

The magic of The Highlands
VIEW FROM THE HIGHLANDS

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During my senior year of high school, I embarked on the task of selecting a college to attend for the next four years.

I traveled the east coast from North Carolina to Boston trying to discover the perfect place. Being from the Pinelands region, I grew up with a forest for a backyard and a close connection to nature.

In my travels of college campuses, I searched city and suburb and nothing seemed to connect.

Then I visited the Highlands. I remember the first time I came to Ramapo College and saw mountains glistening with fall foliage. A breathtaking vista lay right across the street from the college campus. Immediately I knew I wanted to study and live here in the Highlands.

Although mountains and forests characterized my first encounter with the Highlands, I soon discovered the other facets of life actively ongoing here. Gorgeous agricultural landscapes comprised of preserved farmland that continue to provide crops to New Jerseyans, quaint communities such as Belvidere, Boonton, and Bloomsbury with a unique charm, picturesque lakes and reservoirs that provide drinking water for 5.4 million people.

The Highlands is significant for so many reasons as the natural resources found here endow its inhabitants with a wide range of economic, recreational, and ecological opportunities.

Today I still live and work in this pristine region at the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, striving to preserve the unparalleled natural beauty, environment, and community character that is found here. This region is so critical to the overall health of the state because multiple mechanisms are at work in the Highlands.

The Highlands is not just about scenic vistas and picturesque hiking trails but also ecotourism opportunities, agricultural industry, and most importantly drinking water.

The complex character of the region is defined in the Regional Master Plan compiled by the Highlands Council.

The Highlands has a myriad of natural resources including forests, steep slopes, critical habitat and lakes, ponds, and reservoirs. The numerous forests and open spaces serve as a huge ground water recharge area which allows us to continually harvest clean drinking water.

Numerous historic sites are found here from Jockey Hollow and the Thomas Nast House in Morristown to the pre-industrial mills of Hunterdon County up to the Split Rock furnace in Rockaway. These sites along with the natural resources create opportunities for sustainable economic activities in recreation and tourism that are not offered in other areas of the state. Activities such as canoeing, fishing, hiking, camping depend on maintenance and preservation of our natural resources.

Preservation of these resources is not just an environmental issue but will result in economic returns as well.

After visiting the region it is obvious why people want to live here. People are attracted just as I was by any number of the above mentioned qualities.

Although the beautiful Ramapo Reservation which played a key role in bringing me to the region is forever protected, the same cannot be said for the remainder of the pristine Highlands.

Encroaching development continues to threaten the quality of our communities.

What if Route 206 became a six lane highway surrounded by housing developments and mini-malls? What will happen to our agricultural economy if farmland continues to be turned into one acre lots for more and more homes?

What happens when over development results in water deficits and the concrete jungle has left no where for groundwater to recharge.

Protecting the unique character and economies of the Highlands is necessary to prevent the monster of sprawl. This area is unlike any other in the state due to the diverse economic activities, landscape types, communities, ecosystem services and natural resources that make up the region.

Each month this column will explore the complexity of the Highlands through one of the many issues that influences the region and reminds us why the Highlands has the special protections afforded under the law.

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