



Highlands Lookout

njhighlandscoalition.org

Newsletter of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition

Fall/Winter 2022

Message from the Executive Director

The changing of the seasons once again brings into focus just how spectacular and important our public forests in New Jersey are. Protecting these forests has been something at the forefront of what we at the New Jersey Highlands Coalition have been working on these last few years.

Since May we have been fully engaged in Senator Bob Smith's Forest Taskforce, advocating for protections against logging, promoting ecological restoration, and recognizing our forests' role in carbon sequestration and addressing climate change. Our Natural Heritage and Policy Committees' members have dedicated a staggering amount of time to this effort, compiling the latest scientific data, confirming what we have known for so long: our oldest and biggest trees play the largest role in fighting climate change and must be preserved.




Nestled in mountains of Ramapo State Forest, Lake Ramapo is one of the most serene locations in the New Jersey Highlands. (photo: Dylan Medici)

No one explained this better than Dr. Mark Anderson of The Nature Conservancy, who led a fabulous webinar for us on just how trees absorb and store atmospheric carbon and reduce the effects of climate change.

In September we were thrilled to be able to return in-person for the first time since 2019 to Centenary's Lackland Center for our fourth annual Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference. This year's theme on ecotourism and the economy of the region was a big hit, no doubt due to having so many local experts. The plenary and our keynote speaker – New Jersey's 34th Secretary of State, the Honorable Tahesha Way – hit it out of the park.

Policy Update Elliott Ruga, Policy & Communications Director

The most exciting statewide policy news in years is the hiring of Ben Spinelli as the Highlands Council's Executive Director. Ben's professional and political experiences make him a perfect fit for the task. Ben is a former mayor and township committee member of a Highlands municipality, Chester Township. He was the Executive Director of the Office of Smart Growth and he was an original member of the Highlands Council. Most importantly, Ben understands the goals of the Highlands Act and is committed to seeing it implemented. He understands that the exhaustive analysis of the region made by the Highlands Council provides the Council with a unique understanding of the opportunities and constraints for growth and development—and that if the Highlands region is to realize a sustainable future,

You can view all these events and more on our Youtube channel. In the meantime, all the Board and Staff wish you and your family a wonderful holiday season and a very happy New Year! 

Julia Semers



Happy holidays from the New Jersey Highlands Coalition staff! (photo: Elliott Ruga)

including a sustainable water supply, the Council must be consulted for all major land use decisions in the entire region, regardless if it impacts the Planning or Preservation Area, and regardless of the conformance status of the municipality. This is a concept that we have been advocating ever since the procedure was changed by the Council when it provided DEP with a Consistency Determination for a proposed development that required the designation of a new sewer service area.

When the Regional Master Plan (RMP) was first adopted the Highlands Council judged a project in the Planning Area for consistency against all applicable provisions of the RMP regardless of the municipality's conformance status. Under Governor Christie, the RMP was dropped from Consistency Determinations


Policy Update cont'd

for projects proposed in the non-conforming Planning Area, which is in fact a violation of DEP's own rules. Under Governor Murphy we have been unsuccessful in our requests that DEP and the Highlands Council return to the former procedure.

Ben is absolutely correct, that the deep analysis of the region undertaken by the Highlands Council provides the Council with a greater understanding of the environmental conditions and resource constraints than any other agency of the State. It is more than foolish, and certainly poor planning, to deny that knowledge because a municipality chooses not to conform to the RMP.

New Jersey DEP's currently adopted rules stipulate that for the Planning Area, the Department shall not issue a permit, authorization or approval that it determines, in consultation with the Highlands Council, to be inconsistent with the resource protection goals of the RMP. And for both the Planning and Preservation Areas, it shall give great consideration and weight to the RMP. The current procedure for Highlands Council Consistency Determinations is in violation of these provisions.

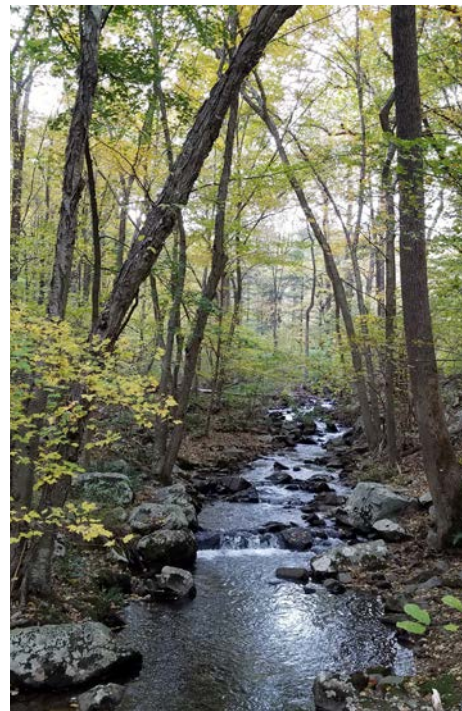
Ever since Eileen Swan was fired as the Highlands Council's Executive Director in 2012 the Council has maintained a low profile, neither eagerly promoting municipal conformance, nor asserting the Highlands Act's resource protection goals and objectives. It took its direction from the Governor's office, whether under Governor Christie, who was hostile to the Highlands Act, or the current Governor, who seems indifferent to the Highlands Council (that all but 2 seats of the 15-member Council are vacant or long expired indicates an indifferent Administration).

Ben Spinelli is rearing to reinvigorate the Highlands Council and we could not be more pleased. 

Protecting New Jersey Public Forests

Dr. Sara Webb, Professor emerita, Drew University

In New Jersey, mature, natural forests are uncommon and incredibly important to biodiversity, to water quality, and to climate resilience. Mechanical logging, now widespread on public lands, destroys habitat for at-risk forest interior wildlife, erodes and compacts soil, disrupts vernal wetlands, and puts our state's water supplies at risk. The trees that are taken – the largest and most profitable ones – are scientifically proven to absorb and store by far the largest amount of carbon which is a leading cause of global climate change. What's worse is that after logging, lost native trees do not return because of our state's overabundant deer and invasive plant species.




Stopping logging in public lands such as Roaring Rock Park has been one of our highest priorities

As an ecologist with 35 years of research on our forests, I was alarmed to discover that large swathes of our mature public forests were being cleared and the logs trucked away. After vowing in retirement to avoid all meetings, I joined the Coalition's Natural Heritage

Committee, an extraordinary collection of conservation groups, scientists, and concerned citizens working to protect our natural resources in New Jersey.

This committee, along with the Coalition's staff, have worked toward a shift away from the traditional logging approach. We have negotiated changes in the extent and location of logging for many public forested areas, and we have documented that the age, diversity, and health of public forests are far greater than claimed in plans by pro-logging interest groups. Yet, resistance to change is strong.

New Jersey must better protect its uncommonly mature natural forests without clearing canopies and removing wood. This was the conclusion drawn by the Natural Heritage Committee, and which was the focus of the NJHC Forestry Forum introduced by Senator Bob Smith in February. Following this forum, Senator Smith established the New Jersey Forest Taskforce to reconsider and update our public forest policies. At the end of the taskforce process, The Highlands Coalition hopes to see logging in our public forests replaced with restoration. The current climate crisis demands no less. 

Donor-advised giving can help create a better future

Make a lasting impact for the Highlands with a grant to the New Jersey Highlands Coalition from your donor-advised fund. A grant from your donor-advised fund will be immediately put to work building a better, safer future for the Highlands where people and nature can thrive together. When we join together, we change the future. Contact Julia Somers for more information at (973) 588-7190 or at julia@njhighlandscoalition.org

Take the Trail Less Traveled

Dylan Medici, Manager of Outreach and Education

If you've been hiking at all in the last decade you've probably noticed how many more people have been getting outside. In the last two years alone – no doubt influenced by pandemic – the number of visitors at popular visitor destinations in upstate New York and the Poconos have gone up by as much as 40% or more. In many places parking lots are filled past capacity and trash has become a real problem. Combined with the cost of gas, food, and lodging, going “to the country” to relax can seem anything but calming.

With the ubiquity of the internet and social media, learning about new places to explore has never been easier or more accessible. New Jersey shares in the plight of its neighbors, with once-hidden gems attracting visitors from hours away. A 2002 study by the US Forest Service found that 1 in 9 Americans live within a 2-hour drive of the Highlands of New Jersey and New York, and that the region attracts over 14 million visitors per year. The number since then has only gone up.

Yet, with a little bit of planning, solitude can still be found close to home



Our annual meeting, held at Kean University's Skylands Campus could not have been more timely for viewing peak fall colors from the Skywalk. (photo: Dylan Medici)

in the wild forests of the nation's most densely populated state. If you're looking to get away from the crowds without breaking the bank here are a few tips:



The Terrace Pond blue trail is an alternative to the popular Bearfort Mountain Fire Tower that provides stunning views while avoiding crowds. (photo: Dylan Medici)

1. Get out the map and learn to read the features. Steep terrain, and bogs might look intimidating but can provide unexpected surprises to the adventurous.

2. Look for your local town and county parks and Wildlife Management Areas. Many of these public lands are preserved for recreation and see less visitors than nearby state parks.

3. Pass up the views. Most crowds head to popular photo locations and views. A parking lot to a waterfall may be full, but a less popular trail down the road might be totally empty.

4. Hike further. If you're dead-set on a location you know is popular, usually there are other starting points that are a longer hike, but less popular.

5. Plan ahead and be prepared. Always have a backup plan if you can't find parking.

Make sure to hike safely. Prepare for the weather and length of hike planned by bringing plenty of food and water. Be aware of hunting season dates and wear blaze orange when appropriate. Finally, always practice Leave No Trace to keep our shared spaces pristine.

New Hires

This year, we are proud to welcome three new staff members who will help support our mission of protecting the valuable natural resources of the New Jersey Highlands.



Dylan Medici joined us in May as the Manager of Outreach and Education. Dylan grew up in Rockaway Township and earned his B.A. in history from Rutgers University. His background includes serving two consecutive terms with Americorps: with the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference and with the Student Conservation Association. Dylan has a passion for building hiking trails, traditional crafts and skills and everything outdoors.



In October, Jen Wanisko joined us as our Events Coordinator. Jen is a resident of Philipsburg. She comes to us with a strong background in nonprofit management, grant writing and events coordination. Jen is also an avid birder, paddler, and crafter.



Ian Brastow joined us in October as the Policy Advisor and Lopatcong Creek Initiative Program Manager. Ian has his B.S.

in physics and environmental studies from Haverford College and his M.S. in Geography and GIS from West Chester University. Ian has served as a consultant for NASA researching light pollution across the Colorado Plateau and as a night sky ranger at Great Basin National Park. In his free time, Ian enjoys tabletop roleplaying games and is a talented leatherworker.



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Winter Newsletter 2022

Your water,
Your future

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Your future**
The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is a nonprofit organization made up of groups and individuals committed to a common goal of helping protect, enhance and restore the New Jersey Highlands.

You can help.

Please return your membership contribution to:

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508 Main Street
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www.njhighlandscoalition.org

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Membership Contribution:

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(Your contribution is tax deductible and may be eligible for a matching contribution by the company where you work. Please make checks payable to: New Jersey Highlands Coalition.)

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