

LETTER: Forest management needs a hands-off approach

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A passive forest management approach is the default option for the Massachusetts Audubon's 23,000 acres.

“Our management philosophy, in general,” said Tom Lautzenheiser, Mass Audubon's senior conservation ecologist, during the Nov. 10 Friends of White's Woods webinar, “is that we don't need to intervene. Forests take care of themselves. We keep management as hands-off as possible.”

Mass Audubon does rely heavily on data collection and monitoring. The non-profit conservation organization issues regular reports on bird life, particularly, because birds are “great ambassadors for biodiversity.” Keeping track of birds helps to detect changes in forest habitat. The organization also issues regular reports about land use changes, specifically about how much acreage in natural lands is lost per year/decade to residential and commercial development.

There are threats to forest health: Land fragmentation, invasive plants, over-browse, pests and climate change.

Protecting the canopy is one key to controlling invasive plants. Prevention is another. Vehicles, machinery and people are the primary spreaders of invasive plants in forests. What is necessary, said Lautzenheiser, is “early detection and rapid response.” Utility roads should be regularly monitored and invasive plants should be removed before they spread.

“The less active management you do, the fewer invasives you bring in.”

Climate change is having an impact on forests, too. Tree species are migrating northward, so if one is planting new trees in a forest it might be advisable to assist with this migration by planting trees that have, in the past, grown in areas that are south of a forest and are now at the northern end of their range.

Every management decision, including deer management, needs to take in to account a number of contextual factors, including a property's level of human use of trail networks.

Mass Audubon's management decisions are built around annual "ecological reports" that carefully document the conservation assets of a particular forest as well as potential threats. With long-term monitoring and careful consultation with environmental experts, if serious forest threats do become apparent, then an effective targeted response can be identified.

Lautzenheiser presentation about Mass Audubon's forest management approaches can be viewed at friendsofwhiteswoods.org/events.

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