

The Birds & The Oysters: EcoRI News Roundup

From Superfund Site to Solar Farm

Nestled between Pontiac Avenue and the Pawtuxet River in Cranston, the Beacon Solar Project hosts 9,000 ground-mounted solar panels that can power 509 households. Subscribers to the community solar project are expected to save about 10 percent on their electric bills.

The 3.5-megawatt project is a joint venture between East Providence-based ISM Solar and Nautilus Solar Energy LLC of New Jersey.

The project represents a win for homeowners and solar developers alike. Solar construction is controversial, as residents often complain installations are eyesores, and environmentalists note the destruction of open space and forestland to site them. But the Pontiac Avenue array sits on top of an old landfill, a former Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site that is otherwise largely undevelopable.

A 2020 analysis funded by RI's Office of Energy Resources showed a severe underuse of solar siting on already-developed sites. The report counted 404,594 solar-possible sites, such as rooftops, parking lots, landfills, brownfields, gravel pits, and other commercial or industrial parcels.

Preliminary data from the analysis showed RI could increase the megawatts generated by solar to 3,390 — 13 times higher than the 250 megawatts solar panels power now. Estimates in the analysis indicated using solar across the sites would displace 7.65 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, equaling 70 percent of the state's current greenhouse-gas emissions.

Matunuck Oyster Bar Denied

A four-year tug-of-war between commercial aquaculture and some South Kingstown residents is nearly over. Members of a Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) subcommittee have recommended the council deny an application from **Perry Raso**, owner of the Matunuck Oyster Bar, to expand his Potter Pond oyster farm.

Raso originally applied in 2017 for 3 acres of additional oyster and bay scallop farming in the popular salt pond, claiming an increased demand for local shellfish. The application incited a flurry of complaints and action from neighbors.

The subcommittee's Nov. 9 recommendation came down to the proposal's impact on water-based activities. The subcommittee said the expansion would cut water-based activities by 23 percent, displacing them toward the center of the pond, an area where boats typically cluster, and increasing the risk of injury. Members also noted the proposed site would eliminate traditional shellfishing and fin fishing on the eastern edge of Segar Cove.

Raso owns nearly 10 acres south of Meadow Point, but, even with his request for additional acreage, only about 3 percent of the pond is used for aquaculture, which is below the maximum of 5 percent of a pond's water surface area that CRMC allows for commercial aquaculture.

While the general sentiment across the state, including by many who use the same waters to play, is that aquaculture is good for the local economy and environment — oysters, like other bivalves, filter water and remove excess nutrients such as nitrogen; a small oyster farm can clean as much as 100 million gallons of water daily — resistance to oyster farming has become strong in recent years.

Shooting Birds for Likes and Follows

The increasing popularity of bird photography and the desire of photographers to showcase their images on social media is raising concerns that birds are being harassed and disturbed, leading to potentially harmful effects on their health.

Bird conservation organizations around the globe, from the National Audubon Society to Britain's Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds, are asking bird photographers to avoid getting too close and reminding the photographers of the codes of ethics that many wildlife photography organizations have established.

Local wildlife advocates have noted that it's also an increasing problem in RI.

"It's definitely a problem here, and it's getting worse," said one longtime birder who wished to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. "There are more photographers, and there are more forums that photographers can post their photos on. It's an ego trip for them. They want to post their photos and get likes, and that leads them to harass the birds."

Getting too close to wild birds can pose serious dangers to them. Birds see people as predators, and when people approach, the birds must stop feeding and instead exert extra energy they may not have to escape the area. They also may be forced to leave their nests unattended, making their eggs and chicks vulnerable to predation, thermal stress or trampling.

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