

**Testimony of David Sutherland – Director of Government Relations
Before the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee – March 4, 2013**

In Support of Bonding for the DEP's two Open Space Programs

On behalf of The Nature Conservancy, I would like to express our appreciation for this committee's support in the past for the DEP's Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program, and Open Space and Watershed Matching Grants program, and urge you to include new authorizations for these programs in your Capital budget. It is vital to remember during these times of mounting fiscal challenges and state deficits that our two most popular State Parks were purchased under very difficult economic circumstances.

In 1919, as 60,000 Connecticut men returned home from World War I, the state faced many serious fiscal troubles. The numbers of tubercular patients and former soldiers requiring state agency services were increasing far beyond the capacity of state facilities. The state, because of financial and labor challenges, had deferred any road maintenance for four years, leaving a backlog of crucial work that had to be funded. Against this backdrop, the 1919 General Assembly approved a \$178,000 (*\$2.3 million in today's dollars*) appropriation to acquire and construct facilities at Hammonasett Beach. Today, with over one million visitors each year, Hammonasett is the flagship of our state park system, and provides a significant percentage of the limited public access to Long Island Sound.

In 1931, Connecticut, like the rest of the nation, was in the throes of history's most notorious economic depression. While state revenues plummeted, unemployment and demands on state services and institutions soared. Despite this dire economic climate, the General Assembly appropriated \$125,000 (*\$1.8 million in today's dollars*) to purchase and develop Rocky Neck State Park in East Lyme. Anyone visiting Rocky Neck during the summer now has to wonder where the crowds of bathers, more than 400,000 each year, would go if not for the foresight of the 1931 General Assembly.

Even under serious financial conditions, Connecticut's governors and legislatures have realized that preserved natural lands are an essential component of the services a government provides its citizens. For many people, our state parks and forests provide the only opportunity their families have to hike a wooded trail, swim in a lake or Long Island Sound, or cast a fish line into a stream.

With many state capital projects, a delay in or elimination of funding during tough times is frustrating and inconvenient, but the building or road can still be completed when funds do become available later. With our prime open space parcels, however, a delay in funding often means the property will be lost for public use forever.

(over)

These two open space programs have benefited communities throughout Connecticut. They have funded projects in at least 27 of our 32 Distressed and Targeted Municipalities in the past 12 years.

This year, our state faces a serious fiscal crisis. As our leaders confront brutally hard budget decisions, we hope they will continue to provide bond funds for the state's open space programs so that our generation will not lose its Hammonassetts and Rocky Necks, and can continue to build on a vital heritage and responsibility that our predecessors did not neglect even in their most difficult times.