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Fire and the Suffolk pine barrens share a natural history



Two fawns amid what was left of an area of Westhampton after an August 1995 wildfire in the pine barrens that led to a Wildfire Task Force to better coordinate efforts between different federal, state and local agencies. Credit: L.I. News Daily/John Paraskevas

By **Peter Gill**

peter.gill@newsday.com

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The brush fire in the pine barrens this weekend ignited in a part of Suffolk County with a history of fires and flare-ups — to some degree a natural part of the ecosystem but also exacerbated by Long Island's suburban sprawl.

By Sunday evening, firefighters had knocked down the latest blaze.

Amanda Lefton, acting commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, said earlier Sunday that "we don't expect that we're going to see any major impacts to the ecosystem based off of this fire."

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To help regenerate the ecosystem as well as prevent dangerous fuel buildup, authorities periodically thin out the pine barrens by cutting and removing smaller trees and conducting controlled burns, according to Bryan Gallagher, State Forest Ranger at the DEC.

Brush fires are tied to the history of the pine barrens, now at 105,000 acres, down from what experts believe at one time stretched across a [quarter of a million acres](#). The frequency and intensity of fires increased with European settlement on the Island, according to the Long Island Pine Barrens Society.

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Fires in the 19th century were often set intentionally to clear brush, while other times they were caused by sparks flying from early Long Island Rail Road cars. In 1862, according to the Pine Barrens Society, a fire raged from Smithtown to Southampton.

Long Island brush fires in late April 1989 extended from the pine barrens in Deer Park to Riverhead.

The 1989 fire stoked an ongoing debate at the time about whether the pine barrens should be developed. In 1993, the state passed the Long Island Pine Barrens Protection Act, which heavily restricted development in the area and created a Pine Barrens Commission.

The Sunrise Fire in 1995 charred between 3,200 and 5,000 acres in the pine barrens. The blaze began near the Suffolk County Community College campus in Riverhead, spread to the Sunrise Highway and crossed into the southern pine barrens, burning for nearly a week. The conflagration forced some 400 residents to evacuate, Newsday reported in 2005, the blaze's 10th anniversary.

Following the fire, the Pine Barrens Commission created a Wildfire Task Force to better coordinate efforts between different federal, state and local agencies.

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In April 2012, amid similar dry and windy conditions as this past weekend's blazes, a brush fire burned 1,100 acres in the pine barrens areas of Manorville and Ridge.

By Peter Gill
peter.gill@newsday.com

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