Message from the Executive Director

Every year I can't believe how fast the first six months go. So much has happened since our last newsletter.

Among the exciting developments at the Coalition, we're thrilled to announce our partnership with Jared Rosenbaum, co-founder of Wild Ridge Plants, and Sharon and Wade Wander as advising ecologists. Jared is a Certified Ecological Restoration Practitioner and has performed botanical surveys on over 10,000 acres of public land in NJ. Sharon and Wade are a husband and wife team of top ecologists in New Jersey, particularly known for their bird and butterfly work. We are excited to have them join our team.

We continue to work strategically promoting municipal conformance. It is a welcome change to support the Council's conformance efforts. We are also independently reaching out to establish municipal-led regional stormwater utilities, which will help communities finance meaningful responses to flooding and water quality impairments caused by stormwater.

We are continuing to press the Governor's office to replace Governor Christie's people on the Highlands Council. Currently three seats are empty, and all terms have expired.

Policy Update

On May 30 an editorial of ours ran in the Star Ledger calling on Governor Murphy to make appointments to the Highlands Council.

Despite a new Governor and new leadership at the Highlands Council, with three Christie appointed opponents of the Highlands still active on the Highlands Council, the Council has not been able to regain the momentum it lost when Governor Christie maneuvered to undermine it.

We had been pressing the Governor ever since he was elected to move on appointments. We had attended meetings with his staff and there was considerable correspondence between us.

The same day the editorial ran we received a call from the Governor's office requesting a meeting. On June 7, we met with the Governor's Deputy Chief of Staff and the Director of Appointments. It was a very positive meeting and we were assured appointments would be made swiftly. Still, no appointments have been made. What's up Governor?

We had been strong supporters of the bill that was recently signed into law allowing municipalities, or groups of municipalities, to create stormwater utilities. Unmanaged stormwater is the primary cause of surface water pollution in New Jersey. This was all too perfectly illustrated recently with the closing of Lake Hopatcong to swimming over the Fourth of July weekend—normally their busiest weekend of the summer—due to harmful algae blooms (HAB). Record rainfalls in the last month, combined with inadequate stormwater management and summer heat created the perfect conditions for HAB.

Just prior to the outbreak, District 24

View from the top of 'Stairway to Heaven', Wawayanda State Park

This is unacceptable for a branch of government responsible for such an important region in New Jersey.

Warmly,

Elliott Ruga, Policy & Communications Director

**NJ Highlands Boonton Brewfest**

**Sept. 7, 2019 1-5PM**

Come to Boonton's Canalside Park for an afternoon of craft beer, live music, great food and exhibits. Over 40 breweries will be offering over 80 beers for you to sample.

Tickets are available at [www.njhighlandsbrewfest.com](http://www.njhighlandsbrewfest.com). Use code **NJHC10** for an exclusive discount for New Jersey Highlands Coalition supporters.

*Photo credits: Elliott Ruga, Zachary Cole, Cari Ellen*
Policy Update cont’d

Legislators, whose district include some of the towns on the Lake, had pressed towns to pass resolutions affirming never to participate in a stormwater utility.

Dense development around the Lake, coupled with inadequate and poorly maintained stormwater management systems all but guarantee that HABs will continue to plague the Lake, reducing property values and crippling the businesses that rely on recreational use of the Lake. Effective stormwater management costs money. A stormwater utility is the only effective solution because it equitably raises the necessary funds to install meaningful stormwater controls. We are actively pursuing outreach opportunities in the Lake Hopatcong communities, to educate the public, business interests and officials on the benefits of creating a regional stormwater utility.

Does the Highlands Act provide adequate protections for Highlands forests now that we are beginning to understand the value the Highlands mature forests provide in mitigating the impacts of climate change? We will be exploring this issue over the coming months. The core forest of the Highlands, approximately 255 square miles of dense woods, located north of I-80, from Ramapo Mt. in the east, to Sparta and Hamburg Mountains in the west, continues to be reduced in size and quality because of activities exempted from DEP regulations.

Over the last two years a forest stewardship project has pitted ecologists against DEP’s Division of Fish & Wildlife. What was at stake was an 18.5 acre tract of forest in Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area. Thanks to the efforts of Silvia Solaun and the Friends of Sparta Mountain, the size of the project was reduced to 12.5 acres, saving 6 acres of mature forest that was habitat for Barred Owl and a rare species of orchid.

Work began in the Spring. Now that it’s almost concluded, we caught up with Silvia and asked her for an update.

**What is the current situation on Stand 18 and is there a timeline for next steps?**

**Silvia:** We’ve visited Stand 18 with members of the NJ Highlands Coalition’s Natural Heritage Committee numerous times to document how destructive these stewardship projects are. It’s really impossible to describe how drastic a change this area has undergone, from being a healthy, age-diverse forest to an opening torn apart by heavy machinery. The area is devastated, the soil severely disturbed with rutting sometimes several feet deep, and many young trees cut down only because they were in the way.

They significantly widened the access road, pushing huge amounts of dirt and debris into wetlands and exposing large areas of bare soil that are now vulnerable to invasive species.

Measuring trunk diameter on Sparta Mtn.

**What are you hoping for the future?**

We have always stated that public lands in New Jersey belong to all of us, and it is appalling to see them managed for specific interests—to create habitat for game species and for the sale of timber. There is no accountability or oversight of these activities. It is our hope that using the evidence and the experience of what occurred on Sparta Mountain, we can influence future projects that involve this type of forest management. We want to persuade DEP to reconsider in favor of true restorative stewardship. We cannot afford to log the last remaining intact forest that exists in the New Jersey Highlands.

The NJ Highlands Coalition is advancing a new paradigm for forestry so that intact forests retain their intrinsic ecological values including water resource production, biodiversity, recreation and the ability to mitigate the impacts of climate change. For more information about our vision for forestry in the Highlands check out our **Policy Recommendations for Forest Stewardship for Public Lands,** which can be found on our website under Resources/Other Publications.

255 sq. mi. core forest of the Highlands Preservation Area

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They significantly widened the access road, pushing huge amounts of dirt and debris into wetlands and exposing large areas of bare soil that are now vulnerable to invasive species.

We are documenting all of this and determining if there are violations of the Plan, as well as publicizing what this terrible “stewardship” project looks like on our public lands!

**Have these site visits yielded new data about the age of the stand?**

**Yes.** One thing we can thank the loggers for is our ability to count tree rings on the stumps of trees that were cut down and confirm what we already knew; that trees on Sparta Mountain are not stuck in “middle age.” Of the samples we’ve analyzed, the ages range from 70-150 years, and interestingly the rings also tell us that for many of the trees the last few years show the fastest growth, which has big implications for their capacity to sequester carbon dioxide.

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NJ Highlands Coalition Events
Zachary Cole, Outreach & Education Director

All year we find creative ways to engage our members and supporters with the vibrant cultural and natural treasures in the Highlands, keep up traditions and share new experiences in the Highlands.

In April we hosted the 3rd Hopped Up Hackettstown Pub Crawl and Scavenger Hunt which saw participation by a number of local businesses who recognize the critical connection between a sustainable Highlands and a healthy economy. This year we had 150 supporters join us in Hackettstown for this fun event.

May marked our Fourth Annual Highlands Golf Outing, which was a record breaker this year; it didn’t rain and the temperature was above 40! Around 50 golfers, photographers and guests joined the action at Hawk Point for the 4th year in a row. The golf ranged from pretty good to pretty bad; breakfast and lunch were delicious and a grand old time was had by all.

The Highlands Hikers kicked off with a successful outing to Apshawa Preserve in April. Hikers enjoyed views over Butler Reservoir and a delicious craft beer at Ramstein Brewery after a day on the trail.

These outings are open to everyone and all levels of ability. Get in touch with Zac to find out where and when the next outing will be.

In June we hosted the first NJ Highlands Coalition Paddle Event on Splitrock Reservoir with sponsorship from REI Co-op. There is no better way to connect with the water resources we work so hard to protect than to float on the reservoir and observe the rugged shoreline and the expansive forests of Farny State Park.

This special event was coordinated with Keep It Green NJ, a network of more than 150 organizations across the State working to increase awareness about the intrinsic benefits of Open Space preservation: clean air, clean water, and healthy communities - more information about Keep It Green can be found at the updated Keep It Green web site at njkeepitgreen.org.

Coming up this summer we’re excited to announce the 3rd Hopped Up Boonton Pub Crawl and Scavenger Hunt (Aug. 31), and the NJ Highlands Brewfest at Boonton (Sept. 7) two unique events that celebrate community, clean water, and craft beer. Early bird discounts are available. Check out the events page on our website.

At the NJ Highlands Coalition Splitrock Paddle Event

New figures recently published by, among others, the State of New Jersey and the New Jersey Highlands’ Council confirm what far-sighted investors in the Highlands have long known: the New Jersey Highlands continue to prosper.

Land values have risen strongly since the end of the Great Recession and the infamous Real Estate Bubble that began in 2007. While some areas of the Highlands are losing population other communities in the east are growing rapidly. Jobs in portions of the Highlands are down, but employment is up! The simple answer to that counter-intuitive math problem is that many more Highlands workers are commuting out of the Highlands. By the way, incomes here are also up.

Yes, the times, real estate markets, retail sales and employment patterns and many other factors are changing. Tourism is returning as a major sector particularly in the western Highlands. Agriculture is expanding. Our traditional corn and tomato crops continue to thrive. Shifting markets are making so-called “Farm to Table” crops big money-makers as well, and towns with far-sighted leadership are discovering that small town, downtowns can be attractive, profitable and sustaining with creative marketing and modest investments.

In the coming weeks and months ahead the Highlands Coalition will be rolling out hard numbers that will demonstrate that the future of the Highlands Region can be kind to those who understand that “Changing Times” favor the bold and the creative.

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Summer 2019 Newsletter

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Meet your personal, financial and estate planning goals by making a lifetime or testamentary charitable gift that expresses your affection for the New Jersey Highlands. Contact Julia Somers for more information: 973-588-7190, or julia@njhighlandscoalition.org