

Appendix A to the report of the
Ad Hoc Committee on the Site of the Research Park

NOTE: Norm Christensen, as he signs below, is Professor and Founding Dean of Duke University's Nicholas School. It should also be noted that he was 2007-08 President of the Ecological Society of America, founded in 1915 with over 10,000 members today, and he is a global expert on forest ecology.
Stephen Swallow.

From: Norm Christensen [normc@duke.edu]
Sent: Tuesday, April 28, 2009 1:43 PM
To: Stephen Swallow; Norm Christensen
Subject: Response to your query

Hi Stephen,

Forgive my tardy response to your question. I was on the road yesterday. The dilemma you present is familiar. We have a similar 20-acre tract of woods adjacent to our student center. It is the only patch of intact mature hardwood forest on campus. Its location has made it attractive for a variety of building projects over the years.

A twenty-acre patch of forest is beginning to approach a scale at which certain undesirable ecological changes occur. At smaller scales, the amount of edge relative to forest interior increases and this in turn increases the likelihood of invasion by shade intolerant plants, including invasive exotic species. This is also nearing a minimum size to sustain populations of forest interior songbirds. This is not to say that 7-8 acres of forest would have no value. However, its value as an ecological and educational resource would be greatly diminished.

One of the most important values associated with a forest plot of this kind is the data and knowledge that accumulate for it over time. This allows students to put their own observations in the context of change over much longer periods. It also greatly enhances the value of such a site as a research resource for faculty.

Not having seen the actual plans and footprint for the proposed building project, I'm a bit out on limb here. However, it's hard to imagine how removing 60+% of the forest patch cannot have very significant detrimental effects.

You may be interested in how Duke has handled its similar tract. After considerable discussion that included our University architect, Exec. Vice President and members of the University Board of Trustees, it was concluded that the parcel was more valuable to the university community as intact forest than as a building site. Thus, the university plans to dedicate the woods as a memorial to a former colleague who worked hard over a 40-year period for its conservation.

I hope these comments are useful.

Warmest regards,

Norm

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Here is the message to which Dr. Christensen responded:

Norm:

I hope you can provide a few minutes of expertise on a problem facing University of Rhode Island. We are about to initiate a Research and Technology Park, and the site conflicts with an outdoor natural laboratory for environmental science teaching and research, while providing immediate proximity (across the street) access to our developing science quad, anchored by a newly opened biotechnology building and an under construction pharmacy building. I'd appreciate your comment on this dilemma.

The originally planned site comprises 20 acres of forest that has not been disturbed since around 1913 – see the parcel marked NW-1 in the attached map (and MSWord tables). The average age of dominant trees is 95 years. This parcel is surrounded by mostly well-disturbed wetlands that have had significant harvest activity by the prior owner. However, the south side is along the northernmost campus road. The administration has offered to use only 11 acres of the 19.6 old forest for the research park, arguing they can establish an irrevocable trust of 150 acres of wetlands with the remaining 7-8 acres of old upland forest included. The administration believes ecologists can modify their research and teaching to sustain their programs on the remaining 7-8 acres of old forest which would now be east of an active and expanding parking and business park. The ecologists say the forest is currently remarkably free of invasive species and is valuable as a demonstration of interior forest. There is no similar parcel within any type of walk from the URI campus, although other land is available at 30-45 minute drive (not suitable for normal class-periods).

This document: [http://www.uri.edu/facsen/North Woods.pdf](http://www.uri.edu/facsen/North_Woods.pdf) summarizes that the century-old forest is used by up to 1300 students per year, with classes that involve GIS, spatial sampling, etc.

My question is whether there is any reasonable possibility of building the research park on 11 acres while managing the remaining 7-8 acres in a manner that maintains its value as interior forest and can sustain visits from 1300 students per year. The wetlands have also been used in these courses. Would you mind offering me a quick opinion on whether this compromise seems reasonable? Is there ecological technology that can protect the remaining forest?

Stephen Swallow
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