

**Issue: Stewardship**

Preserving open space is only part of the State's responsibility. Caring for the lands and resources after they are put into public ownership is equally important. Over the past 40 years, New Jersey citizens have invested \$2 billion dollars of state funds and millions more in local tax dollars and private donations for preservation of lands and thereby created an endowment of lands valued at many times the original cost. However, like any endowment, these valuable assets must be properly managed, given care and oversight, replenished and renewed. In order for these lands to sustain the open space and recreation needs of New Jersey, now and into the future, excellent stewardship is needed.

Both state and local governments are challenged to meet the goal of proper stewardship of the public's lands and recreational resources. The State Department of Environmental Protection manages 64% of all public lands in New Jersey. Local governments manage 18% of public lands. Though much of the State land is largely undeveloped, many historic, recreation and education facilities are maintained and operated on both state and local lands. Over many years, funds for the operation and capital needs in recreation areas have fallen short of the needs. Some local governments use open space taxes for development and maintenance expenditures associated with their park systems. In these cases, dedicated funding has given these jurisdictions some predictability and flexibility to meet the needs to acquire open spaces, maintain their recreation infrastructure and meet the needs of visitors.

Deferral of capital spending for renovation and rehabilitation can lead to larger expenses down the road. Some facilities require compliance with disability access guidelines and some are in need of costly upgrades for environmental infrastructure projects such as water and sewage systems. Capital needs left unmet can lead to irreplaceable resource losses, particularly those of historic significance.

Stewardship at times entails enforcement to protect natural resources. The increasing popularity of off-road vehicles (ORV) in New Jersey has presented challenges for the management of public lands and the protection of natural resources. As ORV ownership has increased in New Jersey and neighboring states over the past several years, there has been a marked increase in the unlawful use of these vehicles on public lands. This unlawful usage has caused extensive damage to sensitive natural areas with no provision for restoration; has diminished the use and enjoyment of public lands and other natural areas

by other user groups; has diverted resources from other resource protection priorities; and has created serious risks to ORV users, to the public, and to law enforcement personnel.

By adopting a policy that prohibits ORV use in state parks, forests and wildlife management areas, and increases fines, together with increased enforcement, the State has taken an aggressive stance against unlawful use of ORV on state lands.

Stewardship, however, also involves planning and working with interest groups to address concerns and find solutions. As part of its ORV policy, the Division of Natural and Historic Resources will work to develop appropriate recreational areas for lawful ORV users with the goal of having two new such facilities in operation by 2005. The New Jersey Trails Council will participate in this effort by establishing an ORV subcommittee representing a cross-section of interested environmental, recreational, ORV industry and ORV user groups. No current state park, wildlife management area or other environmentally sensitive area will be considered in the site review and selection process.

The Governor's Council on New Jersey Outdoors has over the years identified a lack of park operation and maintenance funding as a serious problem confronting public recreation providers. State public open space and recreation areas are challenged by rapidly increasing visitation. The Division of Parks and Forestry has experienced a more than 4.1 million increase in annual visitation between 1991 and 2001. For those that care about the natural, recreational and historic resources and for those that have a clear vision of the imperative to protect open space, it is frustrating to contemplate this question: How can we spend money to protect more open space when we do not take proper care of the lands and facilities for which we are already responsible?

The answer is that we must do both – balancing fiscal resources for both preservation and stewardship needs. Many lands that are in public ownership require very little, in terms of resources, to manage. Others, particularly the high recreation use areas of parks and some wildlife management areas, need substantive fiscal and personnel resources. Public testimony to the Governor's Council was critical of both local and state governments' inadequate attention to the stewardship of public parks and recreation areas. The need to serve the public through the protection of open space and maintenance of historic and recreational resources is a critical quality of life issue for New Jersey residents.

**In its 2001 report on stewardship issues on State public open space and recreation areas, the Garden State Preservation Trust recommended that \$25 million a year over the next ten years be statutorily dedicated for capital projects on State public lands over a ten year period. This annual allocation would respond to an estimated long term capital needs for State public parklands and wildlife management areas of approximately \$430 million. The report also recommended an investment of \$154 million to develop regional environmental education and interpretive centers at seven sites throughout the state in addition to other enhancements at these and other sites. The report highlighted the potential for New Jersey to develop a world class park system based on its existing system of natural, recreational and historic resources.**

**Ensuring the public park and recreation facilities are accessible is another issue for the State and local governments. The American with Disabilities Act requires public park agencies to make both programmatic changes, such as having programs occur in an accessible portion of a facility and structural changes such as a physical building alteration. The Green Acres Program has provided \$2.2 million in grant and loan funding to local governments for 34 projects to improve the accessibility of park and recreation facilities.**

**Policy:**

**It shall be the policy of the State of New Jersey to provide funding for the operation and maintenance of State public open space and recreation areas and to provide funding to local governments and conservation organizations for the development and rehabilitation of park and recreation areas.**

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The management, operation and maintenance of the State's open space and recreation infrastructure is a critical issue because it relates directly to improving the quality of life for New Jersey residents.

**Actions:**

1. Continue funding for local governments and conservation organizations for park and recreation development projects. (NJDEP, local governments, conservation organizations)
2. Seek increased funding for operation and maintenance on State public open space and recreation areas. (NJDEP)
3. Develop strategically located Regional Interpretive Centers at five sites statewide. (NJDEP)
4. Encourage the expansion of environmental education throughout New Jersey's educational system. (NJDEP, New Jersey Department of Education, environmental groups and conservation organizations)
5. Continue to provide Green Acres funding for state and local projects for compliance with the American With Disabilities Act. (NJDEP, local governments)
6. Establish two operational off road vehicle parks by 2005.
7. Continue to work with local governments and conservation organizations on the development and implementation of effective conservation easement language, monitoring and enforcement. (NJDEP, local governments, conservation organizations)