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OUR TOWNS

Earth May Hinge on Alert, Furry Creatures Called Everyday People

By [PETER APPLEBOME](#)

Redding, Conn.

BRENDAN HANRAHAN has something of the furry, purposeful, knowing quality of a woodland creature. So it's no surprise that he seems to know all about the red fox, bobcats and eastern copperheads, the ruffed grouse and pileated woodpecker, and the 500 types of trees and wildflowers that inhabit the 1,756 acres of forest, wetland and ridges that make up the Devil's Den wildlife preserve in northern Fairfield County.

But Mr. Hanrahan, who writes, lectures and publishes books on environmental issues and produces an admirable environmental blog, [Connecticut Windows on the Natural World](#), also has something of the furry, purposeful, knowing quality of a science wonk. So he's also excited about a rather remarkable meeting last month at the [University of Connecticut](#) in Storrs at which about 250 biologists, environmentalists and government officials interested in almost every form of wildlife came together for the first time to assess the state of the earth's creatures — or at least those that dwell in the state of Connecticut.

Much of what they heard was pretty grim, like a version of [Al Gore's](#) film, "An Inconvenient Truth," writ small. So according to Mr. Hanrahan's report in his blog, the expert on land-bird species said that one in three species have declined over the last 35 years, with once-familiar birds like the wood thrush, Baltimore oriole, scarlet tanager and others in need of urgent conservation efforts. Another speaker gave a similar report on water birds, citing the need for conservation action for loons, grebes, herons, bitterns and others.

An expert on bats described how populations are in sharp decline, with seven of eight species in need of conservation. Others had similar reports: nearly half the state's amphibian species show signs of declining; invertebrates like species of tiger beetles that have occupied local sands since the last Ice Age have almost disappeared. The expert gave efforts to conserve butterflies a D, saying 25 percent of local species are now imperiled or gone altogether. He said the decline of honeybees, a crucial part of the ecosystem, had reached critical levels.

John S. Barclay, director of the Wildlife Conservation Research Center at the University of Connecticut, in remarks he sent me, compared the current moment to the beginning of the century when pioneering

conservationists like Teddy Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot and John Muir all but invented a movement to save threatened animals. "The consequences of losing more indigenous plants and animals and the habitats essential to sustain them, are difficult to imagine, but could easily be termed catastrophic," he said. He added, "History and experience may be on our side, but time is not."

The meeting was about much more than alarmism. Its purpose was to share information about taking action on a new state conservation plan, part of a congressionally mandated process in which states are required to assess wildlife needs and find a way to address them.

And the clear message at the meeting was the urgency of forming a comprehensive wildlife map and conservation plan so communities can link up open space and wilderness in what are called biotic corridors, running from town to town to create large-scale, sustainable wildlife areas. If you just save parcels here or there, the thinking goes, the turtle who has to cross a road to breed and the salamander who can't get over a sidewalk curb don't survive. If the pieces are big enough, maybe they do.

A version of this kind of planning is already happening in the Farmington Valley, where seven towns — Avon, Canton, East Granby, Farmington, Granby, Simsbury and Suffield — are already pooling information for regional environmental planning.

IT'S hard to know if there really is a new environmental movement growing, as Mr. Hanrahan suggests. But if it is to happen, meetings like the one in Storrs and citizen-scientists as dedicated as Mr. Hanrahan ought to be popping up all over the place. Mr. Hanrahan cites the "heroic" work being done by all sorts of environmental and conservation groups in Connecticut. He hopes to put together a network, he calls it the Connecticut Earth Network, to help link and coordinate them. For now, it's mostly evolving stuff in a small state, but nothing Mr. Hanrahan says about Connecticut sounds like it wouldn't resonate elsewhere as well.

"Planners tell us we have a decade or two to make changes before a great deal of the wildlife that has existed here since the last Ice Age is extirpated," he said. "The question is how do we bring about change in the span of a few car leases? But I travel all over the state, and what I hear is people in Connecticut remembering as kids, turning over rocks to look for salamanders. They want to know their grandkids will grow up in a state where that will still be possible."

E-mail: peappl@nytimes.com

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