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Editorial

Clearing the Forest

It is a place most of us take for granted every day on the Vineyard, a vast, heavily treed place embracing 5,200 acres in the ecological heart of the Island. It is the last unbroken piece of rare sandplain habitat left in the world and the single largest tract of conservation land on the Vineyard. It provides critical protection for the Island aquifer which is its water supply. And yet for a long time, the Manuel F. Correllus State Forest has been the forgotten stepchild of the environmental movement.

Today, after years of neglect, funding shortages and quiet infighting among the state environmental agencies that are responsible for its stewardship, the forest has been tagged for a new and exhilarating project. The newly organized Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation has confirmed that it will solicit bids from logging companies to clear some 500 acres of red and white pine plantations from the old forest.

The project still must go through a public bidding process, and the commonwealth's conservation and recreation department has trained its sights on logging companies that specialize in forest clearing operations on Islands. Who even knew that such a specialty existed - but of course it makes sense - the sheer logistics of clearing wood from 500 acres on an Island will require special expertise, not to mention an array of equipment not normally associated with logging, such as barges and tugboats.

In 1908 the forest was established as a reservation for the heath hen, a subspecies of grouse that had become extinct everywhere except on the Vineyard. The heath hen faded from existence on the Vineyard in 1932, and that was when state officials began to plant tracts of red and white pine in the sandy scrub oak barrens that formed the heartland of the Island. There was some wisdom to the planting at the time; the pines were intended to create a lumber industry, but the market never materialized, and more to the point neither did the forest. Planted well south of their range, the red pines fell victim to a fungus that left them dead or dying. The white pines became infested with a weevil that stunted their growth, drastically reducing their market value for board lumber.

Today the red pines are a blighted ruin, good only for pulp. The white pines may have some minor market value that could induce a logging company to come to the Vineyard to do the work.

In the venerable old forest, vestiges of the Great Plain still remain, and along with them an array of rare plants and animals that are considered key elements in the Island's ecology, among them bushy rock rose, sandplain gerardia and the purple tiger beetle.

The tangled mess in the state forest today threatens these rare species, and there is another threat that is just as dire and certainly more immediate: the prospect of uncontrolled outbreaks of fire. Respected leaders in the Vineyard's volunteer firefighting community have been sounding the alarm about this for some time.

Five years ago Harvard University published a report with a plan to save the forest; the vision would return the forest to its natural state through a massive clearing project coupled with other measures like controlled burns.

Now it appears that the state is ready to carry out the vision articulated in the Harvard study, and if it all comes together the project will be fascinating to chronicle, a story for Islanders to tell for generations to come. It could well become the environmental story of the decade as the old forest takes center stage, no longer a forgotten stepchild in the conservation movement.

There is much still to learn and absorb in the weeks and months ahead - 500 acres is a tenth of the forest and that's a mind-boggling number of trees - but at the outset one word comes to mind at the news of this new plan:

Finally.

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State Forest Tapped for Massive Clearing

By TOM DUNLOP

Swift and monumental change may soon come to blighted landscapes in the Manuel F. Correllus State Forest, which lies at the geographical and ecological heart of Martha's Vineyard.

In the name of biological diversity, fire safety and the appearance of the forest, more than 500 acres of dead and dying trees in the red pine plantations - together with healthier but meteorologically doomed trees in adjacent white pine plantations - are now expected to be cut down and shipped away within the next year.

The ambitious new logging and removal plans began to develop earlier this month. James Rassman, management forester for southeastern Massachusetts, told the Gazette this week that the Department of Conservation and Recreation, a newly organized state agency that assumed ownership of the forest last year, plans to prepare bids and solicit logging companies that specialize in the complicated and expensive business of removing vast numbers of trees from offshore islands.

"If [the logging companies] walk away and say, 'No way. It's not enough wood, or not enough quality, or it's too big of a hassle, or the dock isn't right,' or whatever - then we're back to the drawing board," Mr. Rassman said of what he believes may be the last chance for the state to get rid of the alien and degraded trees all at once.

The logging operation is aimed at clearing away the remaining exotic trees that were planted over the course of the past 80 years on up to a quarter of the state forest - a 5,146-acre landscape of vital ecological importance to the Vineyard, the state and southeastern New England. Historically unscarred by agriculture, the state forest contains the densest undisturbed concentration of rare plants and insects in the commonwealth - and perhaps, species for species, in the northeastern states, according to scientists who have studied it.

The commonwealth wants to remove all the stands of planted trees that remain in the forest. This amounts to 528 acres - some 175 acres of white pine, 350 acres of red pine and a few Scotch pines scattered among the red and white.

Plants found in the state forest that are considered fundamental to the ecology of the Island include bushy rockrose, sandplain gerardia and sandplain flax. Insects and moths in the same category include the barrens buck moth, pine barrens metarranthis and purple tiger beetle. The forest plantations now threaten these indigenous species by crowding and overshadowing them, scientists in several ecological fields say.

"We've replaced our native system, at least partially, with this nonnative component," Tim Simmons, restoration ecologist for the state Natural History and Endangered Species Program, told the Gazette this week. The indigenous and threatened Island wildlife "is worth preserving and has a higher value than those poor, stunted, old, salt-blasted pine trees ever will. I think the

documentation that this place is very different from other places, and every square inch of it is important to us, is an important recognition."

The red and white pine trees - which were planted in two massive operations between 1925 and 1941, and then again in the mid-1960s - grew to maturity on about 1,100 acres of the ancient scrub oak barrens and frost bottoms historically known to Vineyarders as the Great Plain.

Because of them, there is also a rising concern about the threat of wildfire in the forest.

The U.S. Forest Service reports that the southeastern Massachusetts landscape is the third most flammable area in the continental United States, after the Oakland hills of California and the pine barrens of New Jersey, according to Aaron J. Whiddon, forest fire patrolman for Dukes County.

Forest managers and ecologists say removing most of the remaining pine plantations will lower the risk of a catastrophic wildfire in the forest. They say it will also clear the way to restoring native processes - controlled burns and techniques that mimic burning, such as mowing at critical points during the year - that will at once reduce the risk of future fires and benefit rare and native plants and insects on the old scrub and pitch pine woodlands.

"We're in a situation where we would like to just get rid of our nonnative plantations and essentially restore them to native vegetation," said Mr. Rassman. "But it would create a huge amount of biomass [or] fuel. What are we going to do? We can't just chop this stuff down and leave it on the ground."

No Island sawmill has the capacity to deal with the wood that clearing the plantations would produce, Mr. Rassman said. It amounts to more than a million board feet of marketable lumber and an additional 5,000 cords of pulp wood. A mainland logger said recently that shipping the wood off-Island would be prohibitively expensive for any company that did not have its own barges and tugs.

"So it's all going to come down to the transportation," Mr. Rassman said. "What is it going to cost [a logger] to cut the tree, get it to a dock, put it on a boat and get that boat to the mill? My guess is any value in the wood is going to be eaten up by transportation costs. That's how it works. We're going to be nervously saying, 'We hope it's good enough that they can make a profit on it. Or keep their equipment running when they normally don't have business,' " he said.

"If we do this," Mr. Rassman added of the logging operation, "we can't go out and just pick away at it. Because this type of company, with its equipment and people - they need volume. So it would be a pretty heavy effect on the Island. Even though out of 5,000 acres, we're only talking about 500, it's still 10 per cent." He said the goal is to start and finish the job during a single fall, winter and spring, perhaps as early as next year.

State forest officials are concerned about the reaction of the Vineyard public to the idea of a massive logging operation that clears away great stands of trees - even if they were trees originally planted for logging - in the interest of ecology, fire safety and aesthetics.

"First, do people feel comfortable with the idea of managing the state forest on Martha's Vineyard as a natural, functioning ecosystem, made up of native species?" Mr. Rassman asked. "And also protecting human health and safety by reducing fire risk, or proactively avoiding catastrophic fires by getting rid of fuel buildups in these plantations?"

He continued: " ‘Theoretically, I can go for that,' an Island resident might say. Now the next part is, what would that mean? That would mean cutting 528 acres of trees. Okay, that's a little more to deal with. Now you've got to go back again and review why you're thinking about doing it. Bit by bit is the way I see the process. Explanation is the key."

Though clearing the skeletal red pine plantations that line the Edgartown-West Tisbury Road and reach deep into the forest may make sense to Vineyarders, taking down soaring, healthy white pines may trouble them, Mr. Rassman said. The problem is that a mainland logging firm won't take the worthless red without also taking the more valuable white. A successful bidder will be contractually bound to take both, Mr. Rassman said.

Mr. Simmons said the white pines present an inevitable ecological and fire safety problem of their own.

"The white pines, the red pines, the Scotch pines - they're all going to go down anyway," he said. "These things are terribly vulnerable to tropical storms and hurricanes. And as we saw after Gloria [in 1985] and Bob [1991], they took the brunt of those winds and we ended up with a mess of crisscrossed timber that was very, very expensive to then salvage-harvest. So our assumption is that with or without us, these trees are going to go down, probably in a catastrophic manner. To do it neatly, and fundamentally ecologically and economically, is much better than watching them die on the stump."

The state forest was originally established in 1908 as a reservation for the heath hen, a subspecies of grouse that by 1870 had been wiped out everywhere in the east except for Martha's Vineyard. The heath hen went extinct on the Island in 1932, even as the state began planting the tracts of red and white pine in the sandy scrub oak barrens of the old Great Plain.

The pines were intended to create a Vineyard lumber industry, but the marketplace never materialized. The red pines were planted south of their natural range and fell victim to a devastating fungal pathogen, diplodia pinea, which has left them a wintry-looking ruin wherever they stand or fall. The white pine, unthinned and afflicted years ago by a weevil that reduced the lengths of saleable saw logs, never grew into the trees they might have been.

"They were put in at a time when natural-resource managers were dominated by foresters," said Bill Patterson, a forestry professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, "and almost all of society felt that barrens were worthless land and should be used for an economic end. So they tried . . . . [But] red pine and white pine don't thrive in these soils, in this environment, with the pathogens that are out here. It makes sense to liquidate these plantations. Even if you can't make money on it, you're better off getting rid of them than you are maintaining them."

The former heath hen reservation eventually grew to nearly 5,200 acres and became the Manuel F. Correllus State Forest, named for the superintendent who ran it from 1948 to 1987. Among its virtues - the vast and strange beauty that both separates and connects it to the rest of the Island; its trails for riding, cycling, running and walking; and its wilderness for hunting - the state forest protects the single freshwater aquifer serving the whole of Martha's Vineyard.

"I'd say it's the absolute anchor," said Mr. Simmons of the state forest. "All the populations of things we're concerned about out there [on the Island] would have a much higher probability of being extinguished if it were not for the state forest. All the large properties out there are important. But as a dynamic Island group of habitats, the state forest is absolutely paramount.

Success in the long term is not possible without a healthy state forest. And statewide and region wide, it's unrepeated anywhere else."

Mr. Rassman said public education, planning, permitting, bidding and contracting a logging operation must happen quickly, or probably not at all.

"The quality of the wood is going by," he said. "Anybody that would be partially interested is not going to be interested in it two years from now. So if we're going to do this, we've got to do it quick."