photo: John Stanmeyer / *National Geographic*
Bottom: Salopek rows along a section of the Ganges River in Varanasi, India, Hinduism's holiest city. Photo: John Stanmeyer / *National Geographic*

1. Where are you now?

"We're paused in Gustavas, Alaska, near Glacier Bay for the spring."

2. How are your feet?

"No complaints in that department, thanks for asking."

3. How did you decide the route? I know you wanted to follow the migration path of ancient humans, but I'm sure there were a lot of details and variations within that that you had to decide. Did you have certain criteria to follow, or certain locations you wanted the route to go through?

"It's based on evolution and the theories of paleo archeologists, and on the evidence of fossils and genetics of when early humans migrated out of Africa. We're following broad strokes, not so much pathways. We're taking a very pragmatic approach to deciding the route, and walking to certain archeological sites along the way. Some of it is spur of the moment, determined by visa issues, or politics or borders. It's a lot less organized than it seems."

4. Much like the way our ancient ancestors migrated?

"Theirs even more so in terms of being spontaneous. The first wave of humans didn't head out with a destination and hadn't even yet invented the idea of destination. They were following resources like herds of antelope, or coastlines for access to food."

5. Did you meet with other migrants along the way?

"If you consult with the UN's International Organization for Migration, you learn that this is in many ways the golden age of migration, both for good and bad. Right now, about one seventh to one eighth of the world's population—about 1 billion people— are not in their home countries, either because of climate change impacts, or politics or wars or for work. In China where you have hyper-urbanization, the rural areas are very sparsely populated. No one under 50 lives there. I walked through a refugee camp near the Syrian border, where some of the 13 million Syrians displaced by the war there are living. I am cognizant that I'm an extremely privileged migrant, a voluntary migrant. It's a very big decision for people to leave their homes."

6. Is there an interaction that stood out to you on your journey?

"I don't have a stock answer. This isn't a solo journey. It's about building community, about the people who walk with me. It's more than the logistics and transportation. The people I walk with are co-equal storytellers. If they're interested in the arts, we talk about arts, if they're interested in conservation, we talk about that. I've had about 100 walking partners so far, and all of them are extraordinary people. There were some 20 people who walked with me in China, mostly women. They live in a system that is very constrained and is hierarchal, so the work of women is not rewarded as much as men. Yet they find a way to survive and still be creative to bring value to their lives. It was very inspirational."

7. What does the entourage that's traveling with you consist of, and how has it varied throughout the journey?

"The entourage is just one other person. My walking partners come to the project in multiple ways. They've been following the project and contact us ahead of me coming into their country, and they connect me with friends and relatives ahead on the trail. Some of it is serendipity. In eastern Turkey I met a man in a teashop who was a landscape photographer and he ended up walking with me for seven months, into Georgia.
"I never walk alone. I walk with a local person, to see the world through their eyes. In China I walked with a poet and a historian. I walked with ethnic Tibetan mountaineers, with guides for cultural tourism companies. The people who walk with me share my journey, help with language, and they often have fun discovering their homeland on foot."

8. The theme of this issue of* Wrack Lines *is focused on the relationship between place and community, how caring for places builds communities and visa-versa. What have you learned about place and community through your travels?

"Moving around the world you need community. We're a social species. No matter where you go you can build it. Community is that baseline. We all have that ability to create community by tapping into another person. I went through an area on the outer coast of Alaska with very few people, most of whom had come to escape hyper-urban areas, seeking solitude and quiet landscapes and to commune with nature. They are wonderful people but they also seemed very lonely. They were missing

something to push against. I'm not a nature writer. I'm not interested in a landscape unless there are people in it. Walking to people is the premise of my entire career."

9. Is there a place you would go back to?

"There are people I would go back to. I made deep connections with people in the Caucasus in Georgia, in western Saudi Arabia and in places in China and India. There are over 360,000 villages in India and every single one has a different temperature, a different attitude."

10. How have you looked on the United States over the years of your travels through your various vantage points?

"I'm not an insider, I'm an outsider. I was born in the U.S. but I left when I was 5 and was raised in Latin America. I was last in the United States in 2012, and when I reentered the U.S. for the first time in 12 years last year, it was surreal. Has it changed? Absolutely. When I enter the country next autumn, I hope to record it as honestly as I can. I hope to rediscover the U.S. It's chock-full of good people."

11. When do you anticipate ending your journey?

"Another two to three years."

12. Is there anything you'd like to say to the readers of* Wrack Lines*?

"There's nothing special about what I'm doing. It's getting up in the morning, putting on your shoes, brushing your teeth and going to work. It's always humbling to get to do this every day, to meet people and receive their stories."

Top: Salopek walks along the Wakhan Corridor in Badakhshan, Afghanistan, in 2017. Photo: Matthieu Paley / *National Geographic*
Middle: Salopek captured this photo of a sunset on the southwest area of The Silk Road in Heshun, Yunnan, China, in 2021. Photo: Paul Salopek / *National Geographic*
Bottom: Salopek, his walking partner Lee Junseok and guide Kim Gwi-nam stop near the first gate of Joryeong Path, Mungyeong Saejae Provincial Park, South Korea, in 2024. Photo: Jun Michael Park / *National Geographic*

Poquonnock Road was one of several areas in Groton that flooded during a storm in 2024. Photo courtesy of the Town of Groton

MyCoast CT: collectively verifying need for community resilience projects

By Judy Benson

Photos can be powerful storytellers, even for the photographers themselves.

Just ask Joe Orchardo.

Often on daily walks with his wife around their shoreline neighborhood of Groton Long Point, an association of 640 homes, he'll snap a photo or two on his cell phone and upload them to MyCoast Connecticut. The website collects scenes of flooding and other weather-related damage that are occurring with increasing frequency as sea level rises and storms intensify.

"We have flooding here a few times a year," he said. "Any house that has been renovated in the past five years is being raised to FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) flood requirements, about two to three every year."

One day last March, he walked the neighborhood with a visitor to show some of the areas that have been underwater from storm and tidal surges and storm drain overflows. He paused in front of the small building that serves as Groton Long Point's police and fire station.

"This parking lot had a foot of water in it after the nor'easter in November," he said, pulling up a MyCoast photo on his phone that another resident had uploaded at the time.

Orchardo, who serves as the director of long-range planning for the community, is an enthusiastic ambassador for MyCoast Connecticut, a year-old pilot project in Groton, New London and Stonington that its organizers envision becoming a statewide initiative in the near future. Other Connecticut communities including Branford, Clinton, Greenwich, Milford, Old Lyme, Old Saybrook and Westbrook have either started using it on their own or have expressed interest in joining MyCoast Connecticut.

"One of the most important aspects of MyCoast is that it has raised awareness in the community that flooding is an issue and it's being observed," Orchardo said. "People here enjoy contributing to a community science project and are getting a lot out of it."

Created for the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management 15 years ago, MyCoast has thus far been licensed for use in eight East and West Coast states and

Joe Orchardo, director of long-range planning for Groton Long Point, talks about an area of his neighborhood that flooded during a nor'easter in 2025. Photo: Judy Benson

the Virgin Islands, with funding coming from different sources in each. It basically serves as a web-based scrapbook, but instead of chronicling a family or world travels, it documents high tide and storm flooding and impacts. Community members and public officials alike contribute the photos. They are connected by an app and receive app notifications in advance of potential flooding events that also emphasize keeping safety foremost in any photography excursions. The photos are displayed on the MyCoast site alongside the date, time, weather and tidal data and other information.

Sarah Schechter, assistant extension educator at Connecticut Sea Grant, learned about MyCoast as a graduate student intern with the Rhode Island Sea Grant program, which has been using it since 2014.

"I was really excited to see all the photos MyCoast was able to capture, and the community science focus," she said. "Whenever I see flooding or crazy weather happening, I'm always taking photos and it was great to learn that there is a place to document these events."

Soon after she was hired to join the Sustainable and Resilient Communities team at Connecticut Sea Grant in 2023, Schechter connected with interested partners to start a MyCoast Connecticut pilot, then applied for and received grant funds for the license. Two like-minded environmental organizations conveniently located in the same building as Connecticut Sea Grant on the UConn Avery Point campus agreed to join, the Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve, and the Connecticut Institute for Resilience and Climate Adaptation.

"All the surrounding states (New York, Massachusetts and Rhode Island) had MyCoast," said Schechter, "but the data were missing in Connecticut."

Massachusetts was the first state to start using MyCoast, in 2011. At the time, said Julia Knisel, coastal shoreline and floodplain manager at the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management, efforts had been under way since Hurricane Bob in 1991 to document coastal flooding and erosion in a systematic way for better storm response and recovery project planning. As coastal storm reporting evolved, MyCoast became available as a natural fit to that initiative and expanded into community engagement. Community members and municipal officials were encouraged to upload photos of storm impacts and also King Tide "sunny day" flooding when higher than normal tidal waters overflow onto roads, parking lots and around homes.

The Main Block building is one of several locations in downtown Mystic prone to flooding. Photo courtesy of Town of Groton

An underpass on South Road in Groton is flooded in 2024. Photo courtesy of Town of Groton

More than 1,800 Massachusetts users mainly in five coastal regions have signed on to use the MyCoast app, submitting some 20,000 photos and a few videos since it began. The most frequent users, she added, are municipal and state officials who support the Massachusetts Coastal Storm Damage Assessment Team.

“About 60 percent of the people who’ve signed up have submitted photos,” Knisel said. “A lot of people are there out of curiosity, to see the flooding in their neighborhoods or to look at the tidal tool.”

Knisel listed several examples of tangible benefits from MyCoast: better data to plan coastal resilience projects; images that document the effectiveness of those resilience projects over time; and information to improve flood risk mapping, aid planning for emergency response to storm events and calculate damage assessments.

“A few police officers have even used the tool to determine when a road needed to be closed,” she said.

Next steps for MyCoast in Massachusetts will be to expand into inland communities with increasing flooding vulnerability, especially those along rivers.

Rhode Island, which joined MyCoast soon after Massachusetts, is also expanding its focus beyond the shoreline to inland areas, especially those prone to river and stormwater flooding. About 1,900 people have signed up for MyCoast RI, submitting some 5,900 photos thus far.

“About 1,000 of the users are actively putting in pictures,” said Casey Tremper, coastal resilience specialist at Rhode Island Sea Grant. “Our partners have been essential in reaching community members and helping us understand how they’re experiencing flooding.”

One of those partners is the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, which represents a Providence neighborhood with a large Hispanic population.

“We have been working with residents with the support of the council to ensure the new app is inclusive and accessible,” Tremper said, adding that the council shares the information in Spanish and English with residents. MyCoast photos are being used to develop a proposal for an urban greenway in the neighborhood to help absorb floodwaters, she said.

Another Rhode Island community that has seen tangible benefits from MyCoast is Wickford, a coastal village within the town of North Kingstown where a parking lot and roadway in the commercial center were closed frequently due to flooding. The troubling scene was captured in many MyCoast photos that were put to use in crafting a solution.

“The town used the MyCoast pictures to help get funding for the project,” said Tremper. It included elevation of a seawall, improvements to stormwater flows and construction of a rain garden.

Tremper said the utility of MyCoast becomes more apparent daily, as the trajectory of flooding and storm

intensity shows no sign of letting up.

“In Rhode Island, we’ve seen 10 inches of sea level rise since 1930, and it’s projected to rise another 1½ feet by 2050,” she said. “Rainfall is now 70% more intense than it was in the 1950s. MyCoast gives people actions they can take to be able to record what’s happening.”

Among the three MyCoast Connecticut pilot communities, most of the MyCoast photos thus far have come from Groton—comprised of the separate municipalities of Groton Town and Groton City. Officials in both the city and town are strong proponents.

“I’m really psyched about it, because it raises awareness and it’s a huge help to have the public out there documenting this for us,” said David Prescott, Groton Town land use planner. “In the town, we’re very aware of the consistent flooding we have in the community, in places like downtown Mystic—which is a huge economic engine for us—and in Willow Point, on South Road and Depot Road. We’re looking at all these areas from the standpoint of the town’s infrastructure, emergency access and the stormwater system.”

MyCoast photos, he said, are being used to help prioritize public works projects, for long-range planning and in grant applications. Reaching out to get more community members using MyCoast, he said, will be critical for dealing effectively with the realities of being a coastal community.

“We’re really trying to get that core of volunteers, so when that alert goes out we get as many people out taking photos as possible,” he said.

Like Prescott, Cierra Patrick, Groton City’s economic development manager, can also readily lists the parts of the city subject to frequent flooding: the Five Corners, Jupiter Point and Eastern Point neighborhoods and four main roads—Poquonnock, Mitchell, Hamilton and Benham—among others. When MyCoast CT started last year, she recalled, the city had recently finished a community resilience plan, which identified stormwater flooding as a key problem.

“We figured it all meshed, because we really needed to collect data for resilience work,” Patrick said. “We’ve been using the tool to capture the real-time data to feed into a model for a project we’re developing. MyCoast also allows the community’s voice to come in, along with those of the scientists and planners, so instead of just getting mad about flooding they can report it.”

The biggest challenge for MyCoast CT thus far, said Larissa Graham, education coordinator at the CT NERR, has been connecting with community members. Municipal officials, she said, quickly understand the value of the tool because they deal with flooding routinely.

“It takes a lot of effort to find those community members who are being impacted,” she said.

Fort Hill Brook flooded into Sutton Park in Groton in 2024. Photo courtesy of Town of Groton

Groton, New London and Stonington each have unique flooding issues, economic and social characteristics and governmental structures. New London is a small urban community. Groton is a mix of urban and residential neighborhoods with several large employers and substantial commercial development. Stonington is mostly rural and suburban.

“We need to use different techniques for the different communities,” Graham said. The trial-and-error over the past year of figuring out the most effective types of outreach, she added, will be helpful as MyCoast goes statewide.

With more than 160 photos submitted by 34 users in Groton, New London and Stonington since the MyCoast Connecticut pilot started, the project is well on its way to demonstrating its usefulness, Schechter said. That will be critical in obtaining the funds needed to expand MyCoast CT to the entire state.

“We’ve already had interest in using the photos for grant applications to justify future projects, and we look forward to seeing how MyCoast will contribute to changes throughout Connecticut,” she said.

To sign up for MyCoast CT, visit: https://seagrant.uconn.edu/focus-areas/resilient-communities/mycoast-connecticut/

Gathering the CT community around our common environment

By Judy Benson

Wanjiku Gatheru, center, keynote speaker at the conference, was introduced by Connecticut Land Conservation Council Executive Director Amy Blaymore Patterson and interviewed by David Sutherland after her talk. Photo: Judy Benson

People brought together by love for their local environment aren't just protecting land and wildlife.

They "...are shaping people's relationships to it. This work is not just about the land, it's about belonging to its care."

So said Wanjiku Gatheru, or "Wawa," as she prefers, during her keynote address at the Connecticut Land Conservation Council's annual conference on March 21. Raised in the "Quiet Corner" of Northeast Connecticut, founder of the national non-profit Black Girl Environmentalist (https://blackgirlenvironmentalist.org/) and author of the forthcoming book *The Soul of Our Planet*, she spoke at Weslyan University to an audience of 660 people, many of them members of local land trusts and other conservation and environmental organizations.

"What your groups do are not just acts of conservation, they are acts of world-building," she said. "Our relationship to the land is something we practice together."

Her inspirational message was well appreciated by three young women in the audience, Zion Jones of New Haven, Sara Trueax of Wethersfield and Addie Mehl of Winchester. Jones is on the staff of Gather New Haven, which promotes "neighbors and nature thriving together," while Trueax and Mehl are part of more traditional land trusts in their communities. The three met during a group exercise at one of the more than 50 conference workshops that day and shared some of their takeaways.

"There are a lot of people in Connecticut doing great work," said Mehl, who is relatively new to the state. "Building relationships with diverse groups is the way forward."

Trueax said she's been coming to the annual conference for several years to get re-energized by learning about projects going on around the state. She also appreciated being reminded to always consider the bigger context of history and socio-economic factors before embarking on a new initiative.

"We need to make sure we're looking at things holistically," she said.

For Zion, the conference brought out the need for environmental groups to expand their reach into communities being disproportionately impacted by pollution and other environmental harms.

"A major thing I've been hearing," she said, "is uplifting the marginalized and under-resourced communities who we need to be the new leaders of conservation in Connecticut."

That was one of the main themes of the workshop where she met Trueax and Mehl. Titled "Youth and Community Science," it was led by UConn Associate Extension Professor Laura Cisneros and four UConn students who served as mentors to high school youth from urban communities in the Conservation Ambassador Program. It seeks to "provide a pathway into environmental careers" and "elevate youth leadership," Cisneros said.

After a summer field experience, the high school students return home to lead their own community-based environmental projects. These have included improving access to parks and other green spaces and helping create a community garden in a Hispanic neighborhood.

"The goal of the projects was to prioritize equity and justice-oriented work, and for the students to understand the origin of the problem," said Shanelle Therarajah, one of the mentors, all of whom wore T-shirts with "Environmental Changemaker" written on the back.

Between workshops, participants had a chance to visit the information tables of dozens of organizations with diverse environmental missions pertaining to topics such as farmland, tree diseases, green energy, soil health and financial support for land conservation. The workshops offered a similar variety of themes, from building a firefly sanctuary to dog policies, crafting effective messages for signs to the role of land trusts in meeting the need for affordable housing.

The need to bridge the divide between land conservation and improving communities for the people who live there was addressed at a morning workshop titled, "What is a Community Land Trust?"

"We're all being asked to do more," said Clayton Potter, vice president of the New London-based Southeastern Connecticut Community Land Trust. "We're being called to look at the larger ecosystem, to think about the people beyond the preserves, beyond your property boundaries."

Myrna Martinez, executive director of the community land trust, said her group has helped create pocket parks and community gardens in New London, helped make home ownership possible for people who could not otherwise afford it, and worked with another land trust on a project that preserved a working farm while also conserving open space.

"The human part—peoples' needs—overlay the land for us," she said.

What's in our names?

What are wrack lines? The word wrack is a term for various kinds of seaweed, and wrack lines are the collections of organic matter (sea grass, shells, feathers, seaweed and other debris) that are deposited on shore by high tides. More generally, wrack lines are where the sea meets the land.

With our magazine *Wrack Lines*, we tell stories about the intersection of the land, sea and Connecticut Sea Grant. So what is Connecticut Sea Grant? One of 34 Sea Grant programs across the country, it helps residents make the most of our coastal resources and inland waterways. It addresses the challenges that come with living by the water or within the Long Island Sound watershed, in a state with 332 miles of shoreline and three major tidal rivers.

This NOAA-state partnership based at UConn's Avery Point campus works with aquaculture farmers, fishermen and seafood purveyors to help their businesses prosper. It funds research essential to understanding and managing our changing coastal and inland environments. It provides communities and local leaders with the information they need to make better land and shoreline decisions that result in more resilient communities and healthier watersheds. It educates students as well as teachers and adults of all ages about the marine environment.

An egret wades just offshore from a wrack line dominated by dried eelgrass at Esker Point Beach in Groton. Photo: Judy Benson

Connected to experts and residents who live, work and recreate in the Sound and its watershed, it brings varied interests together around a common purpose of working for mutually beneficial solutions to problems. Small in staff but big in impact, Connecticut Sea Grant is like a pilot boat that navigates the way for large vessels toward safe harbors. Since 1988, Connecticut Sea Grant has supported "Science Serving the Connecticut Coast."

Send us your Restoration Stories!

RESTORATION OF NATURAL SPACES will be the theme of the Fall/Winter 2026-2027 issue, and we would like to hear from you!

Please send us 100 words or less about a restoration project in your Connecticut community, along with a photo of 1 MB or larger. The project must be one that is past the planning stage where the work has begun or is completed. Please include date of project, location, names of partners involved, why it is significant and how the community was involved. We will publish as many as possible in the Fall/Winter 2026-2027 issue of the magazine and on our website, www.seagrant.uconn.edu.

Send submissions to Judy Benson, Connecticut Sea Grant communications coordinator, at: judy.benson@uconn.edu, and please include contact phone number.

Submissions must be received **NO LATER THAN AUGUST 15, 2026.**

Old Saybrook High School students plant beach grass as part of a living shoreline restoration project in the Fenwick section of town. Photos: Juliana Barrett

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A common loon swims with a chick on its back. Photo: Tomas Koeck

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