

New Jersey Hills Media Group

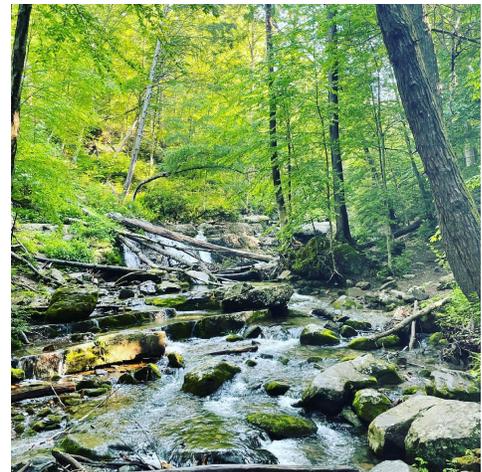


Highlands Highlights: The Great Waters of New Jersey

Zachary Cole, New Jersey Hills Media, February 18th, 2022

Great Waters New Jersey is a collaborative initiative organized by the Musconetcong Watershed Association and the New Jersey Highlands Coalition with several other local partners in the Delaware River Watershed. The objective of this initiative is to celebrate and raise awareness about the incredible rivers in northern New Jersey.

The Highlands region in New Jersey captures the imaginations of hikers, anglers, cyclists and paddlers at every turn with its rolling forested ridges and the opulent rivers meandering through the valleys. These rivers are vital to millions of people's water supply, they sustain farms and vineyards, and are an important economic driver through the outstanding recreational opportunities they offer.



A number of these rivers are actually recognized with the exclusive honor of a National Wild & Scenic River designation, including about 400 miles in the Delaware River Watershed. The value of this designation is that these rivers are protected from development projects in their beds and banks that could compromise them. Development such as dams, powerlines, pipelines and so on, that would negatively impact both the ecological integrity of the water and the river's aesthetic quality.

Through the Great Waters NJ initiative we are seeking to bolster the Wild & Scenic Rivers program locally, and take more advantage of the privileges offered through it. Among our policy priorities is moving the state to recognize the recreational value of our waters and waterfront lands, we are urging them to resolve gaps in our region's regulations that leave our priceless water and waterways vulnerable to contamination, and advocate for better protections at the headwaters of rivers and streams.

We are advocating that NJ DEP adopt Recreational Use criteria that would assess how a river or stream is actually used when determining its level of protection. Currently NJ DEP

only takes account of ecological and fisheries values when considering designation of a river segment. The Department has no standards for actually assessing a river or stream's value to the community for recreation or as part of its public water supply even when a particular river or waterway is primarily used for recreation or sourcing drinking water. Enacting this new standard would keep our waters clean and allow everyone to safely enjoy our rivers for years to come.

Equally important, we are urging the NJ DEP to upgrade all the waters in the Highlands to the Category One Anti-Degradation Designation for their critical significance to northern New Jersey's water supply. Many of the rivers and streams that provide us our drinking water are inadequately protected at their headwaters. Existing standards only consider surface water quality way downstream thus leaving the sources of the water vulnerable to contamination. All of the major river systems of northern New Jersey begin in the Highlands. The effect of upgrading these Highlands waterways to C-1 would afford them much greater protection in line with the purpose of the Highlands Water Protection & Planning Act.

Throughout the month of February, Great Waters NJ has been championing our region's headwaters, which are often overlooked in favor of more dramatic features like waterfalls or fast moving rapids. Headwaters are the tiny streamlets and brooks trickling through the rocks on a trail or off a slope in the woods. Often unmapped these are the sources of water, which combined sustain our rivers and our water supply.

More information about these issues, how we can address them, and how you can get involved is available on the Great Waters NJ website (www.greatwatersnj.org). Also online are several useful resources to learn about where and how to explore these special river environments with your friends and family. Over the upcoming year, the Great Waters Partners will be leading outings - hikes and floats, around and on northern New Jersey's splendid rivers.

Our rivers and streams in the Highlands are among the finest in the state—and beyond. Help keep it this way!

*Zachary Cole, Outreach & Education Program Director, New Jersey Highlands Coalition
(Image Credit: Dunnfield Creek, DRWG, Z. Cole)*