



Sparta Mountain plan divides environmental groups



Herald file photo - Dennis Miranda, who is now president of Eastern Conservation Advisors, talks about the Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area with a group of hikers on Sept. 25 at the edge of the Edison Bog.

By [Bruce A. Scruton](#) New Jersey Herald

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FRANKLIN -- Gubernatorial candidate Raymond Lesniak stepped into the "log/no log" dispute over the Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area and promised, "If I have to, I'll go to court to save your forest."

The Stop the Chop meeting at the Franklin Firehouse on Thursday was billed as an update to the year-long controversy over a new forest stewardship plan for the 3,400 acres interspersed with lake communities.

Lesniak was the first speaker, having been invited to the group by Twitter, the new political communications tool.

"Even though I'm a city boy, doesn't mean I don't care about nature," said Lesniak, a Democratic state senator since 1983 whose district includes his hometown of Elizabeth. He went on to say, "I am the most progressive environmental legislator this country has seen."

No lawsuits have been filed as yet over the state Division of Fish and Wildlife's proposed forest stewardship plan for the wildlife management area, which has split the environmental communities in New Jersey.

The Sierra Club, one of the oldest environmental groups (founded in 1892), is vocally against the plan, which was authored under contract with the state by the New Jersey Audubon Society (founded in 1897).

In addition to the senator, who left immediately after his speech, other speakers at the meeting were Erik Kiviat from New York-based Hudsonia Ltd.; Sara Webb, a professor in environmental studies at Drew University; Ryan Rebozo, associated with the Pinelands Preserve Society; Julia Somers, executive director, and Elliott Ruga, policy director for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition; and Dennis Miranda, president of Eastern Conservation Advisors, who was at one time a contract employee by the state Department of Environmental Protection to do bird studies within the Sparta Mountain and surrounding areas.

Although the Sierra Club had a table set up, nobody from the group spoke during the 2 1/2-hour meeting.

The meeting was sponsored by the Friends of Sparta Mountain, a group formed a year ago when the controversy first arose after the DEP invited comments on its proposed 10-year extension to an existing plan, adopted in 2009.

The public notice itself stirred its own controversy, being released two days before Christmas 2015. In response to those complaints, the public comment period was extended from the end of January 2016 to the end of February. After a multi-hour public meeting at the Hardyston Middle School in February, the DEP once again extended the comment period through the end of March.

The updated stewardship plan has yet to be finalized, with both the state and Audubon now saying they expect the final draft to be done next month and presented at a public meeting in March. That meeting, they have promised, will be held somewhere near Sparta Mountain.

Other than a presentation in public, the finalized plan does not require further action to be put in place.

The plan

In essence, the plan divides the wildlife management area into 33 sections and lays out plans for "treatment" within each section. The plan offers an inventory of the types of vegetation within those sections and broad guidelines as to how much work will be done, but notes there will be further study of each section before work is done.

Work in those sections can be extensive, leaving just a handful of "seed" trees over several acres, or just taking out a few trees or intentionally girdling the trees to kill them but leave them standing.

Opponents have adopted a "Stop the Chop" motto, selling T-shirts and lawn signs with that motto. The more extreme arguments claim the state's plan is full-scale logging operation and an attempt to "monetize" state-owned property.

The state claims most of the timbering operations under the existing plan have been done by volunteers, and those operations done by professionals under contract produced timber to be sold as firewood.

As a result, the state claims there has been little profit gained by the logging.

Young forests

Thursday's focus, however, was on the importance of the forests to the wildlife and flora in the Highlands, as well as that area's importance as a water source for more than 6 million state residents.

However, hanging over the session was that century-old dispute over care of our forests -- whether to keep hands off and let Mother Nature manage the forest her way or allow man to manage the forest for his benefit, whether it be recreation, resources or relaxation.

The latter view seems to have coalesced around a movement known as the young forest initiative, pushed by the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on a national level, and being adopted by the new Sparta Mountain stewardship plan.

The initiative is that by managing the ages of trees in a forest, especially a homogenous forest, which now covers the Highlands, the forest will become healthy with a diversity of ages.

According to the DEP's studies relayed at meetings it has held, as much as 90 percent of the trees in the wildlife management area are 70-90 years old. By cutting down some of those trees, new growth will sprout and the remaining trees will grow to full maturity.

By doing different areas over the course of a decade -- and continuing in future updated plans -- man can speed up the process of a multi-aged forest.

The trees

Opponents, such as Webb in her presentation on Thursday, argue that the Sparta Mountain forest is healthy as it stands.

"Sparta Mountain is not unhealthy and doesn't need management to thrive," she said, adding that New Jersey, because of its unique standing as the most densely populated state in the union,

"does not need young forests. Other states may have enough forest for that; New Jersey does not."

She said the work being proposed in the plan is too "high intensity" to work, and that "small openings described in the plan are actually sizeable, covering many acres."

She also acknowledged the long-standing differences between environmentalists, such as John Muir, co-founder of the Sierra Club, and forestry proponents, such as Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the U.S. Forest Service.

The two men were friends in the late 1800s, through their love for the Western wilderness, but became rivals because of their differences over how to protect/use those resources.

Rebozo's take on the proposed plan is that there hasn't been enough work done on the extent of various rare plants on the mountain, noting that the two surveys that were done likely stayed on paths and roads through the area and only covered short periods of the year, not an entire growing season.

"There is a lack of the big picture for some of these species," he said, noting that several rare species were documented, but the extent of their range, and whether how they would be protected, were not outlined in the plan.

The birds

Miranda, who did bird surveys of parts of Sparta Mountain for the state between 2005 and 2009, also criticized the lack of depth in some of the bird studies.

He was also highly critical of the state seemingly adopting the Young Forest Initiative and abandoning its own landscape studies.

"For 50 years, New Jersey was the leader in protecting the environment," he said, "then someone came and pulled out the rug and changed (focus) to the young forest initiative."

He also noted the difference between environmentalists and foresters, saying, "Forestry is not a science. It is an extraction plan."

He called the plan of making openings in the forest canopy by cutting down trees "a Swiss cheese approach," and said doing so would locate many bird species' nesting areas too close to those openings, allowing greater predation and nest parasitism, especially by cowbirds.

The female cowbird will lay her eggs in the nest of another species. Her eggs hatch first, and the nesting pair will feed those babies as if they were their own. When the remaining eggs hatch, the cowbird chicks will kill them or push them from the nest and continue to be fed by the "adopted" adults.

He also said that the proposed plan talks about creating habitat for the golden-wing warbler, a species that uses higher elevations of New Jersey for its nesting grounds.

He said that the bird has disappeared from most of its range in New Jersey over the past two decades, and chances of it returning because of the clear-cutting are not likely to be successful.

"I can show you places where there were 23 nesting pairs 20 years ago. Last summer there was just one male singing and no females for him to sing to," he said. "The habitat is exactly the same; it's the birds who have gone."

Highlands forest

Ruga showed a video of an airplane ride last fall that showed the vast area of the Highlands covered by a contiguous forest.

"It's amazing to see from that vantage point," he said. "It seems to go on."

He also noted that the area has an abundance of state, county and town parks and trails. As a result, he said, a recent survey revealed the New Jersey Highlands "draws more visitors for recreation than Yellowstone, Yosemite and Grand Canyon, combined."

Somers said that 70 percent of the state's population gets its water from the Highlands, and New Jersey has the fourth lowest cost of water in the nation because of the expanse of forests that cover the Highlands.

Audubon responds

Not introduced, but present in the audience at the meeting, was John Cecil, vice president for stewardship for New Jersey Audubon, the group that wrote and is overseeing the current forestry plan for Sparta Mountain as well as the update.

He said objections to the young forest initiative are misplaced and that the way it will be adopted in New Jersey is different from how it's being applied "out West."

"Our objectives are very different," he added, and said, "There's a variety of forests where this (thinking) will work."

He noted that New York has formally adopted the initiative for forests in areas that are very similar to New Jersey.

Cecil also objected to accusations that surveys were lacking.

"We do know what we have on the land," he said. "We know where we can do work and where we can't."

Audubon has done forestry plans on several pieces of property that it owns, including one abutting the wildlife management area, and have been certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council.

"We realize when we are doing on-ground projects we will always face local objections," Cecil said. "We understand. People are afraid of change."

But he also separated those objections from the organizational objections, often using their protests to raise funds.

"Last night, Julia stood and thanked those who donated to the coalition," Cecil said.

It was also mentioned during the meeting that Audubon received contracts for the forestry plans because it can receive grants from private and federal sources, something prohibited to the state.

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Editor's Note: Dennis Miranda's position was misstated in a photo caption in the original version of this story. Miranda is a former employee of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation and is currently president of Eastern Conservation Advisors.