

A LEGACY OF CONSERVATION

Our State's Conservation Ethic

New York State can truly be called the cradle of the modern conservation movement. Beginning with the influence of *the Hudson River School* whose paintings transformed the way people viewed nature, our State is where the ideals of conservation first developed.

Land stewardship and management in New York first started with *Native American tribes* who protected sites that were considered sacred, as well as, important hunting grounds. They cleared lands for agricultural purposes, becoming the State's first inhabitants utilizing land management techniques to support themselves.

Before the middle of the **19th century**, much of our State's lands were covered by forests, which had been viewed primarily as an obstacle to European settlers; they were something to be cleared to allow agriculture, or to be cut and exploited for profit.

The paintings of the Hudson River School and growing literature of nature writing gave people a new appreciation of nature for itself, for its wild beauty and remoteness. The public was eager to read about the adventures of Verplanck Colvin, known for surveying the Adirondacks. Publications such as *Forest and Stream*, published by George Bird Grinnell, who founded the first *Audubon Society* in **1886** in New York City, brought awareness of the outdoors to a wider audience.

President Teddy Roosevelt:

National Forests, Parks & Monuments

President Theodore Roosevelt was deeply affected by the power and beauty of nature, and it became a defining force in his life. He and like-minded New Yorkers sought to reverse the exploitation of nature such as uncontrolled logging, commercial hunting, and extermination of birds such as egrets for their plumes to adorn hats. As president, he established a conservation legacy of national forests, parks and monuments.

Olmsted: Our Urban Parks



Photo: www.visitnyc.com Central Park ~ Manhattan

The recognition of the healthful benefits of nature led to the building of magnificent urban parks to bring the healing beauty of natural scenery to city dwellers. *Frederick Law Olmsted* brought a new vision to park design, creating naturalistic landscapes, rather than traditional formal gardens. His parks transformed many of New York's cities, such as Buffalo with its green necklace of exquisitely landscaped parks. Olmsted's most famous park – *Central Park* – is a stunning 840 acre rectangle of green in the heart of Manhattan.

Our State Forest Preserve Act

By the 1880s, *less than 25% of our State was forested*, and the remaining uncut forests in the Catskills and Adirondacks were being quickly logged. In **1885**, our State created the Forest Preserve Act to protect portions of our State's lands in the Catskills and Adirondacks from further exploitation. This Act was strengthened in **1894** by the "forever wild" amendment to the New York State Constitution, creating the first state protected wilderness in the world, ensuring that Forest Preserve lands...

"shall not be leased, sold or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed."

Today, New York's Forest Preserve is the largest state-designated wilderness in the country.

Our State Parks

Recognition of the scenic value of New York's unique natural features also led to the establishment of the first State Park at *Niagara Falls*, established as a State Reservation in 1883. It was soon followed by other State Parks such as the Palisades along the Hudson River, the natural springs at Saratoga Springs, and the Genesee River Gorge at Letchworth State Park, known as the "Grand Canyon of the East."



Letchworth State Park

New York City: A Need for Clean Water

New York City's need for drinking water led to the development of a huge water supply infrastructure upstate, beginning with the construction of the Croton Aqueduct in 1842. The first reservoirs were built in Westchester and Putnam counties, and were followed by the development of the Catskill watershed, beginning with the building of the Ashokan Reservoir in 1907. The value of forests for the protection of our State's water supplies was one of the early incentives for preservation of forest land – with the City of New York buying thousands of acres adjacent to its reservoirs.

The Conservation Department

In 1911, *The Conservation Department*, the predecessor of today's Department of Environmental Conservation, was created by legislation in order to consolidate the functions of the Forest, Fish and Game Commission, the Forest Preserve Board, the Water Supply Commission and the Water Power Commission. By combining these commissions into a single department, our State greatly enhanced its ability to protect the

environment, and to respond to new environmental challenges, such as the rapid abandonment of farmland that began in the 1920s.

Restoring Productive & Viable Lands

Much of our State's farmland was on marginal land, and as better land became available out west, agriculture began to decline in New York. When the *Great Depression* hit, many farmers could no longer make a living on their worn out, unproductive land. The 1929 *State Reforestation Act*, and the 1931 *Hewitt Amendment*, authorized the State's Conservation Department to buy land for reforestation purposes. These lands were known as State reforestation areas, and were the beginning of today's *State Forest system*, which now encompasses more than 770,000 acres. The Conservation Department began a massive tree planting program to restore these lands for watershed protection, flood prevention and future timber production. Today, these areas are covered with healthy forests.

During the Depression, the federal *Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)*, founded by *President Franklin D. Roosevelt* in 1933, planted millions of tree seedlings on the barren soil of the new State reforestation areas; work that provided employment for thousands of young men.

Our State's Private Forest Lands

As early as 1912 there have been provisions for tax concessions on forest lands to promote private forest land ownership. Various laws and amendments have been passed over the years, culminating in the present law, Section 480–a of the Real Property Tax Law (480a) which has been in effect since 1974. 480a remains instrumental in focusing conservation efforts to 14.4 million acres of privately-owned forest lands, encouraging the long-term ownership of woodlands to produce forest crops, and thereby increasing the likelihood of a more stable forest economy. This early expression of "sustainable" forest policy has had a major impact on the growth and development of New York's forests. For a state with such a high population, it is an impressive achievement to have so much well-managed forested land, particularly in comparison to other states in the Northeast.



CCC enrollees planted thousands of trees throughout New York State, www.dec.ny.gov/pubs/42768.html.

Robert Moses: Access to Nature & Recreation

As New Yorkers' growing interest in outdoor recreation led to the establishment of dedicated recreation areas such as campgrounds, public beaches and golf courses, these areas began to be managed more for recreation and scenic beauty, rather than strictly for natural resource production. By the 1920s, cars had already become an important part of the recreational experience. More people were driving their own cars to outdoor recreational destinations, providing ordinary citizens with the freedom and mobility that had formerly been available only to the very wealthy.

Robert Moses, the State executive charged with development and maintenance of State parks, created a new recreational infrastructure based on cars and began a massive development program of new parks, beaches, and campgrounds. Between 1924 and 1968, Robert Moses transformed much of New York State with his vision of the automobile society.

Founding of The Nature Conservancy

After World War II, there was a growing recognition of the importance of preserving natural areas for their intrinsic ecological value. TNC (*The Nature Conservancy*), founded in New York City in 1951, undertook its first land preservation project by saving the *Mianus River Gorge* in Westchester County from development. This was the beginning of *New York's land trust movement*, where private citizens and conservation groups banded together to acquire significant land parcels. Land trusts, environmental groups and environmental lawyers, with the support of local citizens, stopped many environmentally destructive projects.

In 1970, on the *first Earth Day*, the *New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)* was established. This new agency joined the mission of the former Conservation Department with the missions of various State environmental quality bureaus. Soon after, the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation was split from the Conservation Department and elevated to full agency status as the new Office of Parks and Recreation (OPR), since renamed the *Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP)*. The *Park and Recreation Land Acquisition Act of 1960*, the *Environmental Quality Bond Acts of 1972 and 1986*, and also the *1996 Clean Air, Clean Water Bond Act*, provided funds for the acquisition of additional State Parks and forest lands, including inholdings or parcels adjacent to existing State forests and parks.

A Tradition of Recreation

New York's Recreational Pastimes

Nature is home to many traditional sports as well as more modern pastimes. Most of us see the outdoors as a place to relax, unwind and exercise in one form or another. Although hunting is one of the most venerable outdoor sports, the number of hunters in New York has been declining. One of the reasons for fewer hunters is the lack of nearby places to hunt. As more and more private land is posted, public lands managed by DEC and OPRHP may be the only local areas open to hunters.

Like hunting, fishing is a traditional outdoor sport and our State is recognized around the world for having an amazing range of fishing opportunities. On public lands and easements, it is possible to fish for native brook trout, landlocked salmon, striped bass, bluefish and many other species. Stocking of many streams and lakes with a variety of game fish is supplied and managed by 12 DEC fish hatcheries.

Our Public Lands & Easements

Our State's public lands have more than 4,500 miles of trails for hiking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Some of these trails are also designated for snowmobiles, horses and bicycles. In the Adirondack Park, there are 2,700,000 acres of Forest Preserve; and over 600,000 acres of public recreation rights under conservation easements on private forest lands. The Catskill Park contains 281,000 acres of Forest Preserve lands.

State Forests

Additionally, there are 776,000 acres of State Forests across New York, originally acquired for reforestation and now for open space and watershed protection, timber production and recreation. New York also has more than 85 Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) managed by DEC and designated for hunting, trapping and fishing. They include forests, open fields, streams, ponds, wetlands and scenic vistas. WMAs make up 200,000 acres of DEC land, 124,000 acres of upland, and 53,000 acres of wetland.

New York City Watershed Lands

New York City (NYC) Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has acquired 59,000 acres of fee and 32,000 acres of conservation easements in the NYC watershed to protect the quality of the drinking water for more than 8 million residents of NYC. In 2008, NYC DEP and NYS DEC signed an agreement to ease existing recreational access restrictions to approximately 13,000 acres of DEP lands in the Catskill Watershed. DEC will help patrol and manage these lands.

Our State Parks

OPRHP administers about 330,000 acres of land including 178 state parks. Nearly 80% of the park system is in natural areas with a wide range of geological features, ecological habitats and species of plants and animals. These include the extensive forested areas of Allegany and Sterling Forest State Parks, the gorges of the Finger Lakes

parcs, islands in the St. Lawrence and Hudson Rivers, cliffs at Minnewaska, and the beaches and sand dunes of Long Island.

Our Town Parks

For many people, local parks may be the only nearby open space. New York State has over 1,040 municipal parks and 250 county parks, as well as many small local recreational areas. Almost every town, no matter how small, has at least one green space. They range from simple sports fields to elegantly landscaped spaces funded by wealthy donors. In addition, many communities are connected by greenways, long distance hiking trails and bike trails.

Ensuring Environmental Justice

Providing For All Our State's Communities

Environmental Justice is the fair treatment of all people regardless of race, color, national origin or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.

To achieve environmental justice, we must ensure that all communities enjoy the same degree of protection from environmental and public health threats, as well as, equal access to the decision-making process. Fostering environmental justice in New York involves a range of activities that both reduce environmental burdens and target benefits to underserved populations or areas struggling with disproportionate burdens.

The work of the Environmental Justice Interagency Task Force, a wide network of professionals at DEC, OPRHP, DOS and DAM, will remain focused on reinvigorated efforts to integrate environmental justice principles into our agencies' activities.

The pressing need for open space in underserved neighborhoods across New York City and the City of Yonkers, as well as the Albany area, Syracuse, Binghamton, Rochester and Buffalo, requires a continued focus on conservation acquisition and preservation of smaller sites. The acute lack of open space in these communities makes every square foot of land that is saved an extremely significant, public amenity.

Enhancing Our Approach

Ecosystem-based Management via Open Space Conservation

Ecosystem-based management (EBM) is a growing approach to managing our human activities and natural resources in a manner that fosters healthy, productive and resilient ecosystems able to deliver the resources and services we need and want. The goal of this approach is to move towards a more holistic way of how we manage and view managing our State's natural resources, shifting our traditional management that often focuses on a single element, to a management system that evaluates and considers the myriad of factors interacting across an ecosystem (e.g. forests and air quality; streams and watersheds with our need and desire to utilize these resources).

'Landscape' Management

EBM seeks to focus on the interactions of natural systems, species and human activities occurring across broad regions such as the Great Lakes, Hudson River Estuary or the ocean ecosystems. By emphasizing "place-based" management decisions, EBM can help tailor implementation measures and decisions to the issues that exist within *specific communities, landscapes or ecosystems*.

Threats to Ecosystem Health

Loss of habitat, urbanization and the increase of invasive species are just three of the biggest threats to ecosystem health. Critical habitats include freshwater wetlands, tidal wetlands, low-lying areas adjacent to tidal wetlands that offer the potential for wetland migration; riverine, ocean and estuarine shoreline habitats, including beaches, protective dunes, maritime forests and associated buffers; and streams and their corridors, throughout our State's watersheds.

Over the years, our State and local governments have been working to ensure the protection of our State's tidal wetlands for habitat preservation. Through publicly-identified, significant property acquisitions and through protective regulations, we have begun to slow some of the destruction of these wetlands, thus proving the necessity of

these measures and likely need for their expansion in the future.

Ocean & Great Lakes Ecosystem Conservation Council

Through the work of the Ocean and Great Lakes Ecosystem Conservation Council and other existing regional efforts, our State is adopting collaborative approaches that will improve the management of our State's natural resources and human activities in ways that enhance and protect the health of ecosystems.

As we continue to learn more, we must adapt our approach to enhance our conservation tactics. Our goals ultimately remain the same, while our means of getting there change. Through the State's Open Space Conservation Plan, developed nearly 20 years ago, we continue to identify New York's landscapes and ecosystems that are under significant threat and in need of priority conservation action. To sustain our State's existing ecological integrity, we will continue to work towards:

1. maintaining viable populations of all native species in their original habitats;
2. representing, within protected areas, all native ecosystem types across their natural range of variation;
3. maintaining evolutionary and ecological processes (i.e. disturbance regimes, hydrological processes, nutrient cycles, etc.);
4. managing over periods of time long enough to maintain the evolutionary potential of species and ecosystems; and
5. accommodating human use and occupancy within these constraints.



Continuing New York's Conservation Legacy

More than a century ago, our New York predecessors, in and outside of State government, had the wisdom and forethought to preserve land for the future benefit of all New York citizens. Today, the return on this investment in land is far greater than could ever have been imagined 100 years ago. These lands, originally bought to protect water supplies, prevent floods, preserve habitat for wildlife and provide recreational opportunities have become economic drivers for our rural communities and one of our State's greatest legacies. Summarized by the phrase, "ecosystem services," they have fulfilled their original purpose magnificently and have been providing other benefits that we have only recently begun to understand and value; such as carbon sequestration, climate moderation, coastal and riparian area protection, habitat for rare and endangered species, groundwater recharge and filtration of significant amounts of air pollutants.

If we are to fulfill our State's mission of protecting ecosystems, preserving open space, preserving a sustainable quality of life, providing for future environmental benefits and recreational benefits on some of the most heavily used public lands, we will need to continue to work in partnerships, saving and maintaining our land for our ecosystem health – for our own well-being.

Let's continue building on this legacy.



www.milliontreesnyc.org