

**Stewardship of Pine Barrens Protected Lands:
A Summary of Accomplishments to Date and Recommendations for the Future
Work of the Protected Lands Council (PLC)**

Source: Meeting of the Central Pine Barrens Advisory Committee of April 22, 2009, based in part upon PLC materials supplied to the Committee, and incorporating comments received subsequently, pursuant to the Advisory Committee resolution. Adopted and approved by the Pine Barrens Commission on 10/21/09.

Statutory Background

In July 1993, the Long Island Pine Barrens Protection Act (codified in New York Environmental Conservation Law Article 57) became law. That milestone had several immediate effects, including delineation of the “Central Pine Barrens”, creation of the Central Pine Barrens Commission (the “Commission”), and commencement of a two year period for production of a comprehensive plan. While land use regulatory and land preservation were understandably dominant topics then, the statute also encouraged protection, restoration and enhancement of natural resources, recreation, cultural resources, and related topics. The Commission adopted the *Central Pine Barrens Plan* (the “Plan”) on June 28, 1995, with Chapter 7 entitled “Public Lands Management”.

Creation and Level of Activity of the Protected Lands Council

Section 7.1 of the *Plan* (Volume 1) created a Protected Lands Council (“PLC”) “to protect and preserve public lands in the pine barrens” and to “consist of, but not be limited to, the major public pine barrens land holders ...”. It was established to be a “working association that will formulate strategies for implementing the provisions of Chapter 7 of this Plan” and was empowered to “make recommendations as they pertain to their respective public lands, and may recommend appropriate changes to the protected lands management provisions of the Plan, especially Chapter 7.”

The concept was, and remains, to promote regional cooperation and oversight, uniformity of management approaches, and the sharing of resources and information with respect to protected public lands within the Central Pine Barrens.

The PLC first met on August 8, 1994. It typically met once per month in its initial years (more frequently when pursuing special projects such as field events), and scaled back to

generally bimonthly meetings around 2003-2004. Through the first quarter of 2009, the PLC met 117 times, averaging 8 to 9 meetings per year overall. The strong attendance records for these meetings and the quantity of them attest to the high level of interest by both organizations and individual citizens.

Maturation of the Council

For many years the PLC successfully facilitated information sharing among the conservation landowners and conservation constituency, but more recently a frustration has built as to whether it was possible to fund and implement any regional stewardship projects that cut across jurisdictions and property lines. The PLC has a respectable record of collaboration upon noteworthy projects, including the outline of a regional, interagency management plan; recommending changes to the *Plan*; the groundwork for a recreational plan; and the now mainstream ATV damage mitigation and invasive species programs. Some were implemented while others languished for various reasons.

Notably, with a lack of clear reporting lines, the PLC has, from inception, relied upon the staff for assistance outside the direction of the Commission itself. This presented a dilemma to staff, who wished to support the PLC yet focus upon clear objectives.

In 2008, the PLC undertook a self-assessment under the leadership of Co-Chair and Suffolk County Parks Commissioner John Pavacic, to craft a consensus on the PLC's direction, and recommend a future PLC direction to the Commission. Issues included:

- uncertainty regarding how to get issues addressed,
- how the so called "user groups" fit into the PLC,
- identifying a more specific and tangible mission,
- meeting attendance requirements,
- more focus,
- the role of the PLC in the larger Commission and Pine Barrens arena,
- agenda setting,
- responsibility for management plan(s) production and implementation, and
- addressing common stewardship issues.

The wide variety of comments indicated a high level of interest and a consensus that more focus and direction are required for the future success and effectiveness of the PLC.

Over the past two years, the Commission stepped in to direct that more focus be given to funding and implementation of regional stewardship projects in the Central Pine Barrens

and tasked a Science and Stewardship Steering Committee of the Commission with recommending definitive projects. This was born from the need for a clean and simple line of Commission oversight and approval of regional stewardship initiatives. This now includes a Science and Stewardship Work Plan for the staff. These were goals beyond the practical and legal ability of the PLC, which itself reports to the Commission.

The Challenge at this Crucial Point

The creation of a Science and Stewardship Steering Committee made up of three representatives of the Commission (not a quorum) has effectively streamlined the consideration of specific projects, and assured direct Commission oversight of the projects identified in work plans and traced to specific statutory and/or *Plan* provisions.

This practical success has had the side effect of leaving the PLC to wonder where it stands, and what role it is to play in pine barrens conservation. More specifically, the nongovernmental members such as hikers, hunters and equestrians, may not see many other outlets where their voices will be heard on matters of use and stewardship of public lands. Further, PLC governmental members have been drawn from parks or environmental personnel with direct jurisdictional control over the public land, and breaking apart or diluting that regional connection of land stewards weakens the strong regional aspect which was the foundation of the PLC to begin with.

This is a propitious juncture in an essential program: the energy of the dedicated attendees is a valuable asset which should fuel tangible work products, and not be lost.

Recommendations

Historically, much of the progress and “leaps forward” (e.g., invasive species work; clean up efforts; the now “mainstream” ATV Damage Mitigation Project) have been the result of simple, straightforward brainstorming and collaboration among the PLC attendees, putting aside their organizational and individual differences. Many initiatives started by the PLC have been adopted and funded by the Commission through the Science and Stewardship Work Plan and budget.

The Advisory Committee’s overarching recommendation is that ***the Commission simplify the structure of the PLC while simultaneously focusing more of its valuable time upon substantive conservation work products which further the Commission’s***

Science and Stewardship Work Plan. Specifically, we recommend eleven actions:

1. ***The Commission, through its Science and Stewardship Steering Committee, should assign the PLC tasks or projects that further the Science and Stewardship Work Plan, with associated deadlines and criteria for completion and reporting.*** The Science and Stewardship Steering Committee should allocate and oversee those assignments, including the facilitation role of the staff in such tasks. (See Recommendation 8 pertaining to communication of results and work products.)
2. ***Encourage the proposal of new ideas and initiatives from the PLC attendees.*** As noted, there have been several successful and “mainstreamed” proposals from the PLC in the past. That should be further encouraged and, indeed, expected. This may be the result of pooling the attendees’ experiences and ideas. It may also result from hosting technical speakers on research, management, scientific, recreational, and other current work elsewhere that could benefit the pine barrens. (See Recommendations 8 pertaining to communication of ideas and proposals.)
3. ***Eliminate the current administrative dichotomy of “voting” and “nonvoting” members.*** This distinction serves no current practical purpose, and has, in fact, been a source of friction. The PLC does not exercise budgetary, legal, financial, or other formal powers, and thus realizes no benefits from this distinction.
4. ***Change the meeting frequency to a minimum of quarterly, and rotate the locations as the attendees see fit.*** This is a sustainable frequency, and varying meeting venues showcases different conservation and park sites in the barrens.
5. ***Select a new chair once per year.*** Broaden the opportunity for people to serve as chair. Set a term of service of one year, with a maximum of one additional. A chair and a vice chair should be recommended by the PLC, and confirmed by the Commission, as with all other committees. Such rotation encourages strength.
6. ***Invite practitioners, naturalists, scientists and managers from outside of our area.*** Some of the most effective meetings of the PLC during its history have been those where a visiting colleague speaks about what he or she does. This is an important source of ideas for the PLC to consider when making recommendations.
7. ***Keep it informal, and thus effective.*** The chair should – indeed, must - assure that everyone gets to be heard, and that the focus remains upon responding to the PLC’s current assignments. Simple meeting ground rules should be developed.
8. ***The PLC’s work products – assigned tasks and recommendations – as well as new ideas and proposals should be communicated regularly to the Commission.*** The Commission has traditionally been well represented at PLC meetings through either Commission members or staff. However, this line of communication can be guaranteed by implementing Recommendations 9 and 10 below.
9. ***The chair or vice chair must personally attend a Commission meeting once or twice***

per year to personally report on the Council's activities. This is the practice for other Commission committees, and ensures an open and direct line of communication. Willingness and ability to do so should be considered in all chair and vice chair recommendations.

10. ***The Science and Stewardship Steering Committee should be formalized as a "corporate" committee of the Commission, and should include the current PLC Chair as an ex officio member.*** This would be a formal committee of the Commission in the same way that large corporations have various committees. Inclusion of the current PLC Chair, for the purpose of reflecting the PLC views on issues, both establishes and assures a direct line of communication between the Commission and the PLC.
11. ***Finally, only the Commission should create standing PLC subcommittees, and, when created, should meet with staff present.*** To accomplish work that is not practical at a full meeting, individuals could meet between meetings. If a topic's significance requires a standing subcommittee, then the Commission should make that decision.

Closing Comment

The PLC has an admirable and tangible record, and has chosen to redefine itself and ask for direction. This is a solid sign of their dedication and commitment to conservation and the goals of the Pine Barrens Act. These individuals - whether they attend for employment or on their own "time and dime" – form an irreplaceable resource of hard won field experience, technical knowledge, dedication, and community ties. You simply can't buy that through any contract, store, or vendor. There are no "RFPs" for this.

It is built up over time - often decades - and is composed of everyone's years of work, volunteering, and countless field days in all kinds of conditions. The Protected Lands Council can, and must, be a dynamic entity that builds upon that hard won experience and knowledge. In so doing, it will also help to encourage - year by year - the development of the next naturalist, the next scientist, the next land manager, and the next volunteer. That is a true investment in the future. None of us will be here forever - let's simply accept that - *but we certainly can – and must - set the stage for our successors.* That's our truest obligation, and is the real test of whether our efforts are well expended. The Advisory Committee respectfully urges the Commission to adopt these recommendations today with that focus upon investing in the future of our natural resource.

Adoption at Pine Barrens Commission meeting of 10/21/09 at Riverhead Town Hall:

Motion by: Mr. Turner (for Brookhaven)

Second by: Ms. Gallagher (for Suffolk County)

Ayes: Mr. Scully (for New York State), Ms. Gallagher, Mr. Turner, and
Mr. McCormick (for Riverhead)

Nayes: None