

Communities willing to face environmental challenges have new allies at CT Sea Grant

Story and photos by Judy Benson

On a chilly December morning as a snow squall loomed, 20 people gathered on a hillside at Hamden Town Center Park.

It was the perfect vantage point to view a small pond and surrounding vegetation with an outsized significance as an example of how one town successfully took on the challenge of resilience. In just under an acre of the park, Hamden public works crews followed nature-inspired principles to landscape the area with a pond, stone-lined channels to corral water and native plants to filter runoff and create habitat for native insects and birds. Called a rain garden, it's considered an environmentally friendly solution to flooding problems that can be scaled and adapted to a wide variety of sites.

"It was an undervalued property at the end of a stormwater outfall," said Nicole Davis, watershed projects manager for the nonprofit group Save the Sound, which worked with the town on the project.

She motioned toward the far end of the pond.

"There is the channel that the stormwater is now flowing through."

Among those learning about the pond and plantings were Sarah Schechter and Deborah Visco Abibou. They organized the field trip and complementary workshop that afternoon for local officials and volunteers who work on land use issues for towns, land trusts, watershed alliances and other groups. It was followed by three virtual workshops they organized, together with four teammates in New York, each attended by more than

100 people. The sessions featured speakers who led other types of resilience projects and shared nitty-gritty details about how much they cost and how they were funded, along with tools available to bring project ideas to fruition.

Each with the title of assistant extension educator-sustainable & resilient communities, Schechter and Abibou are part of Connecticut Sea Grant and work with four New York Sea Grant counterparts on a four-year-old bi-state initiative with the Environmental Protection Agency's Long Island Sound Study. Their collective mission is to help communities in the Sound's coastal watershed adapt to increases in flooding and storm intensity with projects that make it easier for them to build long-lasting, sustainable communities. Some of the ways they accomplish this include enhancing cooperation between regions, training and empowering local leaders, assisting with grants and other resources for community infrastructure projects and helping plan improvement projects. The team established the framework for their new positions using the results of a needs assessment to create a work plan, adjusting as they move forward.

"I've learned from our communities what needs to be done and where the support is most effective," said Abibou, who is based in North Haven and focuses on Western Connecticut. "We're still at the front end of projects, but it'll be exciting when we have projects moving to implementation. I also understand about the volume of work to be done."

Schechter focuses on Eastern Connecticut and is based at the UConn Avery Point campus in Groton. As she and Abibou began interacting with various groups, they quickly learned



Attendees at a workshop in December organized by Schechter and Abibou learn about the rain garden installed at a Hamden town park.



Nicole Davis, watershed projects manager for Save the Sound, talks about the rain garden project to the group.



Schechter joined FRESH New London volunteers at a garlic planting festival at the organization's community garden last fall.

that one of the biggest needs was funding to hire grant writers to help towns and nonprofits access larger pots of funding for projects—basically a grant to get a grant.

“We’ve been responding to the need for capacity to apply for grants,” Schechter said. “We’ve also tried to provide development and planning support.”

Both are early in their careers as environmental professionals. Abibou, 40, came to the position in the fall of 2021 after doing coastal restoration and resilience work in Louisiana for a few years after earning a doctorate in ecology and evolutionary biology at Tulane University. Schechter, 25, joined Connecticut Sea Grant in the spring of 2023, after earning a master’s degree in environmental science and management at the University of Rhode Island while interning at Rhode Island Sea Grant.

“We saw an opportunity to address Long Island Sound Study goals for resilience of communities and ecosystems through Sea Grant extension and outreach methods,” said Sylvain De Guise, director of Connecticut Sea Grant. “While pooling resources, capacity and expertise of the team with members in Connecticut and New York, we envisioned a place-based approach where extension professionals like Deb and Sarah are embedded in the communities they serve. We meet people where they are to better understand their needs and help address them. Deb and Sarah have a great combination of technical expertise and people skills to fulfill that role.”

Hearing from some of the community partners Abibou and Schechter have been working with is probably the best way to understand how they’ve been trying to make the abstract idea of “sustainable and resilient communities” into a reality.

Take Vanessa Liles, director of PT Partners public housing task force in Bridgeport, and leader of other initiatives in the state’s most populous city that is also one of its poorest. The housing complex her group represents, home to about 31,500 people, is located near the city’s sewage treatment plant. The plant is under legal order to expand and upgrade so its discharge doesn’t pollute Long Island Sound. Residents wanted to have a say in the project.

“This is an industrial zone, but the people who live here shouldn’t be unfairly targeted,” Liles said. “Deb started coming to our monthly meetings and has been great at adding expertise on these issues, telling us what questions to ask, and explaining aspects about the chemicals and types of equipment used in the treatment tanks. They wanted to tear down a greenway of trees between the plant and the current facility, but we’re fighting now to get the trees put back in.”

Abibou’s participation, Liles said, has helped empower her group by sharing her technical knowledge, participating in a listening session with residents and helping secure funds for a grant writer, the first step toward addressing a longstanding need to tackle persistent flooding problems in the neighborhood.

“She understands that relationship building is really key to being effective,” Liles said. “This is exactly what a grass-roots organization needs.”

Chris Sullivan heads an organization that serves a large region, Fairfield and New Haven counties, plus the town of Southington. Through Abibou, he learned about funding available for resilience projects, and had just such a project in mind.

“We’ve been trying to get funding to update our Norwalk River watershed plan, but we hadn’t been successful,” said Sullivan, the executive director of the Southwest Conservation District for the past five years. “The plan we had was outdated and needed to be revised and enhanced.”

With the updated version of the plan, now in early stages, the district hopes to be able to begin addressing the water quality, erosion, flooding and nutrient problems plaguing the Norwalk River and its watershed. Sullivan also attended a workshop organized by Abibou and Schechter that introduced him to a host of grant programs, along with giving him an opportunity to network with colleagues from other organizations.



Abibou participated in a meeting of the Six Lakes Park Coalition in July 2024 to gather public input on plans for a future state park in the Six Lakes area of Hamden.



“There are all sorts of projects we can do, but having help finding the best potential funders is really helpful,” Sullivan said.

The district also worked with Abibou on a water science education event last fall focusing on the Mill River in New Haven, Sullivan said. About 50 adults and youth attended, many affiliated with the New Haven-based organization CPEN (Community Placemaking Engagement Network). It was the first time the district had worked with CPEN, but he expects it won't be the last.

“We've been trying to do more in underserved communities, so this is a great connection,” Sullivan said. “It's been really helpful to have Deb interact with and connect different parties.”

In Eastern Connecticut, Schechter has also made an impact, despite being on the job for less than two years. Megan Granato, sustainability and resilience manager for the Town of Groton, was also new to her job when Schechter started, but the two quickly connected.

“She helped provide funding for incentives to engage the public in our tree survey and has participated in our community resilience meeting with stakeholders,” Granato said. “I really appreciate Sarah as another sounding board for resilience planning. I'm really thankful for my relationship with Sarah.”

Granato also took advantage of a field trip planned by Schechter and Abibou to see a series of bio-retention projects installed by the City of New Haven that help address that city's flooding problems.

Maggie Favretti, founding director of the Alliance for the Mystic River Watershed, recalled that Schechter participated in the early stages of the two-year-old organization as it was honing its mission.

“She helped us define what we meant by community resilience, and with what we can do regionally,” Favretti said. “She also made it possible for us to access funding for a community learning and gathering event, making it possible for it to be free.”

The Alliance also received a grant writing support grant with Sarah's help. The grant writer the Alliance hired then successfully applied for a larger grant to create a community-led plan for the watershed.

“As a start-up organization,” Favretti said, “I don't know what we would have done without Sarah.”

In addition to the grants and local partnership work, Abibou, Schechter and the rest of the resilience team worked together to create a web-based resilience tool library available to anyone with Internet access. Called the Long Island Sound

Resilience Resource Hub (<https://www.lisresilience.org/>), it is a collection of curated information about environmental problems, possible solutions, and examples of how to implement and sustain projects that Favretti and many others working on resilience are finding invaluable.

Now, as the pair work on designing a new funding workshop that responds to the changing grant landscape, they are drawing on the motivations that first drew them to resilience work to stay focused and committed.

“I developed a passion for coastal issues in Connecticut as an undergraduate at UConn,” Schechter said. “Not everyone has the same opportunity to access the coast, but there are ways to make it easier. It's really interesting to learn why these places are important to people and help make sure that they can continue to be connected to the coast. That's what keeps me going.”

Abibou said she was drawn into resilience work out of a desire to make an impact on conservation solutions in the human sphere, a departure from her academic career in the more esoteric world of wildlife research.

“I had a growing appreciation of community and place,” she said. “And I came to appreciate that communities need to be the ones making the decisions about the places they live. Their support is really vital to getting projects initiated but also to making them last. It's really satisfying to be responsive in working with communities to make a difference.”

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Deborah Visco Abibou, left, and Sarah Schechter.