

## NELF Lunch Chat Discussion

June 16, 2020

Topic: NELF Suggestion Box and Presentation by Mary Rickel Pelletier, Park Watershed

### Presentation and Speaker Information

*Watershed planning to protect and revitalize riparian corridors along the Lower Connecticut River*

Mary Rickel Pelletier is the founding director of [Park Watershed](#), a 501(c)3 urban-suburban environmental stewardship organization. Mary has a Bachelor of Architecture from the Rhode Island School of Design and a Master of Design from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Mary is co-leading a NELF Working Group in partnership with Trinity College, CT River Conservancy, and Sustainable CT. Their project explores how urban-suburban riparian corridors offer uniquely vital ecosystem service benefits within high-density urban-suburban communities that deserve increased protections. In her talk, Mary will describe how woodland landscape fragments along inland riparian corridors are arteries of ecosystem connectivity and community resilience and her use of the NELF scenarios to protect and revitalize these essential landscapes.

### Takeaways

1. Good design can make our cities more wild and more livable, enhancing the resilience of both urban (e.g. more access to nature, better air quality, improved flood mitigation) and rural (e.g. reduce development pressure, limit sprawl) communities.
2. Riparian corridors are an ideal location for urban wildlands because they can connect landscapes and protected areas, as well as balance wildland needs with other open space needs such as recreation. This riparian-centered approach is fundamental to Park Watershed's work.
3. Connected Communities is the NELF scenario most informing their working group activities. They are interested in identifying concrete steps to realizing a Connected Communities future in a local urban-suburban context.
4. This presentation is available to [watch on YouTube](#). The recording has closed captions.

### Next Steps

1. Save the date for the next NELF Lunch Chat – July 21, 2020 at 11:30am
2. Continue to [map NELF signals](#) and [suggest resources and actions](#) to help our community understand and address structural inequality.
3. Reflect on what a [Connected Communities](#) future would look like in your neighborhood. What half-steps within each bullet point get you there?

### Discussion Summary

*Marissa introduces the [NELF Suggestion Box](#): Inspired by the thoughtful and actionable suggestions we received in response to our June 3 email about the role of land ownership and land policy in perpetuating structural inequality, we hope we can compile and [amplify more resources](#) and suggestions.*

*Marissa introduces Mary and thanks her for helping her more fully realize the importance of not just conserving rural areas but the places where people live. Mary begins her presentation:*

- The Park River Regional Watershed is a 78 square mile watershed nestled in the Hartford, CT metro area. During the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, urban areas and rivers were not much cared for by the dominant society or conservation community:

- The Park River is buried under I-84 in Hartford, reflecting the historic valuing of industry and automobiles over nature.
- When she first began this work 15-20 years ago, someone in the conservation community told her that this urban-suburban watershed was a “throwaway watershed.”
  - The architectural community (Mary is trained as a designer) disputes this view of urbanity and believes that there are no throwaway lands.
- Using photos, maps, and stories, Mary points out how much nature and wildlife can exist within a city like Hartford that might appear “too urbanized” to have such life. In her neighborhood, bear, duck, deer, and bobcats have been spotted.
  - Wildlife has proven more effective than water quality in communicating the value of riparian corridors to her urban community.
- Mary’s work is concentrated in the 28 square mile North Branch Park River Watershed. This river used to be high quality but is now degraded and the waterways are considered impaired.
- Her work demonstrates how it is possible to improve local water quality with wildland stream buffers, as opposed to concentrating water quality restoration efforts in headwaters.
  - This is empowering for local communities!
- Riparian corridors represent an ideal location for urban wildlands because:
  - Space is limited and there are other open space needs in cities, such as recreation. Managed, multi-use open spaces are increasingly unlike natural processes.
    - Large, mature trees are being proactively removed – particularly since Hurricane Sandy -- due to perceived hazards and liability concerns. These mature native trees (parks are 100+ years old) are being replaced by non-native saplings that cannot offer the same benefits as mature native trees.
  - Protecting stream corridors can create a capillary network of functioning ecosystems that increase resiliency and connect the patchwork of non-riparian protected lands.
    - Important (and a potential conservation challenge) that these corridors be non-recreational so that natural processes, such as tree decomposition and floodplain flooding, can continue.
  - Many schools are located along rivers. Keeping nearby riparian areas natural and decreasing educators’ barriers to getting students outside can turn these riparian areas into a science learning resource.

*Questions and discussion of Mary’s presentation:*

- Is the river being used by school groups?
  - Yes! Park Watershed has a [report](#) about this. Schools use the river in a variety of ways. But teachers have a hard time getting out there. Park Watershed has proposed a virtual nature trail to help alleviate some challenges of getting students outside.
- What is the land protection status of stream corridor parcels and are efforts underway to protect them?
  - The mosaic of ownership is a challenge. Another challenge in the urban context is to conserve in a way that doesn’t cost more to maintain.
- Where does funding for your work come?
  - Park Watershed’s work to date has been mainly funded by the EPA through Section 319 of the Clean Water Act. Funding is distributed from the EPA to CT DEEP and is dispersed.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service's Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) has also funded some of Park Watershed's work.

- See [Mass Audubon's statement and call to action](#) in response to the Trump administration's gutting of the MBTA.
- Does Hartford have stormwater utility that could provide sustained funding to the work Park Watershed is doing?
  - Learn more about the [stormwater utility approach](#) to funding stormwater management.
- Does your work involve native plants, knowing that native plants host greater numbers of insects?
  - Yes! Any planting projects use native plants.
- How are you using the NELF scenarios as part of this work?
  - As a designer, Mary is trained to envision the future, so envisioning the future of the landscape as the NELF scenarios do is a natural fit.
  - Mary is interested on understanding what half-steps are needed to achieve a Connected Communities future in the context of an urban watershed.
    - In previous chats we talked about how farmer's markets are related to Connected Communities. [Birds and Beans](#) is an example of a New England business / food product that also fits into this scenario.
    - Using the [scenario quadrant](#) as a guide, this project dives into each bullet point and considers what is needed to get there. For example, "infrastructure investments serve local needs" could mean green infrastructure and that could be unpacked.
  - A next step is to create a collaborative space where these half-steps to Connected Communities can be fleshed out in more detail, drawing on our collective expertise.
  - The scenario maps can also be overlaid with other data to get a fuller sense of landscape-scale green infrastructure, show co-benefits of natural values, and improve our cities to prevent sprawl.