

How Is the Planet Faring?: ecoRI news roundup

The World Is Not Their Oyster Right Now

With restaurants shuttered because of the COVID-19 crisis, Rhode Island's oyster farmers are facing market collapse.

"We sell 98% of our oysters to restaurants in Rhode Island and New York, and when they closed, our sales dropped by 98%. That was certainly eye-opening," said Jules Opton-Himmel, co-founder and owner of Narragansett-based Walrus and Carpenter Oysters.

For most people, oysters aren't a vital household item, nor are they hoardable like coronavirus-coveted toilet paper. Plus, they aren't cheap, so oyster farmers can't necessarily pivot to selling directly to consumers to make up for lost sales to restaurants.

What's more, oyster farmers worry that by mid-summer, there will be a glut of oysters waiting to hit the market, if it re-opens. A collapse of market price is seemingly almost inevitable.

Designed to Fail?

Who is leading RI's response to the climate crisis? That would be an unpaid 12-member council, with no staff, no funding, no authority and an advisory board with eight vacancies that haven't been filled by the House and Senate in five years.

This could explain why the Ocean State hasn't created actionable and enforceable laws around emissions reduction and pollution.

A 2014 law created the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4) and gave it a staggering to-do list — such as reducing emissions generated by state agencies, working with municipalities to support the development of sustainable and resilient communities and working with other states to develop regional initiatives.

A recent assessment of the EC4 by an outside advocacy group, Civic Alliance for a Cooler Rhode Island, summed up the council's work in one word: "insufficient."

Murder Hornets: The Stuff of Nightmares

One thing Rhode Islanders won't have to worry about in the midst of a pandemic that's upended their lives is murder hornets.

Two murder hornets, more officially known as Asian giant hornets, were discovered in Washington State in December. Native to Japan, where they are responsible for about 50 human deaths annually, the 2-inch-long insects with orange heads and black eyes are best known for their foraging behavior which involves ripping the heads off honeybees and feeding the rest of the bees' bodies to their young. Hence the murder moniker.

URI entomologist Lisa Tewksbury said it's unlikely these hornets will make their way from the Pacific Northwest to Rhode Island anytime soon. Phew.

Reusable Bags Trashed by Virus

Sixteen Rhode Island communities have approved plastic-bag bans since Barrington passed the state's first municipal ban in 2012. But since the pandemic took hold in March, more than half have paused their ordinances citing health concerns and needed relief for businesses.

Environmentalists fear the moratorium on bag bans will reverse gains made in recent years to curtail single-use items such as plastic shopping bags, straws and to-go containers.

The plastics industry is stoking public fear and undermining bag bans by promoting single-use plastics as a way to curb infection during the health crisis with unproven claims that reusable bags can carry the coronavirus.

Barrington Town Council vice president Kate Weymouth said it will be "an uphill battle to reverse the trend, as the plastics industry got out so far ahead on this from the beginning, convincing people that reusable bags carried the virus."

Leapin' Lizards!

Rhode Island's herpetological community is bursting with excitement at the discovery of the first confirmed lizard sighting in the state. A five-lined skink of uncertain origin was found in South County on April 22, Earth Day.

Emilie Holland, an environmental scientist with the Federal Highway Administration and president of the Rhode Island Natural History Survey, made the discovery and immediately contacted other National History Survey board members with expertise in identifying lizards.

The big question is how the lizard arrived in Rhode Island: Did it arrive naturally on its own, or was it brought to the area by humans, either intentionally or unintentionally? Since it was found near railroad tracks and a lumberyard, it's speculated that perhaps it was a stowaway on a train.

Move over Snakes on a Plane for Lizards on a Train.

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