

New Jersey Hills Media Group



HIGHLANDS HIGHLIGHTS: Highlands Coalition focuses on cultural & natural resource protection

Julia Somers, New Jersey Hills Media June 28, 2021

The Mission of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition is to protect, enhance and promote the vital water and other natural and cultural resources of the New Jersey Highlands to sustain current and future generations.

How and why do we do that? It means we work to safeguard the water resources, ecological integrity, biodiversity, and cultural and scenic resources of the region, its farmland and high quality farmland soils, and work at the council to ensure that we have a strongly protective Highlands Regional Master Plan.

We encourage protective regulations promulgated by the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and other agencies, and work with our non-profit member organizations and other New Jersey non-profit conservation groups to ensure adequate funding for land conservation and stewardship in the region.

We educate the public and decision-makers on, and serve as an information source for, New Jersey Highlands cultural and natural resource protection.

And most importantly, we create strong partnerships and alliances with organizations and individuals to effectively protect, preserve and enhance the resources of the New Jersey Highlands.

Sounds like a lot, doesn't it? And yet we do this with only seven people on staff out of a little, second-floor office on Main Street in Boonton.

A miracle? No. The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is truly exactly that – a coalition of more than 115 organizations, small, medium and large of diverse missions and origins, some established and well known like the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, which created us from a program they first established in 1988, ANJEC (the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions) and The Land Conservancy of New Jersey, to multiple watershed associations and others – names you know, like the Raritan Headwaters Association, the Great Swamp Watershed Association, the Musconetcong Watershed

Association and the Passaic River Coalition – to medium or small-but-mighty grassroots groups like the Coalition for Sustainable Development (aka Save Warren County), Skylands Preservation Alliance and Walkkill Headwaters Association.

It's our members who make us strong, keep us informed and ensure we are effective. We keep in touch with each other through regular meetings, very active social media, and networking.

Our members co-sponsor our great webinar series (check out our website, our Facebook page and our YouTube Channel!) and share our Action Alerts.

Through us, they collaborate and help each other, and in turn provide people and experts to serve on our great board, our Policy Committee and our Natural and Cultural Heritage committees. They are our boots on the ground, and together we are an army.

We do our best to ensure that all our members, particularly our grassroots member organizations, thrive and fulfill their missions.

When they ask, we help them help themselves organize, fundraise, and find the professional expertise they seek to advise them, like lawyers, ecologists, engineers; we provide them with small grants - it's truly astonishing what a \$5,000 small grant can help a group of concerned citizens achieve - and with support when the local land use battles seem to be taking sooo long.

It's hard to keep people attending municipal meetings month after month, occasionally for several years.

Sometimes, all one needs is reassurance at the right time and a "Great job! You are doing OK! Here's what has worked in other places."

Just this year we fledged two new official non-profit organizations that will now stand on their own two feet, the Highlands Glacial Lakes Initiative and New Jersey Forest Watch. We are very proud parents.

Our grassroots member organizations also get access to the resources of the larger, well-established statewide and national organizations. For us, helping establish effective grassroots advocacy throughout the Highlands helps us accomplish our mission because with our small staff, we cannot possibly be in all 88 Highlands municipalities at once. Our grassroots members are our ears to the ground.

So, if there are all these groups active in the 88 communities and seven counties of the Highlands, what do we need the coalition for?

At 860,000 acres, the Highlands is not a small place and it is remarkably diverse, in so many ways. NJHC is the only group whose entire focus is only on the Highlands region; we are the glue that keeps the protection of the Highlands on everyone's agenda and at the top of all our "to do" lists.

And we are very welcoming. We encourage everyone to join us, individuals as well as organizations.

There is an important role for every single person to play, so just ask. Come on in ... we cannot do this without you too! Find out more about us and become a member at www.njhighlandscoalition.org.

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