

New Jersey Hills Media Group



HIGHLANDS HIGHLIGHTS: The Third Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference, November 9th and 10th Online!

Joe Hernandez, New Jersey Hills Media October 22, 2021

I tighten the straps of my thick neoprene waders as I gather my gear for an evening fishing session in Stephen's State Park. It's the start of fall and the water is warm enough for most of my favorite fish to catch to still be active, but too cold for swim trunks and sandals. With rods in hand and tackle bag on my side, I set off on the trail.



I walk along the shore of the Musconetcong River, a 46-mile tributary of the Delaware River. Its pristine clear water flows past massive boulders covered in mosses that thrive in the shade of maples and oaks. Flowing with the current is native eelgrass that sways like hair in the wind. Knowing that my target the Smallmouth Bass prefers to use this vegetation as shelter, I ready myself to enter the water.

One step into the water and I feel like I've entered another world familiar yet alien. The environment speaks a thousand words, and I tune my ear to listen. The peaceful churning of water against the riffing rocks interrupted seldomly by the plop of a fish plucking an insect from the surface or a hickory nut falling into the river. The breeze blows fresh against my face bringing leaves down like natural confetti.

This is the river experience, something very familiar to the northwest region of New Jersey with its cold-water springs, pristine riparian forests, spectacular waterfalls, and legendary fishing spots. All these elements combine in the Highlands watershed of the Delaware River, a valuable resource not just for the recreational opportunity, but also as a drinking water resource and economic driver. The river and its tributaries, also provide critical habitat for some of the most unique and beautiful flora and fauna in the state. The water quality we have here is a resource we truly can't live without.

However, the river and its ecosystem are constantly threatened by the encroaching effects of human development and climate change. Warming waters are driving fish such as native trout away from their regular breeding grounds. Unwarranted forestry projects remove trees

that once held soils in place, and now risk rain eroding the ground washing sediment into streams further stressing fish populations. Massive building endeavors add more impervious cover in our watersheds. When stormwater runs off these hard surfaces it carries pollutants and other contamination into our rivers and aquatic ecosystems. These are only a few of the wide array of challenges facing the Delaware River and its tributaries that can and must be addressed!

Responding to these challenges is the Delaware River Watershed Initiative, a collaboration of academic institutions and non-profit organizations, including the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, working throughout the watershed to protect and enhance the health of the river. As part of this initiative, we are proud to invite you to the **Third Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference**, a virtual forum where interested people can learn about the progress we've made thus far, and exchange ideas and knowledge to further our goals of restoring the Delaware River.

This free online Conference will take place over two sessions in the afternoon of Tuesday, November 9th, and the morning of Wednesday, November 10th. Each year we feature an engaging selection of workshops and presentations by experts working on projects in the Highlands and Paulinskill regions of the watershed. We will also hear from advocates for policies that will improve protections for water resources. The broad variety of topics allows for an inclusive and accessible forum for experts and people working in this field, to local outdoors enthusiasts, or residents in the watershed seeking to join the conversation and become involved.

For 2021, we are thrilled to have Peter Kasabach, Executive Director at New Jersey Future deliver the Keynote Address in which he will explore the subject of sustainable economic development as it applies to our region. Additionally, we are honored that NJ DEP Deputy Commissioner Olivia Glenn will share her perspective in the Opening Plenary.

Admission is open for this online event, so be sure not to miss out on this amazing opportunity. Visit www.northwestnewjerseyrivers.org to register and see details about our 2021 Conference. This event will be sure to educate you on the wonders of the Delaware River and its tributaries and inspire action for how we as a community can come together to make a better future for our treasured Delaware River.

Until then, I will continue exploring my favorite local fishing spots, collecting data, and meeting fellow advocates. *Tight Lines!*

Joe is Program Manager at the Lopatcong Creek Initiative for the NJ Highlands Coalition.