

## Forever Wild Forests in New Jersey

The New Jersey Highlands region may make up only 17% of the landmass of New Jersey, but its importance to the well-being of the State belies its diminutive size (slightly more than 860,000 acres). 70% of the State's residents receive some or all their water from the Highlands. Our state enjoys the improbable distinction of having the 4<sup>th</sup> least expensive water in the country – little New Jersey, the most densely populated state in the country! Why? Because we have protected our headwaters and the forests around them.

If you geek out on information, like me, you can visit the Highlands Council's Regional Master Plan ([www.nj.gov/njhighlands/master/rmp/final/highlands\\_rmp](http://www.nj.gov/njhighlands/master/rmp/final/highlands_rmp)). The Water Availability map on page 79 shows how dangerously close we are to running short on water. Were it not for the preserved forests protecting the headwaters of our rivers and watersheds, these shortages would be markedly worse.

At their origins, our rivers begin as seeps and springs, nurtured by Highlands groundwater, where the forests keep the river waters clean from their beginnings. A major success of the Highlands Act has been in preserving these important, forested headwater areas. But how durably are they protected?

Most of these forests are in public ownership. Much of the land is in Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) such as Sparta Mountain, Berkshire Valley and Weldon Brook. WMAs are found all over the state and are overseen by the NJDEP's Division of Fish and Wildlife. The mission of the Division is "to protect and manage the State's fish and wildlife to *maximize their long-term biological, recreational and economic values for all New Jerseyans*" (italics are mine). It is the position of the Division that, in northern New Jersey, we do not have enough "young forest", and that the bird species found in "young forest" have declined in number more precipitously than species found in interior forests. The many PhD ecologists and experts who advise the New Jersey Highlands Coalition could not disagree more!! Historically, much of New Jersey was forested. With the introduction of agriculture and widespread development, and the resulting loss of forest, it is the birds found in our intact forests that are most in decline because we have lost so much of our maturing forests.

Little is known about the present condition of our forests. We know little to nothing about the condition of their forest soils, fungi, rare plant species, vernal pools and their interrelationships. A forest is its whole, intricate ecology, much more than its trees. Yet despite its limited understanding, the Department is drawing up "stewardship plans" for them! For example, on every stand they have logged on Sparta Mountain to date (where even more logging is planned), we have demonstrated that the Department was dramatically wrong about the ages of the trees they cut down. What we do know, however, is that, through the "Young Forest Initiative" (YFI), federal funding is available to DEP through the US Forest Service (a division of the US Department of Agriculture) to create more "young forest." As justification, and using misleading data, they claim our forests are "even aged," requiring that they "steward" and diversify the habitat. How? By cutting down our oldest forests!

In 2023, we know that climate change is real. Extreme weather events are becoming disturbingly frequent. Lives are in danger. Our environment is broadly threatened. EPA data indicates that intense weather events in New Jersey (from flooding to drought to heat waves) are anticipated to increase in frequency and impact by more than 50% in the Highlands region. Removal of carbon from the atmosphere is an imperative for New Jersey. Recognizing that, the Commissioner of NJDEP has just

awarded several Natural Climate Solutions grants to, among other things, plant trees. We do not suggest this is a bad thing to do but question the optics of the program. These grants are being made at the same time DEP is logging the mature forests that are sequestering the greatest amount of carbon. It is now a matter of proven science that the oldest trees sequester the most carbon (by an extraordinary order of magnitude) through the leaves in their canopy, trunk, branches, roots, supporting fungi and the soil that anchors them. It takes more than 80 years for a young tree to begin to match the carbon storage capacity of a mature tree. Or, according to USDOE data, it takes 16 years for 151.14 young oaks to store the same amount of carbon as one 40-foot oak tree. Why are we cutting down the big, old trees in our public forests?

In early 2022, Senator Bob Smith established a Forest Task Force (FTF) that has spent the last nine months working on recommendations about how best to manage our public forested lands. We hope the FTF addresses Climate Change and the imperatives for carbon sequestration head on. With more than 200 people participating, having committed thousands of volunteer hours, the FTF report is anticipated to become public soon. The New Jersey Highlands Coalition, its members, and partners have been very active participants in the FTF and urge an end to removing wood (carbon) from our publicly owned forests. You can visit the Resources section on the Highlands Coalition's website to familiarize yourself with the most up to date scientific papers – there's a great wealth of them. Let's agree that it is now imperative that we allow our forests to age, to mature and become old growth, by keeping them "Forever Wild." Our lives and our environment depend on it!