

# A Green Way to Grow

By Monica Allard Cox

It may be hard to imagine, but there is a forest in Providence along the Seekonk River that looks like it did when the Pilgrims arrived.

The forest, behind Butler Hospital, is similar to virgin forest, says Numi Mitchell, vice president of The Conservation Agency. Mitchell, a biologist, was hired to assess the forest habitat lining the shore of the northern Narragansett Bay communities of Cranston, East Providence, Pawtucket, and Providence as part of the Metro Bay Special Area Management Plan (SAMP), which addresses regional coastal issues. This assessment was used to identify and prioritize areas for habitat conservation or restoration or public recreation.

Mitchell, whose assessment sometimes involved cajoling security guards to allow her entry to an area, drove throughout the Metro Bay region, searching for locations to access the habitat corridor, some of it quite narrow. She examined everything from an impressive old beech forest to animal tracks and invasive species, and even paused to observe the activities of an ant lion. She found valuable oak forest in Pawtucket and a gully of rich vegetation next to Sunshine Creamery in East Providence.

The R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), which has jurisdiction over the state's coastal areas, has sought to preserve this type of natural vegetation—which serves to control shoreline erosion, absorb pollutants, and protect water quality, habitat, and aesthetic features—along the state's entire shoreline through vegetative buffer regulations. For the Metro Bay area, these regulations are being refined through CRMC's new Urban Coastal Greenway (UCG) Policy, which seeks to create a greenway that would provide both public access and a habitat corridor along the Metro Bay shoreline.

Mitchell's observations formed part of the basis of the zones, reviewed by the municipalities, where different UCG Policy regulations apply.

The new regulations were created to update the Providence Harbor SAMP, which was written over 20 years ago, and to make current regulations reflect the urban setting of the region, where coastal development or redevelopment issues may be quite different than in less developed areas. The UCG Policy focuses on those buffer values that are important in highly urban settings—public access, innovative stormwater management, and a greening of the urban area.

CRMC is offering coastal developers in the Metro Bay area a choice between following the council's standard vegetated buffer requirements, which apply all along the state's coastline, or the UCG Policy, which allows flexibility in buffer widths in return for compensation such as public access or habitat conservation. The UCG Policy divides the Metro Bay shoreline into four zones: the Area of Particular Concern Zone, the Residential Zone, the Inner Harbor and River Zone, and the Development Zone. The ability to reduce buffer widths varies by zone, with the most restrictive zone—which includes that forest along the banks of the Seekonk—being the Area of Particular Concern.

Rhode Island Sea Grant/URI Coastal Resources Center conducted Low Impact Development training workshops in September to provide the CRMC-required certification for reviewers of projects within the Metro Bay SAMP region. The council unanimously approved the policy in October.

"The feedback from the municipalities has been very positive, and both the development community and environmental community seem to favor this as a policy that is more predictive and transparent than the current process," says Grover Fugate, CRMC executive director. "We have a series of projects in Pawtucket, East Providence, and Providence in various stages of review that are all opting to use the UCG."

The UCG Policy is on-line at [www.crmc.ri.gov](http://www.crmc.ri.gov). For more information on the Metro Bay SAMP, visit [seagrant.gso.uri.edu/metrosamp](http://seagrant.gso.uri.edu/metrosamp).

—Monica Allard Cox is a Communicator for Rhode Island Sea Grant.



Biologist Numi Mitchell checks a tree's age in the forest along the Seekonk River. Photos by Monica Allard Cox.