

Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association

Our mission is to preserve and protect the lands and waters of the Wood-Pawcatuck watershed for natural and human communities

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Our Staff:



Executive Director Christopher J. Fox

Christopher J. Fox

Born and raised in Cumberland, RI WPWA executive director Chris Fox was transplanted into the watershed in 1996 after graduating from URI. His diverse studies in soils, geology, forestry, and wildlife biology earned him a bachelor's degree in Natural Resource Development. His time at URI's Coastal Resources Center allowed him to work on international projects that focused on the fragile interactions between fresh and salt water. This was just the beginning of his diverse journey to WPWA. After a decade of working in public service and safety as well as construction and other fields Chris was ready for a change.

When approached to lead this premier watershed council he jumped at the opportunity. Here he would be able to unify all his experience and promote his love for southern New England's waterways. The position allows him to employ his unique skills while providing limitless avenues to learn and grow. With the boundless support of Chris's staff, WPWA has made significant headway since he took the helm in March of 2008. Fox often credits his board of directors and staff as the ones who make all the work possible. WPWA has great expectations for this director to elevate the Association to a higher level. By undertaking larger initiatives like the Shannock River Restoration project it seems as though he is well on his way. Chris is proud to represent

such an outstanding organization and has proven to be an asset to its members.

Chris often recounts the story when, as a child, he paddled by the building that he now works in while attending an environmental camp canoe trip. This experience in part drives Chris's desire to educate children in the watershed about watershed science. The director resides in the watershed not far from WPWA's Barbersville campus along with his daughter Caliah. What little free time that he has, he spends with his family and friends. He'll jokingly tell you that when they are not around he does not like to be found while he's outside hunting, fishing, tracking, kayaking, and gardening. Though an outgoing personality, he requires plenty of "quiet time".



Project Coordinator Denise J. Poyer with her husband Ed

Denise J. Poyer

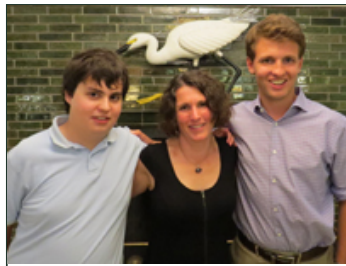
Denise was born in the summer of her thirty-fifth year, when she began studying Environmental Management at URI. Her studies of the environment ignited a love for the outdoors that had previously been latent in her. She started exploring outdoor activities and found she had a passion for the mountains and rivers. Since she turned 40, Denise has hiked, backpacked, and paddled some of the most beautiful areas in the country. However, her true passion is for the watershed in which she lives.

Denise became Program Director for the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association (WPWA) in 1994. During that time she has developed all of WPWA's educational programs and many of the recreational ones. She is also responsible for WPWA's water quality monitoring and scientific research programs. In addition to an undergraduate degree in Wildlife Biology and Environmental Management, Denise obtained a Master's degree in Environmental Education from the University of Rhode Island. Her specialty is watershed education.

Denise's favorite part of working at WPWA is the opportunity to introduce people to the natural world. Through her many projects and interests Denise has taught both children and adults about ecosystems, large and small. She has worked with the Conservation Districts in RI as the exclusive instructor for the Active Watershed Education (AWESome!) Curriculum. In the last ten years she has revamped the curriculum, expanding it into a 32 hour, 3-credit, graduate-level course through the URI College of Continuing Education. Denise's background in botany aids her discussions when she leads nature hikes and paddle trips for the RI Wild Plant Society and the Narragansett Chapter of the Appalachia Mountain Club, as well as WPWA.

As an avid outdoors woman, Denise shares her skills with as many people as possible. She is a facilitator at leadership development training and other instructional workshops; has presented at local and regional conferences; and sits on the Rhode Island Environmental Education Association's board, the RI Trail Advisory Committee, and the Richmond Rural Preservation Land Trust. Denise holds an ACA Certification for kayak instruction.

Denise has been married to her second husband, Ed, since 2003. They share a passion for the outdoors and a love of hiking. Together they completed the John Muir Trail in CA in 2013. Denise has a son, Chris Burgess, who lives in Florida with his wife, Angela; and a daughter, Kerrie Spencer, who lives in Woonsocket, RI with her husband Russ, and two amazing grandsons, Jacob and Zachary.



Project Specialist Elise A. Torello with Nick and Robert.

Elise A. Torello

Elise was born in New Haven, CT and followed a meandering path to Scituate, RI in 1980. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Biology and Management from URI in 1988 and began her career at the Environmental Protection Agency laboratory in Narragansett. While at the EPA lab she worked as a contract biologist performing wastewater toxicity testing, but gradually shifted her focus to data management and analysis. In 1994 she temporarily put her career aside to work on her Master's degree in Computer Science at URI and raise her two sons, Robert and Nick, in South Kingstown.

One random day in 2007, Elise showed up at the WPWA campus and volunteered her data management skills to the organization. Then-Executive Director Lori Urso and Program Director Denise Poyer were happy to put her to work organizing their 20+ years of water quality monitoring data into a database. However, not content to just send Elise off "into the weeds" figuratively with their tens of thousands of data points, Denise also literally sent her into the

weeds helping with invasive plant monitoring, macroinvertebrate sampling, kayaking programs, vernal pool checking, and some fish shocking (and occasionally Elise shocking). Having discovered that she could convince Elise to do just about anything, Denise even managed to get her to start hiking with her and her husband in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, even in winter.

In appreciation of her dedication, Elise was amazed and thrilled to be chosen WPWA's 2007 volunteer of the year. In 2009, having finally completed her Master's degree, Elise was temporarily hired by WPWA to design and build a water quality database using Microsoft Access. As part of this work, she created automated programs to output thousands of one-page PDF reports with tables and plots of water quality monitoring data. These reports are all available to the public on WPWA's web site through an interactive Google Map. In April 2013 Elise was appointed to serve on the Rhode Island Rivers Council, and in February 2015 Elise was excited to be re-hired by WPWA, this time as Program Coordinator. At just about the same time, she was appointed to serve on the Town of South Kingstown Planning Board. In her free time she is usually hiking, paddling, or driving somewhere to enjoy one of the many musical performances of her two sons. She still brings Robert and Nick on as many nature hikes and kayak paddling adventures as their busy schedules allow. Elise's paddles on the Wood River from the WPWA campus with Robert and Nick are among her most cherished experiences.

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