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COMMENTARY: Logging public preserves is a misguided plan

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The state Department of Environmental Protection has released a Forest Stewardship Plan that spells trouble for the Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area.

This well-meaning but misguided plan calls for extensive logging, and that's just not right for New Jersey's forests.

As professional ecologists, we have spent decades studying, teaching in, and enjoying the woods, and like other experts and organizations including the [New Jersey Highlands Coalition](#), we are deeply concerned about this plan.

We believe that chainsaws clearing so much land would cause serious environmental damage -- to water quality, vulnerable wildlife, and forest health.

Sparta Mountain is 3,500-acre public preserve protected from development just 20 years ago. It lies in the beautiful area west of I-287 known as the Highlands, a mosaic of protected and developed lands.

Recovering from state-wide deforestation in the 1800s, its forests have regrown into healthy, intact ecosystems that supply 70 percent of New Jersey residents (6.2 million people) with pure drinking water. Sparta Mountain protects headwater streams that feed the Passaic, Rockaway, and Wallkill Rivers and fill our reservoirs.

Unusual for its size and continuity, Sparta Mountain forest shelters 81 Endangered, Threatened, and Special Concern species. This sort of large, shady, unlogged forest is absolutely essential to a huge array of wildlife that cannot survive near clearings or in small fragments of forest.

This Forest Stewardship Plan would cut down trees from 20 percent of the preserve (that's 541 football fields) over 10 years, with continued logging for another 60 years, leaving precious little of today's mature forest.

The plan's stated goals are to maintain ecosystem health, diversity and integrity, and to protect and enhance water resources. But such extensive logging is quite at odds with these worthy goals and is certain to backfire.

Logging in no way makes forests healthier. Many people have the impression that forests must be selectively logged in order to thrive. But this simply isn't true. Nature does a fine job keeping forests healthy without our meddling.

What does make for a healthy forest? Just what Sparta Mountain has -- a wide diversity of native plants and animals, complex structure, intact food webs, clean streams, mossy logs, and (yes) crooked and hollow trees for wildlife habitat. (To the untrained eye, a healthy forest doesn't always look that great!).

True stewardship for ecosystem health would not carve openings out of such a forest but would instead prevent fragmentation and disruption. It is well known that the larger the preserve, the more species it protects.

We are worried about the plan to convert at least 10 percent of Sparta Mountain's old forests to young woodlands. Young forests are important habitat for some birds such as the Golden-winged Warbler, but many other birds need extensive forests with large trees and deep shade.

Northern New Jersey has far more young forest than the plan claims, and birds of clearings are far more abundant than birds of the forest interior. It is incredibly short-sighted to create young forest by carving up precious maturing forests! Instead let's start young forests in open fields and already-degraded woods.

Logging disturbance causes further harm through what is known as the edge effect. Nest predators such as cowbirds, crows, and raccoons forage on eggs at forest margins. Frogs and salamanders and vital soil organisms cannot tolerate dry forest edges. Exposed trees blow down. And clearings in New Jersey are destined for takeover by a rogue's gallery of invasive plant species, carried by birds and wind: garlic mustard which kills tree seedlings, bittersweet vines which strangle tall trees, and many more.

Water quality also suffers catastrophic, long-lasting impacts from logging: nutrient and sediment pollution, loss of sensitive stream invertebrates and fish, and dramatic fluctuations in stream flows. Yet this plan proposes extensive cutting in pristine headwater areas.

For the sake of the water and wildlife that belong to all citizens, let's protect our public forest preserves with a hands-off approach. Responsible stewardship would not log these wonderful forests, which provide our crowded state with riches far more valuable than timber products.

To view and submit comments on the plan by the Thursday, March 31 deadline, please visit www.njfishandwildlife.com/spartamt_plan.htm. For more information and our scientific sources, see <http://www.njhighlandscoalition.org/>.