



New Jersey Conservation
FOUNDATION

NATURE FOR ALL

A 2050 VISION FOR NEW JERSEY

Report cover photo: Mercer Lake at Mercer County Park (Photo Courtesy of John S. Watson).

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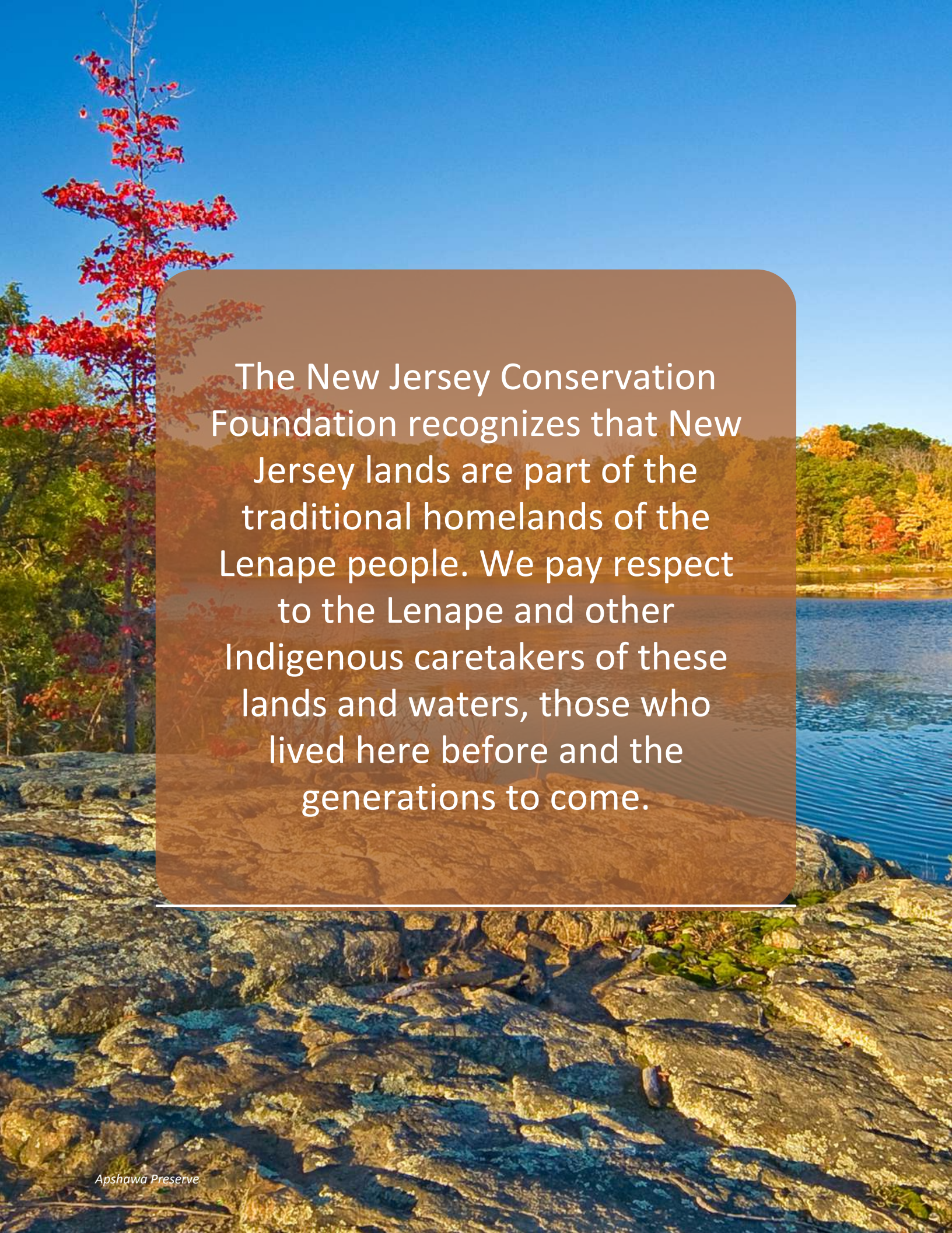
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The New Jersey Conservation Foundation recognizes that New Jersey lands are part of the traditional homelands of the Lenape people. We pay respect to the Lenape and other Indigenous caretakers of these lands and waters, those who lived here before and the generations to come.



———— ” ————

We owe it to ourselves and to the next generation to conserve the environment so that we can bequeath our children a sustainable world that benefits all.

———— ” ————

WANGARI MAATHAI

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE WINNER



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Photo Courtesy of Upstream Alliance

Everyone deserves nature in their neighborhood to survive and thrive.

Land and nature are fundamental life supports: water, air, food, health, peace of mind, and beauty allow humans and wildlife to live and thrive. Land and nature are also essential to addressing many serious challenges New Jersey faces today, including impacts from climate change, securing a safe and adequate water supply, loss of biodiversity, and environmental injustice.

Land is scarce, precious, and non-renewable. But its benefits continue perpetually once preserved, protected from development, and carefully stewarded.



I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The "Garden State" at a Crossroads

In New Jersey, the nation's most densely populated state, residents depend on land and nature for clean water and air, healthy locally sourced food, safe and easily accessible outdoor recreation opportunities, and livable communities. Recognized as a national leader, New Jersey has spent roughly \$4 billion in taxpayer funds to support land preservation. Federal, state, county, local, and private funds have permanently preserved approximately 1.6 million acres of forests, wetlands, parks, trails, farmland, and recreational open spaces, more than one-third of the state's total land area ([A Legacy of Green: Celebrating 50 Years of the Green Acres Program](#), NJ Keep It Green). New Jersey has invested in its urban communities by prioritizing the creation of quality parks, trails, and open spaces and, significantly, reclaiming access to urban rivers. From 2000 to 2020, over \$331 million was granted to support the development of urban green spaces through the [NJ DEP Green Acres Program](#).

It Is No Time to Rest!

Since the 1940s, development and urbanization have led to the loss of well over a million acres of wetlands, forests, and farmlands (Rowan University). A soon-to-be-released study shows that since the 1980s, New Jersey development has claimed over 377,000 acres of farmland, forest, and wetlands (Rowan University/Rutgers University). In addition, the fragmentation of farmlands and forests has increased, resulting in smaller patches of landscape features and a loss of connected landscapes needed for full ecosystem function (Rowan University). Since 2010, the state has added more than 500,000 people, bringing the population to over 9.3 million, an increase of 5.7% ([NEW JERSEY: 2020 Census](#)).

New Jersey Land Use
% change (1986-2020)

LAND USE	'86-'20 % Change
Urban	31%
Agriculture	-29%
Forest	-8%
Water	13%
Wetlands	-6%
Barren	-10%

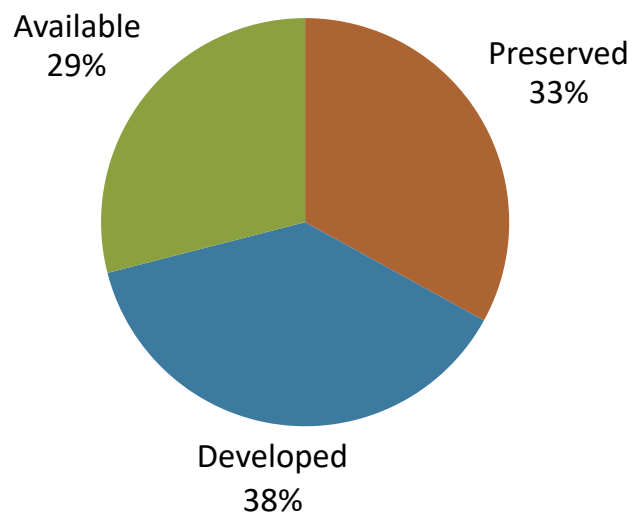


With growth and development continuing to rise, New Jersey must increase its commitment to state-wide land preservation and ensure that residents in the state's urban communities have both a high environmental quality and a high quality of life. Taking bold action on these two essential and equally important goals will require different strategies and an expanded and more profound commitment of funding and resources.

Recommendation 1. 50x50

Preserve 50% of the best of what's left by 2050

- Of the 1.4 million acres of land in New Jersey vulnerable to development (available), nearly 1 million are ranked highly for ecological, water, and agricultural values (New Jersey Conservation Blueprint).
- New Jersey must preserve at least 50% of those lands, or 500,000 acres, by 2050 (The Farmland Preservation Program's goal of preserving another 250,000 acres is included in the 500,000-acre goal.) New Jersey must ultimately preserve 50% of the state's land area or an additional 300,000 acres (for a total of 800,000 acres) to ensure the health of all residents, the preservation of biodiversity, and the future livability of the state.
- Over 29% of the state, or 1,407,000 acres, are considered available, meaning they are neither preserved nor developed and are essentially up for grabs. The work of land preservation is not complete and must continue. The New Jersey Conservation Blueprint tool used in this report provides the data to prioritize the preservation of the most critical of these lands.



Snapshot of New Jersey Lands

- Preserved (1,584,000 acres)
- Developed (1,801,000 acres)
- Available (1,407,000 acres)

New Jersey should immediately take the following steps:

- Expand the scope and pace of the land preservation program, including identifying and adopting an updated and streamlined set of policies and processes.
- Develop new and enhanced incentives for willing sellers to preserve their lands.
- The Garden State Preservation Trust should take a more proactive role in removing obstacles to preservation and expanding capacity for expedited land preservation.
- A "Green Tape" Initiative should be launched to identify and remove barriers to conservation at all levels. Appraisal and site review policies need to be updated and improved.

- Expand staff capacity at all agencies, including the New Jersey State Green Acres Program, the State Agriculture Development Committee's Farmland Preservation Program, and all participating counties and local governments. Expanded hiring efforts are particularly important as the state workforce of experienced professionals is growing older and retiring.

Half-Earth Project

In his [Half-Earth Project](#), the late Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson called for preserving 50% of the Earth's land and waters to ensure the survival of humanity. He argues that humans need high biodiversity of life on land and sea to survive and that preserving 50% of lands and oceans will save 85% of the planet's biodiversity. (E.O. Wilson, *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life*, 2016)

The Half-Earth goal is based on island biogeography, which equates the size of a habitat to the diversity of wildlife species it can support. Wilson said that if 90% of an area's habitat is removed, about half of the species supported by that habitat will disappear. He suggested that by setting aside 50% of habitat on the planet, about 85% of species will remain. This would have the effect of significantly slowing or stopping extinction. In 2015, about 15% of the planet's lands and about 2.8% of its oceans were preserved.

The Half-Earth concept is compelling for New Jersey. Preserving 50% of the state would help protect precious drinking water supplies, maintain the carbon stored in natural lands, protect natural flood buffers, protect the state's biodiversity, and improve public health and quality of life in the most densely-populated state in the nation.



Land preservation efforts must be more strategic, proactive, and aggressive, prioritizing the highest-value and most vulnerable conservation lands at risk of development. Preservation targets should include the state's most valuable forests and farmlands that contribute to preserving large, connected landscapes.

Preservation priorities must also include wetlands, wetland buffers, floodplains, and flood hazard areas. Although environmental regulations protect these lands, many are privately owned and vulnerable to encroachments and violations. Permanent preservation through public ownership and strong, enforceable deed restrictions are required to fully preserve these lands.

These available lands currently provide ecosystem services. They filter and store drinking water, control and mitigate flooding, supply local foods, sequester carbon, provide wildlife habitat, and protect air quality. If developed, their essential ecological functions and services will cease, leading to an overall erosion of environmental quality.

The Conservation Blueprint is a Geographic Information System (GIS) computer mapping tool developed by Rowan University, the Nature Conservancy of New Jersey, and the New Jersey Conservation Foundation in partnership with the greater conservation community. It was created to help identify additional lands for preservation due to their location and conservation values.

The Conservation Blueprint analysis identified all lands yet to be preserved or developed by region and land use type. It ranked them for ecological and water resource features, agricultural, and community greenspace values. Lands were further broken into those with environmental constraints to development, which are restricted by regulations, and those without environmental constraints or regulatory restrictions. Lands without environmental constraints or regulations are considered most at risk of development.

Robust land use plans, including the State Development and Redevelopment Plan and the highly successful regional planning initiatives in the Pinelands, Highlands, Meadowlands, and Delaware and Raritan Canal area, are essential to the long-term success of land conservation.

Comprehensive capacity-based land use planning helps direct growth to appropriate areas and away from lands ranked highly for their conservation values. These plans, including New Jersey's Municipal Land Use Law and county and local plans, should be updated to address climate change, equity, and expanded land conservation goals. Other state regions that would benefit from regional planning include the coast and Delaware Bay Watershed.

Explore the Land Use Land Change Viewer link and the following tables to see how development over the last 30 years has led to the loss of almost 400,000 acres of farms, forests and wetlands.

LAND CHANGE VIEWER

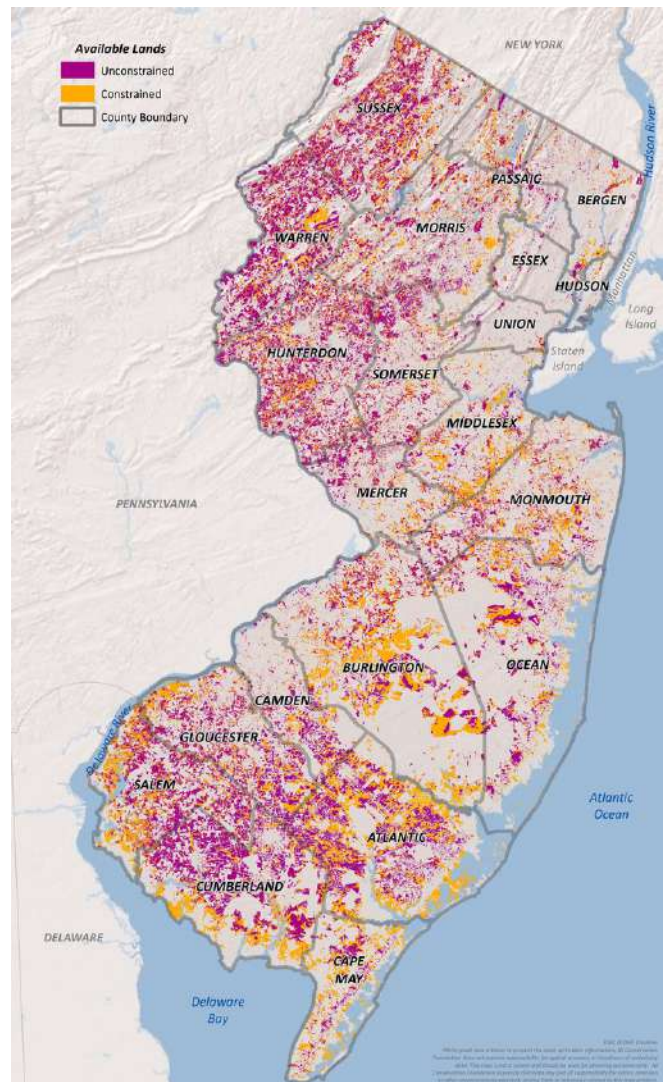
VISUALIZING DECADES OF DEVELOPMENT AND ITS IMPACT

*"NJ Maps," Rowan University, accessed February 13, 2024, <https://njmap2.com/index.html>.



Looking ahead, the urban and suburban development trends in the Garden State will continue for the foreseeable future, although the pace of growth will rise and fall driven by economic and demographic factors..... Notwithstanding, the development of open spaces will persist on lands that are not preserved or regulated. Land conservation remains the most effective way to ensure that development avoids the most critical open spaces that still remain as land use trends unfold in the coming decades.

JOHN HASSE, PH.D
"PAVING THE GARDEN STATE"



Recommendation 2. Green and Healthy Cities

Establish a Green and Healthy Cities Initiative and State-wide Task Force

- The Governor and State Legislature must establish The Green and Healthy Cities Initiative to create a comprehensive planning and investment program for the state's under-resourced urban areas to ensure vibrant, healthy communities. The Initiative must be led by a Green and Healthy Cities Task Force, composed of residents from directly affected communities, who will determine the needs and strategies.
- New Jersey must make a long-term commitment and substantial investment in greening its cities and reversing decades of environmental injustice., degradation, and lack of access to high-quality green spaces.
- This substantial investment is essential to provide a clean and healthy environment and high quality of life in all of the state's overburdened and under-resourced communities of color. This investment is needed to improve water and air quality, reduce flooding risks, remediate contaminated sites, improve access to healthy local foods, provide clean and safe waterways and parks, plant trees and enhance and expand existing urban forests, and ensure expanded urban agriculture and community gardens. Lands suitable for parks and green infrastructure should be priorities for open space funding investments.
- These investments should be paired with efforts to guarantee that increased housing and living costs will not result in the displacement of current residents.
- Collaborations between community land trusts and affordable housing advocates should be encouraged to ensure the availability of affordable housing opportunities.

While New Jersey has made significant urban park and greening investments in communities of color, such as Liberty State Park in Jersey City, Paterson Great Falls in Paterson, Ulysses S. Wiggins Waterfront Park, and Cramer Hill Waterfront Park in Camden, the Hudson River Greenway in Bergen and Hudson Counties, and Branch Brook Park in Newark, the need for an expanded and deeper investment is critical and grows larger every year.

It is time to address and rectify past unfair land use decisions affecting the quality of life in our cities. The state has a long, distressing history of locating undesirable and polluting industries and facilities in low-income communities and communities of color. Antiquated, outdated water and sewer infrastructure facilities, built 200 years ago for smaller populations, are failing today's residents and cannot accommodate current population growth. Historically, many of New Jersey's urban communities were located along key rivers and waterways and today are increasingly

vulnerable to flooding due to climate change. They also suffer from the "heat island effect," and temperatures continue to rise, further threatening public health. Our future must ensure clean water, a healthy environment, and access to nature, parks, trails, and gardens for all residents.



Photo Courtesy of John S. Watson

Funding

New Jersey is fortunate to have a stable source of state funding for open space, farmland, and historic preservation efforts through a dedication of a portion of the State Corporate Business Tax, overwhelmingly approved by voters in 2014. This dedication provides a base of funding that leverages matching funds from federal, state, county, and local sources. Also, it helps to incentivize the state's counties and municipalities to match the funding with their own open space taxes and bond funds.

However, New Jersey is currently moving in the wrong direction on funding. If not replaced, the loss of a 2.5% surcharge on the Corporate Business Tax will result in a removal of \$480 million over the next decade. Without this funding and a long-term commitment to increased funding, efforts to meet the challenges identified in this report will be severely hampered.

New sources of funding to explore:

- A progressive statewide water protection fee through a surcharge on water allocations or drinking water revenues. The funds should be used to preserve the most sensitive and critical forested watershed lands that protect and support water supplies.
- A real estate transfer fee and a developer's fee to increase funding for land preservation.
- Funding through the Federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022.
- Conservation finance tools such as the Installment Purchase Program which has been successful in the Farmland Preservation Program.
- Funding to support the long-term stewardship of preserved lands. Ongoing stewardship funding should be part of the state's annual budget. Enormous challenges exist to secure sufficient stewardship funding to manage and care for preserved lands. The state falls well below the national average of neighboring states in per capita spending on public lands management and stewardship.
- A bold, comprehensive, and multi-decade funding initiative will be necessary to implement the Green and Healthy Cities Initiative and make meaningful, transformational, and sustained improvements in the state's under-resourced communities and communities of color. The recently passed Clean Water, Clean Air, and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act in New York State is a relevant model for New Jersey. It provides \$4.2 billion for work in climate change mitigation, restoration and flood risk reduction, water quality improvement, resilient infrastructure, open space, land conservation, and recreation. A large and diverse group of citizens, environmental leaders, advisors, key legislators, and the Governor's office should join in a call for action. A robust program of this magnitude is essential to the future of the state's long-term economic health and sustainability and should be developed and shaped by the Green and Healthy Cities Task Force.

These goals require significant capital expenditures and ongoing funding support. However, every public dollar spent on land preservation and repairing, revitalizing, and greening urban areas will produce tangible benefits in perpetuity. Actions and investments now will avoid costly and virtually impossible fixes and retrofits in the future. These critical program investments are New Jersey's preventive medicine.

It is Time to Take Action

In many ways, New Jersey reflects two realities. It is home to some of the nation's most interesting, unique, and beautiful natural landscapes and, at the same time, also home to more Superfund toxic waste sites than any other state. It is a state constantly at risk of being paved over but also has some of the nation's highest-quality parks, farms, and trails. And it is a state with significant inequities in its residents' access to a healthy and clean environment.

New Jersey has been at the forefront of preserving land and nature. It must continue to lead the nation in land preservation, environmental protection and sustainability, and environmental justice as crucial elements of a just transition to a better future for all residents. New Jersey must commit to significant and transformative investments in land preservation and green, livable communities to ensure a future of economic health and livability for current and future generations.

This report presents a vision for why, how, and where New Jersey must take action and invest in its future.



Photo Courtesy of Richard Lewis