

Peter August wins EPA merit award

Professor

For URI professor, work at Napatree is ‘capstone’ of career

By Cynthia Drummond Sun staff writer

WESTERLY — Peter August is the Rhode Island recipient of this year’s Environmental Merit award from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. He received the award at a ceremony in Boston on Tuesday.

August, who recently retired from his position as professor of natural resources science at the University of Rhode Island, was nominated for the award by Janet Coit, director of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management.

“His work at URI and as a volunteer has made a terrific positive impact at every level,” Coit said. “As a teacher and mentor, Pete has influenced hundreds to get involved in science and conservation. As a volunteer, he has

developed trails and protected land. As a visionary, he has developed new programs to support habitat and promote scientific decision tools that will benefit Rhode Island for decades to come.”

August accepted the accolade with humor and humility.

“It’s a huge honor,” he said. “It’s humbling to think that I’ve even been nominated for this. When I look at the profiles of the other recipients this year and the people that they’ve honored in previous years, all I can conclude is somebody made a big mistake with my nomination and put it in the wrong pile.”

August, who still maintains an office at URI, chairs the science

See Professor, A5

Peter August wins EPA merit award

Professor

From A1

advisory committee of the Watch Hill Conservancy and remains involved in research and stewardship projects at Napatree Point.

“The Napatree stuff is my personal, professional capstone experience,” he said. “It allows me to put into practice everything I’ve been teaching and doing in my professional life — the natural history, the mapping, the policy issues, communications, grant writing for a place and a cause that I think is massively important.”

Watch Hill Conservancy President Deborah Lamm described August as a skilled communicator as well as a brilliant scientist.

“Peter is a joy to work with — upbeat, positive, and tireless,” she said. “And his enthusiasm is contagious.

“I think he’s taught many people.

He’s a huge team-builder, an enabler in the best sense of the word ... He always puts everyone, I don’t care who you are, on a level playing field.” Sassi said she expected August to continue to pursue his many research projects at Napatree Point.

“As many years as he has been at it, he still loves it,” she said of August’s field work. “It’s still fun and interesting to him and it doesn’t matter what it is, he’s just so enthusiastic.”

Home in Richmond

Nature is also central to August’s personal life. The Richmond home he shares with his wife, Lynn, is on the bank of the Wood River.

“I look out my window and I see the Wood River going by all the time and I see the otters and I see the great blue herons in the reeds across from my yard and I see the wood ducks and you know what? There’s no place I’d rather live,” he said.

It is easy to understand why he has been such a highly regarded and popular professor at URI. He is crazy smart but has a knack for communication that makes the material accessible, which draws in colleagues and laypersons alike.”

August was born in Hawaii and his family moved to California when he was 4. He was not one of those kids who know at an early age that they want to be scientists.

August attended college in San Diego, where he majored in biology, but he wasn't bitten by the science bug until his sophomore year, when he began doing field work for one of his professors.

“We spent three or four days getting rattlesnakes in the day and trapping rodents and bird watching and I thought ... sign me up for this gig.”

August was hooked. After spending two years on a Smithsonian Institution fellowship studying small mammals in Venezuela, he completed his Ph.D. at Boston University and began teaching at URI.

August established the state's first geographic information system, founded the Rhode Island Natural History Survey and served as its first director, and established the URI Environmental Data Center. He also served as the first director of the Coastal Institute, chaired Gov. Gina Raimondo's Climate Change Science and Technical Advisory Board, and created an alliance of conservation groups known as the Rhode Island Stewardship Collaborative. He formed the Watch Hill Conservancy science advisory board, and served on the boards of the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association and The Nature Conservancy.

Napatree Point Conservation Manager Janice Sassi has worked closely with August for the past nine years.

“He's taught me so much,” she said.



Peter August, seen here at Napatree Point in Westerly, is the Rhode Island recipient of this year's Environmental Merit award from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. He received the award at a ceremony in Boston on Tuesday.

Courtesy of Bryan Oakley