

**152-1 RHODE ISLAND'S OUTDOOR RECREATION NEEDS**

Enjoyment of Rhode Island's outdoors – the waters of Narragansett Bay, the state's ocean beaches and rocky shores, its forested preserves, streams, rivers, lakes and ponds, and urban parks and playfields – is a cherished tradition for Rhode Islanders. By attracting visitors and providing an alluring environment in which to live and work, Rhode Island's resources are also of strategic importance to our state's livelihood.

Recreation in all its forms is assuming greater importance in our increasingly complicated and stressful lives. Whether it is competition on the playfields, a healthy swim in the ocean, or the simple communion with nature of a walk in the woods, recreation releases our tensions and renews our spirit. As the pace of our lives quickens, it will be crucial that we retain and expand the opportunities available to us to step back, relax, and enjoy our outdoor heritage in our own fashion.

### **A Long Tradition**

This updated Recreation Guide Plan is but the latest in a long tradition of studies and documents offering a vision for the protection and use of Rhode Island's natural resources for the enjoyment, physical vitality, economic progress and spiritual renewal of its citizens. As far back as the 1890s the Public Park Association prepared a visionary plan for a system of parks serving the metropolitan Providence area. Since that beginning, numerous studies and plans have pointed the way towards reserving land for public recreational usage and protecting the land and water resource base for future Rhode Islanders.

This legacy of planning has set the stage for the remarkable progress that has been made through the decades. The "circle of life" -- a string of parks ringing the state's metropolitan area -- was realized in the 1960's through acquisition of Colt, Snake Den, Brenton Point, and Cocumscussoc State Parks under the Green Acres bond program; community recreation systems were also dramatically expanded under the Green Acres and Land and Water Programs. In the 1970s, the development of Fort Adams and Colt State Parks was accomplished, as recommended in the 1965 and 1971 recreation guide plans. First contemplated in the 1965 guide plan, assemblage of an open space system on the islands of Narragansett Bay, was actively pursued as opportunities for land acquisition availed themselves. Coastal parks and the Narragansett Bay Estuarine Sanctuary encompassing over 2,000 acres are now protected for



public use and enjoyment of what is often called “Rhode Island’s greatest natural resource”. Planning has also laid the groundwork for protecting the state's most threatened natural resources. Throughout the 1980s, the Natural Heritage Program inventoried and focused preservation efforts on rare and endangered species habitats and other unique natural areas. Irreplaceable resources have been preserved forever on Block Island, and in other locations around the state through the cooperation and support of state and local governments, and private groups such as The Nature Conservancy and the Champlin Foundation. The Greenspace and Greenways Plan (1994) transformed the broad policies for protection of open space set forth in the 1992 version of the Recreation Guide Plan into a blueprint for an interconnected, statewide system of protected open space, bikeways, and trails touching every community. As documented in this update, development of the greenways system is well under way.

This update of the Plan thus continues in the tradition of its predecessor documents, blending an unfinished agenda from the past with new concepts and ideas for Rhode Island's future. This edition re-affirms the over-arching themes from the prior (1992) edition to protect and manage the state’s natural and cultural resources and the recreation system they support as an integrated entity:

- Protecting Open Space and Critical Resources
- Delivering Recreation and Resource Conservation Services
- Stewardship and Partnership ...Taking Care of our Outdoor Recreation System

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In this respect, the plan is most accurately a progress report to the "stockholders" -- the citizens for whom government holds in trust Rhode Island's remarkable endowment of natural resources and for whose benefit and enjoyment the state's parks and open spaces are provided and improved.

### **Some Recent Accomplishments**

The decade since the last edition of this plan have witnessed considerable advances: four major state open space bonds and numerous local bonds provided an investment of over \$73 million in land and new facilities for Rhode Island's recreation and open space system. This infusion allowed an historic expansion and improvement of the recreational opportunities available to Rhode Islanders, including:

- The addition of nearly 7,000 acres to the state recreation and open space system, preservation of 1,857 acres of threatened farmland, and the protection of 3,115 acres of local open space.
- The improvement, expansion and rehabilitation of scores of existing recreational facilities and development of 65 entirely new parks or sports complexes.
- Habitat protection for plant and animal species identified by the Natural Heritage Program as State Endangered, State Threatened or of Special Interest or Concern on 41 projects funded under the Department of Environmental Management’s Local Open Space Grants Program.

- Major upgrading and expansion of Misquamicut and Roger C. Wheeler State Beaches for the popular activities of swimming, sunbathing, picnicking and field sports.
- Focused efforts to preserve, enhance, and expand recreational opportunities offered by the state's rivers and watersheds, including continuing development of the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, completion of plans for the Woonasquatucket and Saugatucket River greenways, creation of the RI Rivers Council and adoption of a Rivers Policies and Classification Plan as a State Guide Plan Element, and development of watershed associations and watershed planning approaches in many of the state's river basins.
- Continuation of improvements of user facilities at major metropolitan (state and local) parks including \$10.5 million in State investments in Roger Williams Park, operated by the City of Providence, partial restoration of historic Fort Adams, development of the Blackstone River State Park, new beach pavilions and parking lots at Misquamicut State Beach and Roger Wheeler State Beach, construction of a new bathhouse at Pulaski State Park, the construction of new horse barns for public equestrian programs at both Goddard State Park and Lincoln Woods State Park, and completion of plans for development of Snake Den State Park in Johnston.

Despite the progress made, the job is not yet complete, and the period ahead promises to be a challenging time for recreation, conservation, and open space.

The difficult economic circumstances likely to face state and local governments over the next several years, coupled with a diminished federal presence, will constrain efforts to offer citizens the level of recreational services they have previously enjoyed. The investment made in recreation capital over the last decade will have to be paid (through debt service) over the next generation. At the same time,



facilities built and expanded in the past must be maintained. Demands for recreation and leisure activities, particularly for accessible, close-to-home opportunities will likely continue to increase, as will regional tourism. The threats to the land and water resource base are increasing, and time is running out for the protection of irreplaceable open space. All of these challenges confront Rhode Island as it looks ahead at recreation, conservation and open space issues and needs.

## Purpose of this Plan

*Ocean State Outdoors* is the Recreation, Conservation, and Open Space Element of the State Guide Plan – Rhode Island’s plan for improving its outdoor recreation system and protecting the natural and cultural resources on which that system depends. It articulates state recreation and conservation goals and policies, and maps out a five year action agenda for the Department of Environmental Management, other state agencies, municipalities and not-for-profit groups. It establishes the state goals and policies for outdoor recreation, conservation and open space with which community comprehensive plans must be consistent. Its purpose, in the broadest sense, is to report on progress the state has made, assess the current situation, and set future directions for outdoor recreation and conservation. Its primary audience is state and local officials who are responsible for Rhode Island’s recreation and open space systems and programs, but its themes must also be embraced by the diverse array of public and private organizations which play roles in outdoor recreation, conservation, and open space, and supported by a broad cross-section of Rhode Islanders if its initiatives are to be realized.

### ***Ocean State Outdoors* serves several key purposes:**

*State Guide Plan* -- Through its adoption by the State Planning Council as an element of Rhode Island’s State Guide Plan, this plan has legislated stature that requires the comprehensive plans prepared by the state’s municipalities be consistent with its goals and policies. Publicly-supported projects of several specified state agencies are also required to be consistent with the Guide Plan. Other elements of the State Guide Plan are integrated with and support this plan, in particular *A Greener Path... Greenspace and Greenways for Rhode Island’s Future* and the *Rhode Island Urban and Community Forest Plan*. Inclusion of recreation and conservation goals and policies in the Guide Plan also helps insure that these concerns are properly coordinated with other functional areas covered by the Guide Plan; elements covering land use, transportation, economic development, water supply and other functions contain important related guidance.

*State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)* -- *Ocean State Outdoors* is also submitted by Rhode Island to meet the National Park Service’s planning eligibility requirements for the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund program. While resources of this program have diminished, it remains a valuable source of support for protecting resources and providing facilities for public recreational use.

*State Recreational Trails Plan* -- In concert with Rhode Island’s Greenways Plan<sup>1</sup>, this plan addresses the requirements of the U.S. Department of Transportation -- Federal Highway Administration’s National Recreational Trails Program that provides funds to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Greener Path: Greenspace and Greenways for Rhode Island’s Future*. R.I. Division of Planning. 1994.

*Wetlands Priority Plan* -- This plan provides an update to the wetlands priority plan required under the federal Emergency Wetlands Conservation Act. Updates to the original 1988 plan are submitted to the National Park Service periodically as part of SCORP updates.

## Rhode Island's Planning Framework

Rhode Island is blessed with many special natural settings, historic districts and sites, and unique local areas. Providing for the public's enjoyment of Rhode Island's outdoor environment is an important responsibility of state and local governments. In the decades since the first Recreation Guide Plan in 1965, the interest and commitment of Rhode Islanders for outdoor recreation, conservation and open space protection has grown. Planning efforts have become more multi-faceted and better connected and have been strengthened by the groundswell of the movements for environmental protection, historic preservation, public participation, growth management and quality of life.

Rhode Island's framework for coordinating state agency and municipal activities in support of major goals and policies consists of the State Guide Plan and the local comprehensive plans prepared by Rhode Island's municipalities. Rhode Island's Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act (1988) requires new and stronger connections and consistency between state and local plans. All (39) Rhode Island municipalities have locally-adopted Comprehensive Community Plans, and, as of 2002, most (31) have received State approval, indicating consistency between state and local policies. Local plans are required to be updated regularly. Over the past decade, the community plans have been formally incorporated into much of Rhode Island's planning, policy and practice. Plan approval status and consistency with the State Guide Plan are increasingly criteria for state project approvals and grant funding.



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Complementing the State Guide Plan are efforts to promote regional planning cooperation. The three communities of Aquidneck Island and the nine communities of Washington County have formed regional planning commissions to facilitate coordination, and efforts promoting watershed-based planning are supported by the Department of Environmental Management and the RI Rivers Council.

Rhode Island's comprehensive and integrated planning and implementation system is more urgent as Rhode Island and its communities face problems such as increasing development pressures, changing population characteristics, and growing demands for services in an era of scarce resources.