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## Wake Up: The Most Densely Populated State Has Preserved One-Fifth of Its Land

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# Wake Up

*The most densely populated state has  
preserved one-fifth of its land*

**Ronald J. Dupont, Jr., with Paul E. DeCoste**



NEW JERSEY IS—LET’S FACE IT—FAMOUS FOR ITS TURNPIKE. AND its parkways, industry, and congestion. Cut through the stereotypes and myths and here’s a fact: The percentage of New Jersey’s land remaining as natural open space outranks that of 25 other U.S. states, including Colorado, Arizona, Wisconsin, Hawaii, and Texas.

Equally amazing: By area, New Jersey has a higher percentage of parks, forests, and preserved farmland than most other states. More than a fifth of our land area (21 percent) is permanently preserved open space. This in a state with a higher population density than Japan or India.

A conservation ethic in such a heavily stereotyped state as New Jersey always shocks people. “I’m from Jersey.”—“What exit?” went the sketch on the television show *Saturday Night Live* 30 years ago. Joe Piscopo—a native of Passaic, New Jersey—improvised that line during a broadcast. Self-deprecation seems to be part of our state character. Get beyond these jokes and find a happy truth. For more than a century, New Jerseyans have been fighting and winning battles to keep the Garden State green. An extensive system of parks, forests, reservations, wildlife refuges, trails, and greenways is the abundant evidence.

YOU’RE WALKING DOWN THE OLD MINE ROAD IN SUSSEX COUNTY. Here, in the heart of Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, you pass an old stone farmhouse and a stretch of fields. You cross an iron bridge. Woods spread across the valley, and streams are clear and filled with trout and crayfish. White-tailed, wild turkey, and black bear show up. Looming to the east is the level Kittatinny Mountain, a 1,000-foot wall separating this place from the rest of New Jersey, imbuing the valley with silence. It’s a page from a Robert Frost poem, but it’s within a 90-minute drive of the homes of about 20 million people. How did this survive?

“A barrel tapped at both ends”—this was (apocryphally) the proclamation of Benjamin Franklin about New Jersey, noting the state’s position sandwiched between the urban centers of New York City and Philadelphia. Those growing cities used and abused New Jersey’s land and resources. To preserve open space had to start with arguments, scuffles, and sometimes wars.

*The view from Pinwheel’s Vista on the Appalachian Trail, looking south across the Vernon Valley, looks more like a remote New England Valley than a town a little more than an hour from midtown Manhattan—which it is.* RONALD J. DUPONT, JR.

The story can be roughly divided into two phases. First, the campaigns to preserve open space—building the blocks—and then to connect them with trails and greenways—connecting the dots. These stories span 120 years.

### **Building the Blocks**

Open space preservation today in New Jersey means taking a few precious acres in a heavily built city center and discarding plans for condominiums to make a park. It was not always so. Early state efforts typically aimed to acquire large tracts—often a thousand acres and up—usually for timber management and water conservation.

Officials sometimes bought smaller parcels, though, to secure fishing access on popular lakes or to preserve historic landmarks. The Division of Parks and Forestry began with Revolutionary War landmarks, the Monmouth Battlefield (acquired in 1881) and Indian King Tavern (bought in 1903). Later park managers looked for land to protect wildlife and give people areas to have fun. The goal in these early days was to set aside mega-sized chunks of land. These blocks formed the backbone of New Jersey's network of parks, forests, and watersheds. It makes sense that the pioneers of land conservation went for the big stuff. They had to act quickly. In 1900, New Jersey had the greatest concentration of railroad tracks in the United States, soon to be augmented by highways. Other threats were poised to take the land or already had: timbering, quarrying, industrialization, reservoirs, and transportation projects. And so the stories of what protected a backcountry in New Jersey includes tales of reclamation, salvation, and heroes—people who campaigned for these lands.

Water has been one of the most vital resources New Jersey had to offer the nearby cities, and this led to one of the state's first open-space battles. In the 1870s, Philadelphia millionaire Joseph Wharton began acquiring land in southern New Jersey's vast, sandy, swampy Pine Barrens (as they are usually called; officially they are called the Pinelands). Philadelphia needed a water supply; Wharton calculated the water-rich Pine Barrens could supply it. The Cohansey Aquifer beneath this land contains some 17 trillion gallons of pure water. Wharton acquired 150 square miles of land for this water before political forces put the kibosh on his plan.

Neither Pennsylvania nor New Jersey ever got water from Wharton's vast tract, but his buying up and consolidating all that land created, in 1955, the

Wharton State Forest, the largest in New Jersey at a whopping 123,000 acres. It's one of the places in New Jersey where you can get seriously lost.

One of the next preservation battles was over stone. The Palisades, the stately basalt cliffs along the Hudson River (see the cover of this issue), were a famous scenic landmark by the Victorian era. Wealthy urbanites whose mansions lined the Hudson River loved the Palisades. So did quarry operators, who were slowly but steadily dynamiting away the Palisades for rock that could be cheaply shipped out via Hudson River barge.

One of the Palisades' famous features was Indian Head, a 200-foot-tall cliff thought to resemble a Native American in profile. In 1898, a quarry operator invited the press and public to witness the leveling of Indian Head with 7,000 pounds of dynamite. In a few seconds, the prominence became paving stone.

Around the same time as this act of natural vandalism, members of the New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs began lobbying to preserve the Palisades. Many of the women were well connected (with names like Rockefeller and Harriman). Their efforts led to legislation by the states of New York and New Jersey to create a bi-state agency, the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, to acquire and preserve the Palisades. The quarrying stopped, and one of America's great urban parks was born in 1900.

Two other epic Jersey conservation battles were over air space. The first began in the 1950s, when the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey sought to build a fourth major airport for metropolitan New York. The vast, empty 7,000 acres of north-central Jersey's Great Swamp became the preferred location. But its swampy forests and wetlands were also critical habitats for wildlife. A local citizens' group, the Great Swamp Committee, under the persistent leadership of Helen Fenske, took steps to turn the Great Swamp instead into a National Wildlife Refuge. It was a David-and-Goliath battle—the grassroots group seemed to have little chance against the huge bi-state agency. But having engaged the financial assistance of some well-heeled benefactors (including Geraldine R. and Marcellus Hartley Dodge), group members managed to acquire a core area in the swamp, which they donated to the National Park Service. The Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1960.

The Great Swamp wasn't the only place to be eyed for a potential airport or saved after an outcry. Many miles south, between the fertile lands of central New Jersey and the sand of the coast, the Pine Barrens, an abused

landscape if ever there were one, had been almost forgotten. During colonial times, at least 30 bog iron furnaces operated there, consuming a thousand acres of timberland a year. Later, more than 200 glassworks similarly gobbled up forest and sand. By the time the glass industry had vanished in the early 1900s, the Pine Barrens were barren indeed.

So it was no surprise that people talked about building a jetport and adjacent 250,000-population city in 1964. Suburban sprawl already gnawed at the edges of the Pine Barrens.

John McPhee's 1967 book *The Pine Barrens* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) was a paean to the vanishing landscape and culture. The resultant public outcry led to the establishment of the Pinelands Environmental Council in 1971 and, in 1978, the creation of the Pinelands National Reserve. It could not have hurt that McPhee's tennis partner was New Jersey Governor Brendan T. Byrne.

At 1.1 million acres (22 percent of the state), the Pinelands National Reserve is the largest block of open space on the eastern seaboard between the northern forest of Maine and the Everglades of Florida; it was declared an International Biosphere Preserve in 1989. The successful effort to preserve the Pine Barrens provided legal precedent, paving the way for later programs to preserve the New Jersey Highlands, including the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act.

These actions all focused on the preservation of areas that, although threatened, were still in a natural state. Other preservation efforts focused on industrial areas, including the Hackensack River Meadowlands, across the Hudson from New York City. The freshwater wetlands and ancient cedar forests that once occupied these meadows were a rich biotic environment. But in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an array of activities laid waste to them: stone quarrying, cedar lumbering, damming, ditching, draining, diking, dumping, pollution, and landfills. By the 1950s, the once-beautiful Meadowlands had become the stereotype of "bad" New Jersey: a reedy, garbage-strewn, smog-choked miasmic wasteland crisscrossed by highways and railroads, hemmed in by belching factories. It had become—literally—the largest garbage dump in the world. And yes, the northern end of the New Jersey Turnpike does pass through the Meadowlands.

Things only started to change in the late 1960s. First came the establishment of the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission (now the Meadowlands Development Commission) in 1969; next was the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972. These actions arrested the continued

onslaught of pollution, but it took further efforts to begin restoration of the blighted area.

Land acquisition and environmental remediation began in the 1970s and 1980s, and in 1997, the nonprofit Hackensack Riverkeeper Inc. formed to advance restoration and management plans for the Meadowlands and open them for recreation and ecotourism. Today, the Hackensack River Meadowlands includes more than 8,400 acres of preserved open space, which, though hardly returned to its primordial state, is rich in wildlife and recreational opportunities. All this in one of the most heavily populated areas on Earth.

One of New Jersey's longest—and most bitter—battles involved not the question of open space per se, but rather what form it should take. In the 1950s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers laid plans for a massive flood control dam on the Delaware River. By 1965, the engineers had fixed its location: Tocks Island, just north of the famously scenic and historic Delaware Water Gap. The plan required acquisition of 70,000 acres in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and demolition of some 3,000 to 5,000 homes and farms to build a 37-mile-long reservoir and surrounding recreational area.

Around the same time, in 1965, a local power company had announced plans to build a hydroelectric power plant pumping water from beautiful Sunfish Pond, which lay close by on Kittatinny Mountain, near the Delaware Water Gap. The proposed destruction of the mountaintop lake led a local custodian, Casey Kays, to publicly oppose it. Leading hikes and writing letters, he enlisted the support of some heavy hitters, including Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. The plan was scrapped in 1966 and the pond donated to the state of New Jersey. It was a harbinger of environmental victories to come, including at Tocks Island.

The Delaware Valley is one of the most beautiful and venerable in the Mid-Atlantic, with some farms in the same family since the early 1700s. The destruction, both natural and cultural, required for the Tocks Island dam became a lightning rod for this nascent environmental movement. A coalition of organizations, including the Appalachian Mountain Club, mounted a concerted effort to stop the dam. After years of wrangling and controversy, the government shelved the dam plan in 1978 and transferred the property to the National Park Service. It became Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

The Tocks Island dam was not formally de-authorized until 2002. By then, thousands of structures, many historic, had been razed, and thousands of residents displaced. The resultant 70,000-recreation area has evolved into



*By the time the iron and glass industries vanished around 1900, the Pine Barrens were indeed barren. A public outcry helped preserve large sections.* PAUL E. DECOSTE

a treasured regional open space. It is now the eighth most visited national park, seeing more than 5 million visitors annually, more than Yellowstone, Yosemite, or the Grand Canyon. The AMC's Mohican Outdoor Center, located at a historic former Boy Scout Camp (Camp Mohican), is one of the recreational jewels of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

The circumstances of northwestern New Jersey's protection remain a tragic and bitter memory decades later. Some open-space battles took place on a mega-scale, but others were quite local, such as the crusade in the highlands of Morris County. During the 1980s boom, upscale housing was swallowing open space. One battleground was Pyramid Mountain, where the remarkable glacial erratic, Tripod Rock, balanced on three boulders. Alarmed at the mushrooming development, resident and historian Lucy Meyer formed the Pyramid Mountain Committee to press for public acquisition of the land. Faced with often-hostile developers and sometimes-disinterested public officials, Meyer methodically built support for her plan. Great Swamp activist Fenske commented, "She just wouldn't give up." In 1987, Morris County used state open space money to establish the Pyramid Mountain Natural Historical Area, which today amounts to more than 1,500 acres. For this widely admired grassroots campaign, former President Bill Clinton gave Meyer an award.



The conservation of the almost 18,000-acre Sterling Forest State Park in New York offered New Jersey officials the chance to show how much they care about drinking water. New Jersey was the first state to donate funds for Sterling Forest because the Wanaque Reservoir is the primary drinking water source for Newark. Joining in this effort to raise \$55 million were New York, federal and local governments, and foundations. In 2000, a 575-acre tract in the center of the forest went on the market. A developer planned large, expensive houses. Citizens rallied and were able to procure the tract for the state park. The AMC New York-North Jersey Chapter conservation chair at the time hosted the first meeting. In the decade that followed, many other pieces of land within and near the park boundaries have been protected.

A newer crusade has been to preserve the northern New Jersey Highlands, nearly 900,000 acres in extent. Just as the Pine Barrens had been preserved two decades earlier, the 1980s and 1990s saw increased interest in protecting the Highlands, a densely forested mountainous region across state lines into Pennsylvania, New York, and Connecticut, where land is rapidly fragmenting under development pressures. State and county parks protect some large blocks of the Highlands, but it represents a small percentage of the overall area.

Among the Highlands' critical resources is drinking water for 5 million people. After years of struggles by preservationists, New Jersey passed the Highlands Water Protection and Preservation plan in 2004. Just a few months later, Congress passed the Highlands Conservation Act that designated the four states of the Highlands a "nationally significant landscape" and threw federal funds and resources behind its protection. Some landowners have said their property rights are unfairly restricted, but the act has survived legal and political challenges. The AMC has spearheaded efforts to keep the Highlands preservation moving forward. As a leading force in the Highlands Coalition, an alliance of almost 200 organizations spread out over Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, the AMC continues to advocate for preservation of the Highlands. Spread across these state boundaries are 3.5 million acres in the western shadow of one of the most heavily developed regions in the United States.

### **Parks Aren't Just for Cities**

Much open space preservation in New Jersey has occurred under conflicting land-use visions. The solution was typically simple: money. For the last

50 years, New Jersey citizens and their government have almost always enthusiastically supported open space preservation, and philanthropists and nonprofit organizations have greatly assisted the cause.

In 1895, Essex County created the first county park system in the United States with its Branch Brook Park. The belief that public parks and open space weren't just for great big cities was a new concept. It was a forerunner of things to come, in New Jersey and nationwide.

The state of New Jersey started acquiring land for conservation and recreation shortly after 1900, when it created the New Jersey Forest Park Reservation Commission (later the Department of Conservation and Economic Development, now the Division of Parks and Forestry). Bad lumbering practices had degraded forests and caused erosion across the state, and public acquisition ensured better forestry management and recovery of these abused lands.

Public land purchases also meant opportunities for camping and recreation, though these were somewhat secondary goals at the time. Bass River State Forest was acquired in 1905; Lebanon (now Brendan T. Byrne), Stokes, and Penn state forests soon followed. By World War I, state forests covered tens of thousands of acres of New Jersey. The forests provided places for public fishing (in such places as Swartswood State Park on Swartswood Lake) and historic sites (including Washington Crossing State Park, on the land where Washington made the crucial nighttime crossing of the Delaware during the Revolutionary War, which was acquired in 1913).

In 1892, Newark also began acquiring natural lands, especially a 50,000-acre watershed along the Pequannock River in the Highlands of northern New Jersey. The city's goal was to protect reservoirs, but the Pequannock Watershed was also recognized as a model forest preserve in the middle of the megalopolis. In the 1970s, the cash-strapped city thought of developing houses, hotels, and commercial buildings here, but it never happened. The Pequannock Watershed survives as one of the state's great open spaces.

State parks, as a system, came along after 1923, when the Kuser family donated its 10,500-acre Kittatinny Mountain estate—the highest spot in the state—to the people. It became High Point State Park, one of the first state parks in the nation and the first large tract developed for recreation. The noted landscape architecture group the Olmsted Firm designed the master plan.

That historic donation inspired other gifts. Governor Foster M. Voorhees similarly donated his large farm to the state upon his death in 1927;

it became Voorhees State Park, an oasis in northwestern Jersey, between interstate highways and southeast of Delaware Water Gap. In 1936, the Hewitt family donated its estate, Ringwood Manor, to the public. Before it became a country mansion, the land was an iron-making site. It's a national historic landmark and an exemplar of a grand Victorian country estate. Another boost to New Jersey's state parks and forests occurred when they became federal Civilian Conservation Corps camps during the 1930s. The CCC improved the parks and worked to reforest abandoned farms.

### **Bond Act Doubles Open Space**

The biggest victory in New Jersey's efforts to preserve open space came in 1961, when state legislators passed the first "Green Acres" bond act, designed specifically to generate funds to buy open space. (The television situation comedy was still a few years in the future.) With Green Acres funding, state, county, and local governments could apply for help in buying land. The result was tremendous: within a decade, publicly owned open space doubled. Since 1961, New Jersey voters have approved Green Acres bond issues thirteen times and preserved 1.2 million acres. Green Acres has since been joined by Blue Acres, a program to acquire flood-prone properties for open space. The state funds, along with efforts by nonprofit land acquisition organizations, have also helped land preservation.

### **Connecting the Dots With Greenways**

You're standing on Pinwheel's Vista, a craggy overlook on New Jersey's section of the Appalachian Trail, the most venerable of American long-distance trails and New Jersey's most prominent footpath. This scenic aerie high atop the cliffs of Wawayanda Mountain takes in an expansive vista of mountainside, forest, and the bucolic Vernon valley below. Farms, fields, woods, and waters—the wind whistles through the trees, and a hawk cries high overhead; the traffic on the road far below is unheard; the scent of pine and laurel perfumes the air. You're 39 miles from Times Square as the crow (or hawk) flies, but you wouldn't know it.

The AT has been a critical element in creating a string of open spaces stretching from the Delaware Water Gap all the way up to the Hudson. Yet land preservation efforts along its route began long before it came along. By 1907, with the creation of Stokes State Forest in New Jersey, state officials

expressed interest in creating a greenbelt along the Kittatinnies from the Delaware Water Gap north to the state line. In later years, with the creation of High Point State Park in New Jersey and Bear Mountain State Park in New York, there was further talk of creating a Hudson-to-Delaware greenbelt northwest of the New York–New Jersey megalopolis.

When it first was established in the 1920s, volunteers routed the AT through the north Jersey Highlands and Kittatinnies. Initially, the AT crossed only two state-owned lands: Stokes State Forest and High Point State Park. The remainder traveled through private lands or down long, dusty public roads. But as the years progressed, other pieces of this AT puzzle fell into place. State and federal lands eventually protected much of its route, which included Worthington State Forest, Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, and Wawayanda State Park. But not until the 1970s were plans made to acquire a full trail corridor and move the AT off public roads. Finally, with the creation of an AT corridor from the Kittatinnies to the Highlands in the 1970s and 1980s, and the creation of Sterling Forest State Park in New York in 1998, the long-imagined greenway of the early 1900s essentially became a reality.

The AT corridor effort was at the time not very popular with some north Jersey landowners—indeed, this chapter of the trail’s history could well be listed under a chapter about battles. But when the AT was moved off public roads about a decade ago, the resulting trail included some exceptionally popular hiking spots. Among these are a mile-long boardwalk and bridge over the Pochuck creek and meadowlands. The Pochuck Boardwalk, designed and built by volunteers for the New York–New Jersey Trail Conference, is so popular with locals it has its own Facebook page.

In 1961 came another long-distance trail in south Jersey, the Batona Trail. It snakes through the Pinelands’ Lebanon, Wharton, and Bass River state forests. The brainchild of Philadelphia’s Batona (“Back to Nature”) Hiking Club, it eventually stretched 50 miles, and helped reinforce the idea that trails can join otherwise disconnected blocks of open space. The Batona Trail is now part of the South Jersey Pinelands Natural Heritage Trail.

Among the state’s most-used long-distance trails is Morris County’s Patriots’ Path. Linking a variety of natural, historic, and cultural open space properties, it includes state, county, and local lands. Hikers encounter Revolutionary War sites, arboreta, historic mills, and natural woodlands.

More trails formed on abandoned railways. By the 1960s, New Jersey’s once-extensive system of railroads was withering, as was the case nationwide.



*An old furnace at Wawayanda State Park. As the years progressed, this land was part of the puzzle pieces falling into place to protect the Appalachian Trail.* NJHIKING.COM

With vacated and abandoned right-of-ways all over the state, the concept of converting them to recreational uses came to the fore in the 1970s. Most of these rails-to-trails efforts did not take off until the 1980s and 1990s, but when they did, the results were dramatic. There are currently 21 rail-trails in New Jersey, and at least another half-dozen have been proposed. Some of the best known include the Paulinskill Valley Trail, the Columbia Trail, and the Sussex Branch Trail.

### **The Race**

The future of open space in New Jersey can best be described by two simple words: the race. During the height of the pre-recession building boom, New Jersey was losing open space to development at the rate of 18,000 acres a year—about 50 acres per day. The recent economic recession has given conservation efforts some breathing room and some land bargains. Development pressures will return and grow in the future. Planning experts believe that

New Jersey will be the first of the United States to reach what land planners call “buildout”—the point at which all available land is either developed or permanently conserved.

When New Jersey will reach buildout, no one can predict for certain: Some authorities say by 2050, some by 2040. At least one person who should know says it will be far sooner—by 2025. That person is Bob Toll of Toll Brothers, one of New Jersey’s (and America’s) biggest developers. If that’s not a prediction to chill the soul of open-space preservationists, nothing is.

In the 1990s, Governor Christine Todd Whitman announced a goal of preserving 1 million acres of land in New Jersey. Although the state has made progress toward that goal, most open-space advocates would argue that 2 million acres more accurately represents what ought to be saved. Public and private support for land conservation has always been high in New Jersey. Green Acres bond issues have seen overwhelming support at the ballot box. It speaks volumes that New Jersey’s last Green Acres bond issue for \$400 million, coming in 2009 during a burgeoning recession, handily won approval. New Jerseyans love their open space and are willing to pay for it.

### **Open Space Earns Money**

New Jersey’s Department of Environmental Protection and its Office of Science took a broad look of the value of open space to the state’s economy several years ago. Initiated by DEP Commissioner Lisa Jackson (now administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency in President Barack Obama’s administration), the two-year study calculated that wildlife/open space related economic activity generated \$3 billion annually for New Jersey, and that the total value of the goods and services provided by the state’s “natural capital” (including farm produce, timber, ecotourism, etc.) was some \$20 billion annually.

Indeed, Jersey’s green areas are economically vital, but with buildout coming soon, the state’s leaders must make priorities. What should they conserve? Where should they allow more building? It’s an ongoing and, as usual, contentious process.

Limited funding and prioritization aren’t the only challenges facing New Jersey’s land. In a compact and densely populated state, balancing the competing demands of adventure seekers can be awkward. Hikers, cyclists, hunters, anglers, snowmobilers, horseback riders, and cross-country skiers—all love the land, and sometimes get in each other’s ways. These

conflicts, of course, pale in comparison with those with the motorized off-road vehicle community. All-terrain vehicles are not permitted anywhere on New Jersey state lands, but violators frequently go out. As legislators argue how to outlaw abuses by these vehicles, riders want the state to set aside legal areas for them. So far, this has not happened, leaving almost all interested parties—pro- or anti-off-road vehicles—unhappy.

Such challenges aside, there are many bright spots on the horizon. Most of New Jersey's 21 counties have their own parks that have preserve ecosystems. But the amazing thing is how the trails are still coming along. The Hudson River Waterfront Walkway, when completed, will run from the Bayonne Bridge to the George Washington Bridge. From the George Washington Bridge, hikers can take the Long Path north all the way to upstate New York, and someday, to Canada.

The Hudson River Walkway will connect at its southern end with the Hackensack Riverwalk, through the Hackensack Meadowlands. Another long-distance trail well under way is the Liberty Water Gap Trail, which will connect the Statue of Liberty with the Delaware Water Gap. The Ore Belt Trail, still in the planning stages, will thread through the Jersey Highlands, connecting former iron mines and smelteries. Well under way is the Highlands Trail, heading north-south through the rugged heart of the Jersey Highlands.

River and bay greenways are another up-and-coming trend, using those natural features as the central backbone of a conservation corridor. The proposed Capitol-to-Coast greenway would include the Raritan River from Trenton all the way to the Raritan Bay. Other rivers—the Paulinskill, the Pequest—are also part of actual or proposed greenways. In total, at least fifteen greenways are in the planning stages. Meanwhile, most state parks and forests have seen their boundaries grow (often substantially) in recent decades.

At the same time, preservationists aren't forgetting places that ought to be saved for the habitats, such as swamps and wetlands, those areas that once were considered worthless. The 2,000-acre Bear Swamp Wildlife Management Area and the 400-acre Muckshaw Ponds Preserve in Sussex County are examples of more recent preservation victories in this area.

### **Under Our Noses**

And so, we say to our fellow New Jersey residents, and to anyone who drives through: Wake up. The irony of the long and distinguished history of

open-space conservation in New Jersey is that residents and outsiders remain frequently unaware of the natural riches here. Many has been the AT thru-hiker who anticipated a 70-mile trek past houses, malls, and highways and instead been astonished to see the Kittatinnies and the Highlands.

Consider the equally amazing view from Apple Pie Hill in the Pine Barrens. From atop the fire tower here, the forests stretch in all directions as far as the eye can see—an ocean of pitch pine. It is profoundly isolated, and stunningly wild. On a clear day, the sharp-eyed observer will note distant notches on the horizons both east and west—those would be the towers of Atlantic City and Philadelphia. These are the sole clues that this forest is in New Jersey, and not Middle Earth.

The intrinsic beauty and value of such lands isn't enough to safeguard them. Even when land is preserved, the battle isn't over. In Sussex County, a politically connected ski resort operator and developer leased a portion of Hamburg Mountain Wildlife Management Area. Multiple violations of his lease led the state DEP to order his eviction from the property; instead, state legislators engineered the sale of the wildlife management land to the developer, an act that enraged the conservation community. A decade later, the state was finally able to buy the land back: what it sold for \$700,000, it bought back for \$7 million.

The ultimate, and never-ending, battle is in the hearts and minds of residents, elected officials, and bureaucrats. Open spaces need regular funding to enhance and preserve them. They need serious efforts to make them known, used, and loved by the people who paid for them. Without this, public natural lands are ever threatened by more subtle and pernicious dangers: indifference and neglect. The moral is simple: Use it or lose it. But first, wake up to it.

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RONALD J. DUPONT, JR., AND PAUL E. DECOSTE, former student and teacher, have been hiking and writing partners for years in their home state of New Jersey. Members of the New York–New Jersey Trail Conference of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, they are the authors of *Hiking New Jersey* (Falcon Guides, 2009).



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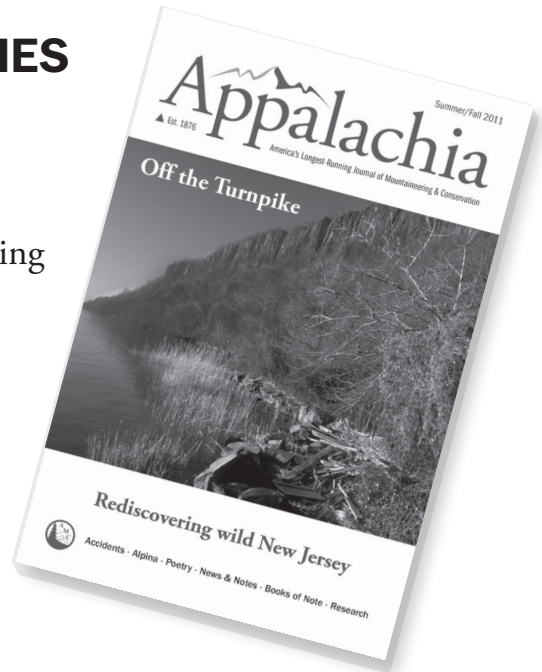
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