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7 Rivers Festival emphasizes interconnected nature of watershed



Steve Brown of the Watch Hill Conservancy leads a group on a guided walk toward the highest point of the Napatree Point Conservation Area in Westerly on Saturday, June 25, 2022, during the 7 Rivers Festival celebrating the federal Wild & Scenic status of the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed in Rhode Island and eastern Connecticut. (Daniel Passapera/Special to The Day)

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Westerly — At the mouth of the Pawcatuck River, where the 1938 hurricane severed a sandbar from the Napatree Point peninsula and turned the smaller spit into an island, nature enthusiasts from Rhode Island and Connecticut are celebrating federal recognition that will protect the watershed going forward.

Watch Hill Conservancy science adviser Pete August of Richmond, R.I., said the two-day **7 Rivers Festival** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20220620/seven-rivers-festival-this-weekend>) held this weekend was the first public celebration of the designation of the Wood-Pawcatuck River Watershed as a Wild and Scenic River system.

The seven major rivers — Queen, Wood, Chickasheen, Chipuxet, Shunock, Green Falls and Pawcatuck — and their tributaries draining into Little Narragansett Bay were **afforded the federal protection** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20190313/updated-pawcatuck-river-receives-federal-protections>) in 2019. That's when then-President Donald Trump signed into law a bipartisan deal to protect 1.3 million acres of land, including 367 miles of new scenic rivers.

"Only about one-half of 1% of the country's rivers have qualified for that designation," August said. It capped almost a decade of advocacy at the grassroots, local and state levels.

Classifying a river as "wild" means there is little development in surrounding areas and "scenic" means it is still largely undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads.

The festival included 30 events spread out across Stonington, Westerly, North Stonington, Sterling, Voluntown and seven other Rhode Island communities.

August was at the Napatree Point Conservation Area on Saturday morning to help kick off the festival with a guided tour of the preserve. It is owned by the Watch Hill Fire District and managed by the Watch Hill Conservancy through a conservation easement.

About 30 people attended the guided tour, splitting into two groups led by August and Steve Brown, a longtime leader of nature walks over the dunes of Napatree. They traversed much of the 1.3-mile-long peninsula sticking out between Block Island Sound and Little Narragansett Bay.

Brown talked about the ocean side, while August covered the bay side and the interconnected nature of preservation efforts in both Rhode Island and Connecticut.

August pointed north to Stonington's Barn Island, with its 1,000 state-owned acres of forests and a salt marsh unparalleled in the state.

"All protected," he said.

He pointed to Sandy Point, a 1.5-mile-long barrier island more than a mile to their north that used to be part of Napatree before the hurricane took it away. Now, the area owned by the Avalonia Land Conservancy is recognized as a critically important bird breeding area for terns, American oystercatchers and piping plovers, according to August.

"100% protected," he said.

The threatened American oystercatchers now feed on growing mussel beds on the beach; terns eat the bait fish that live in masses of eelgrass in Little Narragansett Bay.

"All the pieces talk," he said. "It's really a very spectacular, intact ecosystem with these different components that all rely on each other."

On the other side of the peninsula, Brown's group crossed over the dunes to the open expanse of Block Island Sound. They were careful to avoid beachgrass that slows the inevitable movement of the barrier beach. Brown said the *Ammophila* species can "survive the heat, the sand, the salt air, but it can't survive people walking on it."

He told the group that the barrier beach is a moving thing, effectively rolling over on itself as waves, wind and storms push sand landward from the beach and through the dunes. The beachgrass is a deceptively strong line of defense when left undisturbed.

"Yes, it's a barrier beach and it's natural for it to head north, but we don't want it to head north quickly," he said.

Brown recounted stories of the 1938 hurricane that killed 15 people and wiped out all 39 homes on Napatree, including that of the Moore family. Their house broke away with 11 family members and employees seeking high ground in the attic.

"They had no idea if they were heading to Block Island or if they were heading to Stonington," he said.

They landed alive on the marshes of Barn Island. Across the Northeast, the storm killed 682 people.

Brown's co-leader also invoked the hurricane when he talked about the slabs of cement and pipes that remain as the legacy of homes built on a moving beach.

"As sad as it was to see the loss of property and life in the hurricane of '38, that the fire district was able to purchase all that land and turn it into a public resource was really a great thing," August said.

Colleen Torbett of Westerly said she often goes out in her kayak off Barn Island. The guided tour helped put the wider area — including the Wood-Pawcatuck River Watershed — into context for her.

Joe Perry of Hope Valley, R.I., credited stories of the hurricane as well as remnants of the abandoned Fort Mansfield at the tip of the peninsula with capturing his imagination.

"History and nature combined is great," he said.

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Two groups split up for a naturalist guided tour at Napatree Point Conservation Area in Westerly on Saturday, June 25, 2022, during the 7 Rivers Festival celebrating the federal Wild & Scenic status of the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed in Rhode Island and eastern Connecticut. (Daniel Passapera/Special to The Day)

If you go

The 7 Rivers Festival, which recognizes the federal Wild & Scenic status of the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed in Rhode Island and eastern Connecticut, continues Sunday. For a full listing of activities, visit **bit.ly/7riversfest22** (**<https://bit.ly/7riversfest22>**).

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