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## If a Tree Falls, Will the Lights Go Out? Maybe in Connecticut

*Power Outages Create a Cutting Debate as Some Pine for Less Nature*

By SHELLY BANJO

GREENWICH, Conn.— Recent storms that left millions without electricity have people here questioning: If a tree falls in Connecticut, will the power stay on?

The lengthy outages after Tropical Storm Irene and a freak October snowstorm suggest the answer is a resounding no. In a state known for its forest-like feel and foliage fanatics, the power failures split Connecticut into two camps: the tree lovers versus the tree cutters.



Shelly Banjo/The Wall Street Journal

Trees under power lines along Greenwich, Conn.'s roadways have been aggressively pruned by electric companies.

Utility companies and state officials blame 90% of the epic power outages on the state's dense woods. Some power companies urge the arborcide of at least 300,000 trees, while Gov. Dannel Malloy calls Connecticut's longtime "reverence of trees completely nonsensical."

Enter tree lover Peter L. Malkin, a real-estate heavyweight perhaps best known for his lengthy battle with Leona Helmsley over control of the Empire State Building. He says power companies can't see the forest for the trees.

"They're using the trees as a scapegoat," says Mr. Malkin, president of Greenwich Tree Conservancy. "The real fix to this problem is putting the power lines underground."

The preservation group has been planting trees all over town to replace the ones power companies cut down.

But power companies aren't the only ones pining for fewer trees. A preference for electricity over tree preservation is taking root among frustrated residents who spent weeks in the dark after recent storms.

"Tree huggers like the Greenwich Conservancy can ooh and ahh over their beloved trees, but they all have generators to back up their enthusiasm...those of us without generators aren't as happy," says Christopher Fountain, a Greenwich real estate agent. "I'd rather read poetry by the light of my 100-watt incandescent bulb than gaze upon a lovely tree."

In Connecticut, where utility rates are the highest in the U.S. after Hawaii, residents who once adored living in an urban forest are getting increasingly frustrated by massive power failures that many fear could become a chronic problem.

The rub is being felt particularly hard in Greenwich, a redoubt of Wall Street wealth on the edge of New York City's suburbs, where trees are intertwined with the town's old money legacy.

After power companies last year started chopping down hulking maples planted along Greenwich roadways in the 19th century by John D. Rockefeller's brother, William A. Rockefeller, Mr. Malkin began planting new saplings in their stead.

Now, along with William Rockefeller's great-granddaughter and fellow tree conservancy member Ann Elliman, he plans to plant 1,000 by next year. He's also joining with other town conservancy groups and the League of Women Voters to study legislation aimed at protecting trees and burying power lines. And he has persuaded state lawmakers to hold public tree and power-line hearings in advance of February's legislative session.

"They're cutting down history," Mr. Malkin says. "If we're going to keep the image of Greenwich the way we like it to be, we need to keep the trees."

The tree debate has roots in Connecticut's history and its geology. With 3.6 million people, it is both among the nation's most densely populated and densely forested states. But its underlying bedrock makes it expensive to bury vulnerable above-ground power lines.

Nearly three-fourths of Connecticut is covered by trees, compared with 83% of Maine and 57% of New Jersey, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Viewed another way: There are 2,675 square meters of tree cover per person in Connecticut, compared with 52,275 square meters in Maine and 1,300 in New Jersey.

Like many states in the Northeast, Connecticut wasn't always so densely wooded. In the 18th and 19th centuries, forests were cut down to make way for farmland. In the early 1900s, trees were cut and used to make charcoal. As those industries shrank, forests grew and trees aged.

Meanwhile, people flocked from cities like New York in search of a more rural feel. Residents grew attached to their trees, leading to strict disposal rules. Local officials called "tree wardens" post public notices on trees before they chop them down. Generally, there is a 10-day comment period for residents to argue for sparing a tree.

As a result, the majority of Connecticut's trees are over 60 years old. "Trees, like people, only live so long before they come down," says Christopher Martin, forestry director at the state's Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

Since the two recent storms, five separate investigations have begun examining the tree upkeep of utility companies and state and local governments. Once-reluctant homeowners are disposing of beloved sugar maples and oaks, including those

damaged in the storms. They are leaving piles of wood chips so high that some towns don't know how to get rid of them.

"It's man versus nature, and unfortunately man is winning out," says Pam Iacono, a Fairfield, Conn., resident who says her power goes out at least twice a year when trees or branches fall on nearby power lines. She recently made the decision to chop down a towering oak outside her house that had split down the middle. "We are going to mourn the loss and move on...we can always plant a new, healthy tree in its place."

She isn't alone. Tree wardens across the state report an increasing number of calls from people "afraid of what could happen if their tree fell down, asking us to come and remove it," says Ken Placko, Fairfield's tree warden.

The removals have prompted an exhibit at the Connecticut Historical Society called "New Life for Connecticut Trees." It displays artwork and furniture, including a bench made of a 100-year-old maple that stood outside the Ivoryton Playhouse in Essex, Conn., where Marlon Brando and Katharine Hepburn once practiced their lines.

Ted Esselstyn, co-founder of City Bench, a New Haven business that manufactured the items in the exhibit, says: "The idea of giving a tree a second life can soften the blow to the people who are so passionate about them."

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