The powers and duties of the tree warden include the care and control of all trees and shrubs in whole or in part within the limits of any public road or grounds and within the limits of his town or borough, except those along state highways. ... This is a responsibility of great magnitude. So why did legislators pass such legislation?

Historically, tree warden laws (and they vary somewhat from state to state in New England), were passed during a period now often referred to as the first conservation era. The first was passed in Massachusetts in 1899, with the other five New England states following suit using the Massachusetts statute as a model. Forest cover in Connecticut was much less then than now with most trees in the sapling and pole age classes. During this period, the U.S. Forest Service was established, as was the Yale University School of Forestry. State forestry commissions and departments were founded along with the creation of national and state non-profit, citizen forest conservation associations, such as the Connecticut Forestry Association (founded in 1895). This was a period when people and governments were waking to the need to conserve natural resources.

Simultaneously two other related progressive social movements took place. First came the public parks movement composed of such leaders and innovators as Connecticut born Frederick Law Olmsted. Second was the formation of village improvement societies. While their missions and methods varied somewhat, advocating for the planting of new trees and the conservation of trees and forests was a common thread on the agenda.

The result was a profound cultural transformation in which people (not all, of course) thought of trees as renewable necessities (primarily for fiber but also in recreational settings) as opposed to expendable goods. Though debates raged regarding preservation versus conservation ("the greatest good for the greatest number") over forest land use, management of forest resources, including public trees in our cities and towns, largely prevailed.

As the decades passed, however, the Connecticut landscape changed. More people and greater material needs brought more conflicts between people and public trees. More cars, roads, construction, insect pests, disease and pollution have increased stress on trees. At the same time, trees in municipalities, like in the rural forest, have aged and matured. The outcome of the increased pressures on urban trees has been that they either fall apart or die earlier than their deep forest brethren.

As a result of the cultural and ecological changes, the role of the tree warden changed. Whereas the initial intent of the tree warden laws was to position a tree conservationist in each city and town, the role evolved into one of tree remover primarily in response to public safety issues brought on by old, mature, and decaying trees threatening life and limb and property. In addition, Americans have, in general, become more litigious with threats, real or perceived, of lawsuits constantly on the mind of municipal employees, managers and elected officials.

So, what is the role of a tree warden in a Connecticut city or town today? Is a tree warden a true conservationist or a public safety officer? The answer is both.

The ideal is for the tree warden to successfully and efficiently merge the original intent of the law with today’s real public safety needs. The warden must help the municipality supply the essential benefits trees provide for any community...
while protecting the public, as well as possible, from trees with high risk. (It is important to note that all trees pose some risk.) Assessing for risk is a critical role of the tree warden.

The tree warden must also provide for public participation in at least some municipal tree matters. Connecticut law requires the tree warden to post signs on public trees if they are to be removed or pruned, unless they deem the tree to be an immediate hazard to the public. Once posted a citizen may request in writing (within ten days of posting) a public hearing. At such a meeting anyone may present a reason in opposition or support of pruning or removing the tree. The tree warden, however, makes the final decision. The matter may be appealed to Superior Court (see CT Gen. Statutes Sec. 23-58, 59, and 65 for more).

It is a difficult task but there are many tree wardens in Connecticut cities and towns who have successfully and efficiently struck a balance between conserving public trees while protecting the public from harm. It’s not an easy task. The job is often an underappreciated one. The successful tree warden seeks to not only increase their skills, education, understanding and appreciation of tree care, but in public participation as well. Hopefully citizens, and the elected officials, will increase their understanding and appreciation of tree warden duties and support these essential positions.

Robert M. Ricard is an extension educator in urban and community forestry with the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System.

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eople ask if the Connecticut Forest and Park Association is a state agency, funded by tax dollars. It is not. The Association is a private, non-profit 501(c)(3) membership organization that is supported by dues, donations, endowment revenues, grants, and sales of the Connecticut Walk Book and other items. While an endowment provides some support for CFPA operations, it is not sufficient to supply all needed funding, and the remainder must be raised each year to keep CFPA functioning. CFPA programs provide great benefit to the people of Connecticut, such as maintaining the Blue Blazes hiking trail markers, and the development of trails.

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