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## New Jersey fights to save endangered tree

**ISAAC LINSK**

**For The Press**

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An Atlantic white cedar tree stands in the Dennis Creek Wildlife Management Area.

CIARA WENGER, SOUTH JERSEY CLIMATE NEWS

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For The Press

**T**he New Jersey Forest Service is about halfway through a 10-year plan to restore the state's Atlantic white cedar forest.

Cedar forests are native to the East Coast, but New Jersey is considered the last stronghold of the Atlantic white cedar, said Todd Wyckoff, New Jersey's state forester.

Those forests, here and elsewhere, have been shrinking dramatically due to overharvesting by man and nature. Besides losses due to forest fires, the cedar's leaves are a popular food source for deer.

According to the New Jersey Audubon Society, the range of the Atlantic white cedar in the United States has shrunk from 500,000 trees to about 115,000, with one-fifth of those found in New Jersey.

Since 2020, the state has put a considerable amount of money and effort into trying to preserve this local resource, but extreme weather conditions brought on by climate change require even more dramatic steps, some experts say.

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"We've been talking about this for 45 years, but what is anyone actually doing?" said Bob Williams, a lifelong forester and owner of Pine Creek Forestry, a forestry consulting company based in Clementon, Camden County.

Williams has been working in forestry his entire adult life, spending close to 10 years working in the Pacific Northwest.

He recalls major discussions happening about the restoration of the Atlantic white cedar close to 30 years ago, but until a 2007 Northeast Corridor restoration grant, he hadn't seen much efforts to restore the cedar outside of a few hundred acres managed by land owners in the private sector.

Pine Creek Forestry is one of 17 partners listed on the state's 2020 Atlantic White Cedar Wetland Ecosystem Restoration Strategy. The project aims to restore 1,000 acres of cedar per year for 10 years.

### **Where the problem is**

Currently, the state is engaging in restoration efforts near Cedar Creek, a tributary of Barnegat Bay in Stafford Township, by thinning 34 acres of trees to allow the forest to grow back healthier than before.

From 2016 to 2020, hundreds of acres of prescribed burns were implemented for fuel break maintenance. Fuel breaks are the patches of land in forests with reduced vegetation meant to control or diminish the spread of wildfires or prescribed burns.

Several hundred acres of prescribed burns are expected in the next five years.

Williams champions the efforts the state has made in recent years to combat the shrinking range of the tree but is concerned the project is not moving fast enough.

He fears that with climate change, local ecosystems are heading to a point where it would be impossible to bring the cedar back.

Things like sea-level rise and temperature changes have caused coastal forests like the Atlantic white cedar swamps to begin to slowly die out.

In early July, the state Forest Service responded to a fire in Wharton State Forest, the largest state forest in New Jersey.

Wharton is the location of several key sites, like Batsto River and Sleeper Creek, where the Atlantic white cedar grows, Wyckoff said.

The fire started July 5 as a result of a firework that had burned through 4,300 acres over four days. Exactly how many cedar trees were lost was not immediately known.

While prescribed burns and intentional fires help clear the forest of dead vegetation, if they grow out of control or start unpredictably like the forest fire in early July, they run the risk of losing the oldest cedar tree stands in the area. The older trees convert carbon dioxide to oxygen at a steadier rate than the younger trees.

Williams said more must be done to protect cedar forests from all threats, including fire.

"If you're going to spend close to \$20 million to replenish an ecosystem, you don't want to leave it susceptible to wildfire," he said.

### **A hotter, more intense forest fire**

Fires like the one in Wharton often cause misconceptions about their effects on the ecosystem.

While close to 85% of forest fires are caused by human activity, according to the National Park Service, forest fires are still a natural phenomenon responsible for clearing out dead vegetation from the forest floor and enriching the soil with ash and other broken-down organic matter.

But Williams said the effects of climate change are causing the fires to burn at a higher intensity, causing them to burn through the turf and peat soils.

According to the state Forest Fire Service, repeated higher-intensity fires will produce significant changes in an ecosystem. In cedar swamps and other wetlands areas such as at Wharton, fires can destroy layers of accumulated organic material and lower the elevation of the terrain. Lowering the terrain would then make the area more susceptible to flooding.

Williams applauds the state Department of Environmental Protection for its efforts to bring the Atlantic white cedar back but thinks there needs to be a greater balance in regards to public and private action to restore the cedar, arguing the issue has shifted from a science problem to more of a social problem.

While public funds are being used to solve the problem, Williams is worried the public interest isn't there, fearing a future that could lead to the species' extinction.

But public interest and intervention in the cedars also needs to be balanced, with Williams claiming that in California, "we are loving the redwoods to death."

The social angle is something Wyckoff agrees with, seeing cedar restoration as a way to leave an environmental legacy to future generations.

"Fire and wildlife can't move like they did 1,000 years ago. It takes more to sustain the trees. You need to give the forest a leg up before you walk away," Williams said.

### **Test of time**

New Jersey is no stranger to land management projects brought on by climate change.

Many of the state's shore towns see beach replenishment year after year in an attempt to preserve the coastline.

These projects take place on a consistent and short term basis, like North Wildwood's emergency replenishment earlier this year, which took 70 days from authorization to completion.

Unlike the visible shore projects, work on forestry is less noticeable but no less critical to the forests' survival. Work being done now is attempting to reverse a problem that began in America's colonial era, when cedars were a favorite material for construction.

Likewise, Williams said the results of the state's efforts won't be noticeable for another two to three summers. He said if the state's efforts do turn out to be beneficial, in five years you won't even need to get out of your car to see the new canopy of cedar trees in South Jersey.

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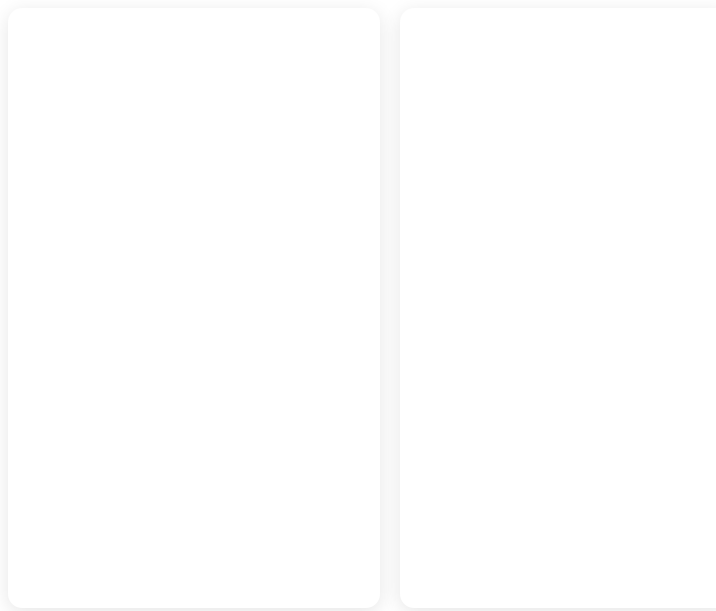
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