

Taking the Central Pine Barrens Into the 21st Century

(in the Summer 2005 Pine Line, newsletter of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society)

Ray Corwin

Central Pine Barrens Commission

From its origin following the last glacial advance over the area we now call Long Island, the pine barrens has quietly compiled its own history. Today, scientists, naturalists, and serious students are slowly but systematically dissecting the multi media record of the Central Pine Barrens' history, our local piece of a Northeastern US ecosystem whose scattered patches stretch from the mid Atlantic through coastal New England. They aim to better understand what defines the barrens, how it came about, and what factors cause it to evolve in different directions. Ultimately, land managers, policy and law makers, and citizens await these results and will struggle to apply them to the day to day decisions that will affect the barrens during our lifetimes.

Like all good puzzles of the natural world, that history is not written in a clear hand on a single, legible medium. Ah, not even close! The clues and traces and hints of the barrens' evolution are written in the original "multi media" - not the one of the modern electronic age. No, *this* history is compiled neither by historians nor scientists, and no experimental controls were in place as it was recorded. This multi media consist of soil profiles; geologic layers; traces of pollen; patterns of genotypes, interpretations of landform and vegetation in light of years of clearing, farming, and development; and erosional and depositional evidence bequeathed by thousands of years of wind, water, and soil interacting daily.

But we - as individuals and temporary custodians of the barrens - live and work on a finer temporal scale, one where we measure time in years and months. In so doing, we play out our collective role as custodians of our natural resources incrementally, and slowly add our own physical and cultural milestones to the history of the pine barrens. Often, in imitation of nature's manner, we quietly mark - indeed, we bring about - many new milestones, and one is passing quietly into the historical record even now: our entrance into a new century of the barrens lifetime.

Even the phrase "Central Pine Barrens" - how often have we spoken it? - reflects a noteworthy point in time for the barrens. Once - pre 1990, give or take - it was simply the "pine barrens", or, for those of us growing up when woodland dominated the East End, and, indeed, most of the Island - simply "the woods". Starting with the 1960's pleas of Robert Cushman Murphy to government to start setting aside land, we have learned to value our dwindling woodlands and fields to the point that each patch and remnant deserves, and receives, a proper noun phrase to identify it. That awareness led to the 1993 Pine Barrens Protection Act and the creation of the Pine Barrens Commission. I am personally convinced that the signing of the pine barrens bill was sometime just before the day before yesterday (or perhaps the week prior to that ...).

But twelve years have indeed elapsed since the bill signing, ten years since the adoption of the Central Pine Barrens Comprehensive Land Use Plan, and the pine barrens has taken us (not the other way around, please note) into the new century with a host of challenges.

The details of our decade plus contribution to the barrens' historical record is, and continues to be, written in another medium: our societal record. We have learned (by doing) to draft legislation, to draft - *and follow* - a Plan to focus our decisions, and to gather specialists to address specialized topics (the Pine Barrens Advisory Committee, Protected Lands Council, Law Enforcement Council, Wildfire Task Force, Pine Barrens Credit Clearinghouse, etc.). Now, the challenge in these earliest years of the new century is to bring to the forefront the many facets of stewardship, from law enforcement to providing public land management resources, from theoretical research to applied studies, from ecological monitoring to water quality protection, from fire management to recreation - the list is long, but our record to date shows that we can address these if we really so desire.

To inform our future decisions - both those which loom imminently and those which we have not yet spied on the horizon - we are, ultimately, dependent upon the success of those patient and systematic dissectors of the barrens history. The scientific reconstruction of its natural and cultural past is essential if we are to make the societal value judgments that will affect our "commons", our own quality of life, and how our little piece of the barrens historical record is viewed by the future.