

LOCAL

Giant trolls from Denmark will soon tower over Ninigret Park. Can they attract tourists?

Danish artist Thomas Dambo will build two giant trolls out of recycled material in Ninigret Park in what could be the start of a Rhode Island troll trail to help boost tourism.



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Trolling for more tourism dollars to support Rhode Island, the South County Tourism Council is turning to ... trolls.

Two giant trolls by Danish artist Thomas Dambo will be unveiled in Charlestown's Ninigret Park this spring in what South County Tourism Council CEO Louise Bishop hopes will be the start of a statewide troll trail that will draw visitors from all over.

"I do believe it will be something Rhode Island is known for," Bishop says.

Delivering a message of conservation as he works with recycled and reclaimed wood, Dambo has public art in more than 20 countries on five continents, including the United States, China, Brazil, Australia, Great Britain, Germany, France, South Korea and Chile.

Dambo has already built 125 trolls, including 44 in the United States, and wants to build 1,000 of them "using recycled materials all over the world," he says. Some of the trolls are 35 feet tall.

A world 'drowning in trash'

"Our world is drowning in trash, while we are running out of natural resources. I spend my life showing the world that beautiful things can be made out of trash," Dambo says. "I give new life to discarded materials by turning them into large-scale artworks."

Dambo's work and environmentally conscious message are a good fit for South County, a place with beautiful beaches and other natural attractions, Bishop says. The trolls will give people another reason to visit, she says, get some exercise and hopefully spend money at restaurants, shops and lodging.

"We're really doing it as an economic driver," she says. QR codes at the park will help direct visitors to area restaurants and other businesses.

Five of Dambo's trolls live in the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens. In 2021, after the trolls were added, the Boothbay attraction saw visitors more than double to 248,121, according to Katie Hey, the gardens' director of marketing.

"They've been a complete game-changer for us," Hey says. "We've had people from 2 to 102 simply captivated by these trolls."

"They're fun and they're whimsical," she says.

In Maine, trolls protect the trees and guard the seeds

Named Roskva, Birk, Gro, Søren and Lilja, the trolls are spread among the gardens' 300 acres, each protecting a part of the tree and working together as "Guardians of the Seeds." Visitors who hike to each troll, which takes several hours, pick up clues leading them to the hidden seeds, which they can bring home and plant.

"Our trolls will help you discover new ways to lose – and find – yourself in our forests," Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens says on its website.

The trolls at Ninigret Park will similarly take visitors on a journey and deliver a message, Bishop says, but Dambo hasn't revealed many details about what he has planned. He builds the head, feet and hands of his trolls at his studio in the Danish countryside, near Copenhagen, and will ship them to the United States.

Assembling the trolls is a community event

Once in Rhode Island this month, Dambo will enlist dozens of volunteers to help construct the trolls. Dambo says his projects are made "working in and with local communities, who are co-creators of the art that I make because the mission I follow needs the involvement of everybody. "

Bishop says she had no trouble finding people who wanted to pitch in. She says, "It's amazing the interest it's created. It's really bringing the community together."

The town has been supportive, Bishop says. Deborah Carney, president of the Charlestown Town Council, says she's "thrilled" Charlestown was chosen as "the first location for the trolls" and believes they will be a "unique and exciting addition to Ninigret Park."

"The trolls will bring more visitors to Charlestown year-round, which will benefit our local businesses," she says. "I look forward to their arrival."

People are calling it 'troll tourism'

Bishop hopes the two trolls in Ninigret Park are just the beginning of a Rhode Island troll trail, which she would like to see run north to the Massachusetts line.

"We love the concept. I think she's right on the money that this could be a great new cultural attraction for the state," says Bob Billington, president of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. "We'd love to be a part of it."

Billington has discussed the project with Bishop, and he plans to send a team to Charlestown to learn more when Dambo arrives. He acknowledges the cost, \$125,000 per troll, could be a high hurdle for the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council.

"I hope someday we can make it work," he says. "We've got to give it a whole lot more thought."

Helping to pay for the Ninigret Park trolls is a \$50,000 grant through the American Rescue Plan Act, with the South County Tourism Council funding the balance, according to Bishop. The tourism council has applied for another \$200,000 grant to complete the trail and has also reached out for corporate sponsors, she says.

If Rhode Island does build its own troll trail, Maine's experience suggests it will draw visitors from other states, even other countries.

"People are calling it troll tourism," Hey, of Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens, says. "People are traveling around to see them all."