



# The Garden Club of East Hampton Newsletter

Spring 2016



Artist in Rachel's Garden. Photo by Durell Godrey

## **Garden Club of America's National Affairs and Legislation Update**

The Garden Club of America's National Affairs & Legislation Committee Meeting (affectionately known as NAL) was held in Washington, D.C., on February 22-25, 2016. GCEH delegates attended the meeting with approximately 300 GCA club members from throughout the country. The event included several days of Speakers, Workshops, and visits to Capital Hill.

While at NAL, our delegates along with members from other local garden clubs in Long Island's District 1 met with Congressman Lee Zeldin, and Legislative Staff for Senator Chuck Schumer and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand. Several topics discussed were pending legislation on Clean Water, Climate Change, and the Land & Water Conservation Fund. These are issues that are supported by the 8 Position Papers drafted by GCA.

The NAL and Conservation Committees work in tandem to enhance the GCA mission to "restore, improve, and protect the quality of the environment through educational programs and action in the fields of conservation and civic improvement." The gathering in D.C. is an interesting and informative meeting, held annually the end of February.

## SAVE ... DON'T SELL PLUM ISLAND

While in Washington, D.C., delegates from our garden clubs on the East End met with Congressman Lee Zeldin to discuss a variety of topics which included "Save, Don't Sell Plum Island" ... bill HR 1887. This bill was introduced in Congress by Representative Zeldin and unanimously passed. Supporters are working towards the preservation of Plum Island, an environmental treasure for the many species of rare plants and endangered birds found on the island.

The Senate will also need to pass a similar bill and the President sign it into law. Congressman Zeldin feels there is momentum for HR 1887 to become law, if supporters like Garden Club of America, continue to work toward this outcome. Please help prevent the sale of Plum Island to developers by contacting your U.S. Senators and ask that the Senate adopt companion legislation for HR 1887 as soon as possible.

For more information, go to the Preserve Plum Island Coalition website at [www.preserveplumisland.org](http://www.preserveplumisland.org)

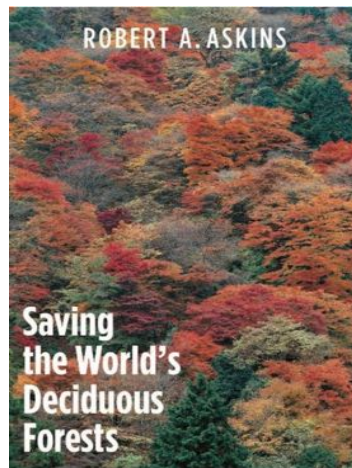


Photos by M.V. Kazickas

The natural beauty of Plum Island on an early spring day.

## THREATS TO THE DECIDUOUS FOREST

Professor Robert A. Askins, author of *Saving the World's Deciduous Forests* (Yale University Press 2014) spoke to a gathering of our members at GCA headquarters in New York City about the issues facing the woodlands of the Northeast.



Professor Askins teaches courses in ornithology, animal behavior, ecology, and conservation biology at Connecticut College. He is nationally recognized for his research on the ecology of migratory birds and the impact of forest fragmentation on their populations. This work has led him to study the deciduous hardwood forests that span the globe. His research is unique in synthesizing ideas from ecology, animal behavior, and evolution, as well as in drawing on historical accounts and geologic and archeological studies to interpret the history of ecosystems and to assess their resiliency in the face of the threats confronting them.

Professor Askins discussed the several threats facing deciduous forests globally, and in his lecture focused on two that particularly threaten forest health and biodiversity: introduced pests and pathogens, and overabundant deer.

Askins considers introduced pests and pathogens to be the gravest threat to forest health. In the same way that smallpox decimated Native American populations within a relatively short time after the disease arrived in the New World with the first Europeans, introduced pests and pathogens quickly decimate the tree species they target. Chestnut trees comprised almost half of the mature trees in many hardwood forests in 1904 when the chestnut blight arrived in this country. Forty years later, the blight had killed virtually every mature chestnut tree from Maine to Georgia, thus changing the composition of our forests profoundly.

The list of devastating pests and pathogens is long and reflects the ease with which people and trade goods move around the world, including, in our area, the Southern pine bark beetle. However, there is hope, Askins says. Based on progress made fighting hemlock woolly adelgid (which arrived from Japan in the 1950's) by introducing one its Japanese predators, Askins is cautiously optimistic that carefully selected biological controls may lead to workable solutions. He says that the hemlocks in a forest he visits regularly, and that serve as a test for this approach, have indeed bounced back.

Professor Askins attributes today's deer problems, which are common to deciduous forests around the globe, to reduced hunting and the elimination of natural predators - wolves and large cats in particular. In his book, he notes that, "At one time the nocturnal howling of wolves characterized deciduous forests as much as spring displays of woodland wildflowers or the summer song of thrushes." Scientists have documented multiple times that forests sustain themselves successfully at deer densities of no more than 22 per square mile, a level that most likely reflects the historical balance typical in these forests when predators and humans constantly hunted ungulate populations. In fact, deer densities lower than this, as well as wolves and large cats, are critical components of healthy forest ecosystems.

Askins cited an example of overabundant deer in Japan that illustrates how deer can convert forests to grasslands. On Kinkazan Island off the coast of northern Japan, ancient beech forests are disappearing as the population of sika deer, who arrived on the island in the last century, surges. Home to a Shinto shrine, the deer are protected, and their population currently stands at about 130 per square mile, or about 600 deer on a 4 square mile island. Deer have largely eliminated the forest understory including any tree seedlings and saplings. Consequently, as first the understory disappears from grazing, and then mature trees are blown down in windstorms and other events, the forests are slowly converting to grassland. Furthermore, as grazing of the grasslands intensifies, they are becoming a monoculture of *Zoysia japonica*, a short dense grass that thrives with grazing and crowds out other native grasses. Kinkazan already has 42 acres of what is essentially a monoculture of *Zoysia*, supporting a herd of 138 sika deer that depend on it for summer forage. This translates to a density of over 2,100 deer per square mile - an astronomically high figure.

Fortunately, some old growth forests on this continent still exist with low deer densities and healthy understories. Dr. Askins and his wife visited the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest in North Carolina the last week of April,

and saw the forest floor carpeted with wildflowers including five species of trillium. (Deer densities in this part of North Carolina are under 12 per square mile.)

Dr. Askins also addressed the different styles of conservation in America, Europe and East Asia. Americans tend to focus on preserving wilderness in national parks and forests, with a focus on preserving pristine wild nature and natural landscapes in very large national parks and preserves. Europeans, on the other hand, focus on preserving cultural landscapes, or landscapes shaped by man, such as farmland, wood pasture, coppice, and managed woodlands.

By contrast, the Japanese appreciate nature in small spaces. This is reflected in their art. Dr. Askins referred us to Zen Buddhist ink paintings of wild plants and birds, which he notes are often quite accurate. Japanese national conservation organizations are not as politically influential as in America or Europe. Instead, thousands of local conservation groups work to restore habitat and monitor threatened species in their own neighborhoods and towns. Japanese children are actively engaged in these efforts, especially collecting and identifying insects. In Yokohama, community groups are creating dragonfly ponds with a variety of microhabitats to help re-establish some of the 48 threatened species of dragonfly, among a total of 180 indigenous to Japan. Dr. Askins notes that the Japanese approach works particularly well for preserving insects, small invertebrates and plants with specialized habitat requirements.

Dr. Askins hopes that European and Asian approaches to conservation can be helpful in thinking about how best to conserve the many forest fragments interwoven with towns and suburbs in the Northeast, as they are important habitats for so many species. In the absence of human intervention, these small forest fragments are under severe threat, however, from disease, pests, invasive plants, and deer, and on a trajectory towards conversion to a scrubbier, less diverse habitat, perhaps even grassland.

Professor Askins is widely published in many scholarly journals and the recipient of numerous prestigious grants as well as Connecticut College awards for research and faculty leadership. In addition, he is a former board member of Audubon Connecticut and is a fellow at the American Ornithologists' Union.