

Let's Not Neglect Our Open Space



By Robert R. Williams
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New Jersey citizens have been leaders in the effort to protect forest open spaces since the creation of Bass River State Forest in 1905.

In the race to save open space, taxpayers have willingly spent billions of dollars to keep land from being paved over. In addition, critically needed farmland has been preserved to ensure generations to come will have farms to work and produce locally-grown farm produce and forest products. One only need look at the overwhelmingly successful farm preservation program of Burlington County to realize the essential need to continue funding these programs.

However, saving land from being paved over or converted to other development uses is only the beginning, if we hope to sustain these open spaces and ecosystems into perpetuity. Unfortunately, the public thinks the work is done once we buy a farm or a forest, have a press release, give it a special name, place little posters or signs and then walk away thinking everything will be okay. Nothing can be further from the truth – “The Illusion of Preservation” has just begun.

Nothing in these protected forest lands is stagnant. Change and disturbance is the natural way of things. Yet it appears we have adopted a land abandonment policy in the name of “preserving open space.”

Benign neglect of these lands now threatens the very natural resources that were intended to be protected. The lack of stewardship of these lands is now resulting in the increase in insect and forest disease outbreaks, increases in nonnative invasive plants, increased risk of catastrophic wildland fires, and the actual loss of some once common, as well as rare and endangered species. An ecological approach to active forest management is the only alternative in most cases, if we are to avoid these unintended consequences.

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We can manage forests to sustain or restore habitat such as habitat needed by our red-headed woodpecker, the poster child of threatened species. We all see this bird on many vehicle license plates. Red-headed woodpeckers, as



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well as many of our threatened and endangered wildlife and plants need "open forests." They don't live in the dense, fire excluded forests we see in many places, that have resulted from neglect and fire suppression. Forests now pose significant threats to public health and safety, as well as the potential to add greenhouse gases to the atmosphere from catastrophic fire. An ecological approach to forest management can solve these concerns and problems.

In addition, we all use forest products, yet we subsidize destruction of forest ecosystems around the planet by importing wood products from regions that support more sensitive forests, such as tropical rain forests. Just look at the situation when Ocean City wanted to re-deck its boardwalk with ipe wood (also called Brazilian walnut) from Central America instead of locally-grown Atlantic white cedar. While restoring our forests to healthy conditions, we could be using locally-grown forest products and putting people to work. At the same time, we'd conserve more sensitive forests around the globe.



This wind damaged cedar forest on public-owned, unmanaged land, resulted in the loss of ecosystem services and also timber resources.

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Haines Family Stewardship Forest with over 100 years of management for fire protection, wildlife and timber provides critically needed watershed for a family cranberry farm in Bass River Township, Burlington County.

Protecting open space from development simply by purchasing it and then walking away from it won't benefit endangered species. For example, buy-

ing a golf course and allowing it to go "wild" and then abandoning it to overgrowth that threatens native species and is a fire risk would be a mistake.

We need to begin to understand what it is we want these protected lands to provide. If our goal is to sustain healthy ecosystems and critical habitat for many rare, threatened and/or endangered species, then we better start planning now, before it's too late. As we saw in the 2007 Stafford Township, Ocean County wildfire, land left unmanaged poses a significant threat to public health and safety. Our forests are meant to burn—it's nature's way.

We need an ecological land planning approach to sustaining existing protected open space, as well as other land to be brought under public or non-profit ownership protections in the future.

Healthy trees and forests are critical to sustaining a healthy environment and healthy vibrant economy. Using locally-grown, renewable wood products is one of the most sustainable actions we can take. Trees are the ultimate in solar energy production—they grow from the sun by photosynthesis. The new catch phrase, "Think globally, act locally" actually can make a difference with regards to the conservation of all forests in New Jersey and on the planet as a whole. ▲

PLEASE NOTE 2009 MUNICIPAL DIRECTORY UPDATES

Bergenfield Borough

Municipal Engineer: Boswell Engineering

High Bridge Borough

New Municipal Engineer: Robert O'Brien, Hatch, Mott & MacDonald

Independence Township

New Municipal Attorney: Judith Kopen

Linwood City

Engineer's Revised Address:

Kevin Dixon, Dixon Associates Engineering LLC

313 E. Jim Leeds Road, Galloway, NJ 08205

Mine Hill Township

Clerk's Revised E-mail Address: clerk@minehilltpw.nj.us

Rochelle Park Township

Mayor's Corrected Name: Frank Valenzuela

West Paterson Borough

Municipality Name Change: Woodland Park Borough
(Address remains the same)