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How the green movement shaped North Jersey

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BY SCOTT FALLON AND JAMES M. O'NEILL

THE RECORD
STAFF WRITERS

Picture a North Jersey with the Palisades blasted to pebbles, a city of 35,000 sitting right above its reservoirs and a highway cutting through the pristine Ramapo Mountains.



Clockwise, from top left: Palisades Interstate Park; The Celery Farm, Allendale; Highlands and Wanaque Reservoir and Richard P. Kane Natural Area, Carlstadt.:

These projects are just a few that have been blocked over the decades through the efforts of conservationists and public officials. “Many of the places we love and take for granted would not be there if it wasn’t for citizens’ efforts to save those parks we now celebrate,” said Jeff Tittel of the Sierra Club’s New Jersey chapter.

“The Richard Kane Natural Area in the Meadowlands would be a mega-mall, but instead it’s an oasis teeming with wildlife. Terrace Pond on Bearfort Mountain in [Passaic County](#) would be under a runway instead of being part of a state park. The Highlands would have been mined for uranium but is now a land-use model that helps protect the water supply.”

In just about all these battles, it was public opposition that was essential in turning the tide — a good lesson for future preservation efforts, Tittel said.

Ellen Kuhn, interim director of the [Tenafly](#) Nature Center, said the fights not only preserved open space in one of the most developed and densely populated states in the nation, it awakened the public to the value of protecting the world around them. “While the value of the space protected is not easily quantified in dollars and cents, it carries an incalculable benefit to our communities and to future generations,” she said.

Those who attend one of the many events today to mark the 42nd Earth Day are, in a way, celebrating not only the battles waged and won to protect open spaces, but reaffirming the value of experiencing nature, Kuhn said.

“Preservation of these open spaces offers us direct experiences in the natural world, unfiltered by electronic devices or packaging,” she said. “Watching a PBS special on penguins or viewing an eagle’s nest on a webcam is no substitute for observing firsthand a kingfisher diving for a meal, listening to the shrill chorus of spring peepers at twilight, or allowing a dragonfly to perch on your finger.”

Here are some of the housing developments, roadways, office complexes, public works projects — and even a stadium — once proposed for spots in North Jersey that today remain protected, open, natural land.

1900: Palisades Interstate Park, [Fort Lee](#), [Englewood Cliffs](#), [Tenafly](#), [Alpine](#)

The majestic cliffs along the Hudson River were once slated to be blasted away by quarry operators selling stone to fill in Manhattan’s waterfront more than a century ago.

Spurred on by the New Jersey State Federation of Women’s Clubs, J.P. Morgan and other philanthropists bought out some of the quarry companies. In 1900, New York Gov. Theodore Roosevelt and New Jersey Gov. Foster M. Voorhees created the Palisades Interstate Park.

“This was really the beginning of the conservation movement in New Jersey,” said Gil Hawkins, of the Hudson River Fishermen’s Association. “Thanks to the federation, we now have one of the most breathtaking sites in the whole region.”

Today, the park contains more than 110,000 acres in the two states, with 21 state parks and eight historic sites.

1965: Bearfort Mountain Jet Port, West Milford

In the early 1960s, the Port of New York Authority desperately sought a new airport to relieve growing demands on the three New York area airfields — and one of their top options was Bearfort Mountain in [West Milford](#).

The [Wayne](#) Area Chamber of Commerce, supported the proposal, but local mayors, environmental groups, resident groups and the City of Newark — which thought its extensive watershed was at risk — opposed it.

The port authority even explored the use of nuclear explosions to blast rock off the mountain to create a level area for runways.

A private consulting firm advised against the nuclear explosives because of the side effects, including the need to evacuate everyone within a 15-mile radius during blasting and decontamination. Ultimately, a 1965 report rejected the site as too costly to prepare.

1975: Highlands highway

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1976: Lost Brook Preserve, Tenafly

The 274-acre tract on East Hill had for decades been the focus of proposals for everything from a high-rise to the site of an antiballistic missile system.

In 1958, the Clinton Hotel Corp. proposed building 225 houses. In 1960, developer Bernard Gray proposed a \$4 million country club. Both received approvals, but were never built. Later, Long Island developer Norman Blankman wanted to clear the wooded site to build a cluster housing project, golf courses and a high-rise office building with multilevel parking. In the late 1960s, the woodland was also considered for an antiballistic missile system. Blankman sold the property in 1973 to Centex Homes of Texas, which proposed a 1,780-unit housing project for the site.

The borough of Tenafly raised \$9.3 million to purchase the property in 1976 to preserve it and got help from a number of places, including the Jewish Community Center of Englewood, which paid \$1 million for 29 acres. The state contributed nearly \$3 million from its Green Acres fund. Gov. Brendan Byrne flew in by helicopter to dramatically announce the final piece of the funding puzzle.

Tenafly's mayor at the time, John Manos, spoke of the "significance of this event and the heritage we are leaving future generations. ... Will Rogers once said something to the effect that you can't manufacture or reproduce land. We, as modern day conservationists, have recognized this."

1979: The Celery Farm, Allendale

There had long been talk of building a golf course on the former farm. At the urging of local officials, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation bought the property in 1979 and eventually sold it to the town.

It has grown to 107 acres and is now a freshwater wetlands natural preserve with herons, egrets, ducks and geese calling it home. In 2010, the foundation helped buy the adjacent Fell House, where 11 town houses were slated for the 2.8-acre property.

1980: Uranium mining, West Milford

In the late 1970s, Exxon, Chevron and other oil companies, drilled test bores in the New Jersey Highlands and found veins of high-grade uranium ore.

Exxon and Sohio quietly leased thousands of acres in Passaic and Morris counties with the intention of mining the uranium, a process that requires large quantities of water and creates huge piles of crushed waste rock or tailings.

Geologists figured it was a good bet since the region was pocked by abandoned iron mines, and uranium is often a cohabitant in rock loaded with iron. The U.S. Geologic Survey had confirmed the presence of uranium there in the 1950s.

But residents in West Milford and Jefferson were worried that the mining could contaminate the region's groundwater and ruin a potential source of drinking water, which had been the case around mining sites in New Mexico. Both towns passed ordinances in 1980 that banned test drilling for uranium as well as mining or milling the metal and its byproducts. In 1981, the Legislature passed a seven-year moratorium with the same restrictions, making New Jersey only the second state in the country with such a ban. The oil companies lost interest, canceling some leases and failing to renew others.

The Legislature made the ban permanent in 1989.

1993: Oradell Reservoir watershed, River Vale, Emerson

Beginning in the mid-1980s, United Water transferred 700 acres in its watershed to its real estate subsidiary, Rivervale Realty, with plans to develop an office complex and homes.

About 400 acres was preserved after 10 years of opposition by environmentalists, including Bergen SWAN, which formed because of the plans. They feared the development would hurt drinking water.

More than 200 acres was sold to builders who have erected hundreds of homes in northern Bergen County.

1998: Sterling Forest

Perhaps the largest private development averted by environmentalists and lawmakers was a proposed city of 13,000 housing units and shopping centers in Sterling Forest, which stretches from the New York border area into upper Passaic County. New Jersey officials said it would have threatened the drinking water of millions because the Wanaque Reservoir and aquifers lie just south.

Sterling Forest was preserved with three separate purchases. In 1993, Passaic County freeholders bought 2,000 acres of Sterling Forest in West Milford and Ringwood for \$9.3 million. Starting in 1998, New York and New Jersey along with land trusts, foundations and private donors, paid \$78 million to preserve more than 20,000 acres just across the New Jersey border to create the Sterling Forest State Park Preserve. And in 2006, New York bought a 575-acre centerpiece of the forest for \$13.5 million, averting a planned golf course and 103 luxury homes.

2000: West Milford amphitheater

Newark's 30-year quest to develop thousands of acres of the watershed it owns in West Milford has featured proposals for housing, hotels, offices and shopping centers. But few projects faced

as much opposition from local officials and environmentalists as a proposed 25,000-seat amphitheater on 400 acres near the Macopin River.

The amphitheater, which would have been 40 percent bigger than the PNC Bank Arts Center in Holmdel, never received approval from the DEP.

2003: The Richard P. Kane Natural Area, Carlstadt

The Mills Corp. wanted to build a 2-million-square-foot entertainment and retail complex with hotels, office space, warehouses and a mass-transit hub on the last large area of marshes in the Meadowlands.

Two federal agencies said it would do significant damage to the 600-acre plot in Carlstadt known as the Empire Tract.

As part of the 2003 deal to allow Mills to develop the Xanadu mega-mall in East Rutherford, the state paid the company \$26.8 million to preserve the tract. About 250 acres of wetlands are slowly being restored with native vegetation and new channels for tides.

2010: Passaic River Flood Tunnel

To supporters, the Passaic River Flood Tunnel was considered the best cure for the severe flooding that so often devastates the area. The 21-mile tunnel would carry floodwater from the convergence of the Pompton, Ramapo, Pequannock and Wanaque rivers in Wayne all the way to Newark Bay.

Critics called it a \$1.8 billion boondoggle. Environmentalists argued it would siphon a large amount of groundwater from the region and destroy wetlands.

“It never made any sense,” said Ella Filippone, head of the Passaic River Coalition and a longtime opponent of the tunnel. “It was this gigantic public works boondoggle that would have done a lot more harm than good.”

Support for the tunnel waned in the late 1990s and the focus shifted to buying out homes in flood plains and demolishing them. Still, after three of the worst floods in the region’s history occurred in the past five years, causing more than \$1 billion in property damage, there were renewed calls for a solution.

Given the current fiscal woes of the state and federal government, it is doubtful the project could be funded in the immediate future, a state task force said this year.

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Reader Comments (1)

1. Friday April 22, 2011, 10:00 AM - **FreeNJ** says:
And without the greenies, the world would not exist today. Praise be the greenies!