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New England's Forests Are Sick. They Need More Tree Doctors.

Climate Change is taking a toll on the woodlands in the Northeast.

By Marguerite Holloway

Photographs by George Etheredge

Marguerite Holloway and George Etheredge traveled to western Massachusetts to see how the warming planet is stressing trees and forests.

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Bear and Melissa LeVangie spent much of their childhood aloft, in a then-forested area of Massachusetts. “Our mother would say, I don’t want to see you until it is dark,” said Bear LeVangie. “We would climb an 80-foot — it seemed like a 100-foot then — white pine and hang out and not think twice about it.”

The twins still spend much of their time in and around trees: Both are arborists, which is akin to being tree doctors. Both are seeing a surge in demand for arborists because the region’s trees are faring so poorly. “I would never have anticipated how fast things are declining,” said Melissa LeVangie, who works for Shelter Tree, a tree care supply company, and is tree warden, or caretaker, for the town of Petersham in central Massachusetts.

As climate change accelerates, the trees in the Eastern forests of the United States are increasingly vulnerable. For many arborists, the challenges facing trees are reshaping and expanding the nature of their work. Many said they are spending more time on tree removal than ever before — taking down dead or unhealthy trees, or trees damaged or felled by storms.

“We are a heavily treed state,” said Kristina Bezanson, an arborist and a lecturer at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. “We are having more tree problems that require lots of arborists, and there is a shortage of arborists.”

Many New England towns are verdant, and the area is roughly 75 percent forest—forests that have generally grown back twice, after clearing by colonists for agriculture and after logging for timber in the early 1900s. To the untrained eye, it looks good: lots of green. Not to the trained eye...

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