

PUBLIC COMMENTS SUBMITTED AT
HIGHLANDS COUNCIL MEETING SEPTEMBER 21, 2023

Forests Are Being Destroyed and ‘Nature Lovers’ Are Helping FOR THE BIRDS

The New Jersey Audubon Society stands arm in arm with big-money interests in support of deforestation. But they’re not the only “green” group to do so.

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In July 1921, Benton MacKaye, founder of regional planning and the visionary behind the Appalachian Trail, held a historic meeting with fellow preservationists in the remote New Jersey lodge that was to become Hudson Farm.

Dedicated to the protection of the nation’s last wild places, they were channeling the inchoate spirit of the coming age with a grand vision for the public domain that would advance the public interest and the democratic ideal on vast landscapes.

The first step toward this end, they said, was to liberate land from industrial capitalism. The Appalachian Trail (AT), proclaimed MacKaye, would be “in essence a retreat from profit.”

The property on which this fateful meeting was held is now owned by the Wall Street billionaire Peter Kellogg. It’s a fitting fate for the old lodge where the AT was born, as MacKaye’s vision of preservation is increasingly captured, co-opted, and perverted by private corporate interests.

This dynamic is on gruesome display in New Jersey, on a parcel of public land called Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area, where loggers have started cutting old forest just a few miles from Kellogg’s exclusive Hudson Farm Club.

On one side of the controversial fight over the logging of Sparta Mountain WMA is a citizens’ group of fierce local environmental activists, NJ Forest Watch, which advocates for strict protection of the state’s woodlands. On the other, surprisingly, is a well-heeled green group that Kellogg helps to fund, New Jersey Audubon—one of the oldest birding groups in the nation.

So far, the preservationists at NJ Forest Watch are losing the fight.

NJ Audubon, along with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), various state hunting associations, and wealthy local sport-hunting boosters (including Kellogg), cooperated with logging interests under the cover of an insidious new model of management that emphasizes the chainsawing of healthy mature forests for the sake of creating an artificial young forest habitat.

This management paradigm—which is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and state partners via groups like the Young Forest Project—is based on the false belief that logging, done right, can mimic the natural disturbances that produce what ecologists call early successional habitat, where shrubs and young trees are predominant. Certain birds, like the beloved golden-winged warbler, and other species that hunters seek out, such as white-tailed deer and wild turkey, thrive in young forest habitat.

Now, it's possible that cutting down forests for the purpose of creating such habitat might improve the chances for a minuscule selection of target species—specifically the ones that Audubon birders want to mark in their life lists or ones that hunters (like Kellogg) wish to kill. But proponents of this logging-for-wildlife program tend to overlook the fact, backed up by numerous experts, that it wreaks havoc on an enormously greater number of native species that depend on mature unlogged forests.

Richard Enser, a conservation biologist formerly with the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program, told me in an email that “clear-cutting destroys a substantially more biodiverse habitat in exchange for a species-depauperate habitat.” He added: “We always hear about the few species that will benefit from clear-cutting without any mention of the species that will be reduced or lost. And of course, when looked at from a biodiversity perspective, factoring in ALL species (insects, fungi, etc.) the losses are considerable. If clear-cutting plans were subject to an environmental impact statement, in which a proper cost/benefit analysis was conducted, it would be very difficult to justify the true costs.”

“There’s a lot of money to be made if you’re a nonprofit and you support logging and hunting...”

According to Bill Wolfe, a former planner with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, logging-for-wildlife in the Sparta area has fragmented the forest with roads, disturbed soils and vegetation, reduced canopy cover, introduced invasive species, and has been “targeted not at scores of rare and threatened interior bird species, but a single species, the Golden Winged Warbler, that requires scrub/shrub habitat.”

And, as it does everywhere, logging at Sparta releases vast amounts of carbon stored in unfragmented forests, carbon that will not be re-absorbed for a century or more.

John Terborgh, one of the world’s premier conservation biologists, observes that there’s “no conservation reason for creating more early successional habitat.” Cutting trees to expand such habitat, he told me, “is a bogus argument, ginned up as an excuse for more logging. But the argument could work with a gullible public.”

In other words, logging-for-wildlife is based on junk science.

And yet, the bogus justifications are working to maximum effect at Sparta Mountain, home to 130 threatened, endangered and “special concern” species. Aided and abetted by state and federal agencies, loggers in this 3,500-acre parcel have been brandishing their chainsaws in an area specifically preserved at taxpayer expense for the benefit of wildlife.

I visited Sparta last March in the company of Silvia Solaun, a local resident turned forest partisan who is now the executive director of NJ Forest Watch. We hiked through clearcuts of red oak, counting the tree rings of the felled specimens. Solaun estimated some of the trees to be 150 years old.

“150-year-old trees. It makes me sick,” she said. “And here’s New Jersey Audubon advocating for logging of our state’s best, healthiest, oldest, most diverse forests.”

Intriguingly, two decades ago, NJ Audubon offered a radically different perspective on protection of the state’s forested preserves.

“One of the most devastating causes of ecological degradation is fragmentation resulting from new developments and roads,” wrote NJ Audubon’s then-director Eric Stiles in a 2002 white paper. “Fragmented forest and wetland habitats have more predation, more parasitism, and less vertebrate diversity than intact habitats.”

What accounts for the astonishing about-face, such that today the group celebrates logging, roading, and forest fragmentation under the aegis of young forest chainsaw management?

Solaun says the reason is the usual one: money.

In recent years, NJ Audubon has enjoyed infusions of young forest funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture amounting to as much as \$648,000. (As I reported in my book, *This Land: How Cowboys, Capitalism, and Corruption Are Ruining the American West*, critics of the USDA have long asserted that it is an agency captured by and subservient to logging interests, and that its funding choices reflect that bias.)

“There’s a lot of money to be made if you’re a nonprofit and you support logging and hunting,” Solaun told me.

New Jersey Audubon also received \$330,000 from Kellogg, the Wall Street billionaire. Kellogg and his ilk have been frank as to what is wanted from this investment in conservation: decimate the public forests so that entitled elites can have an easier time killing animals for sport. (I reached out to NJ Audubon for comment, but have yet to receive a response.)

This is all part of a broad toxification of the environmental movement, which has taken a regressive turn toward collaboration with big business, wealthy donors and corporate-backed foundations. Green groups that embrace market-based initiatives, rather than stand up for sensible regulation and strict enforcement of environmental laws, are the ones that get lavish funding.

Look, for example, at the wealthiest conservation nonprofit in the U.S., the business-friendly Nature Conservancy, whose board consists mostly of corporate executives, Wall Street bankers, and one-percenter investment managers.

The unconscionable logging of Sparta Mountain—with New Jersey Audubon as an accomplice—is a disgusting example of how this baronial neoliberal influence plays out, with powerful environmental groups in the U.S. now serving as greenwashers for the monied interests with whom they collaborate.

From them we hear nothing in the noble spirit of Benton MacKaye, nothing about a call for a retreat from profit.

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Got a tip? Send it to The Daily Beast here.

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Subject: [EXTERNAL] Public Comments Meeting 9/21/23: Parsippany Position on Reports and Maps
Date: Thursday, September 21, 2023 8:05:25 PM

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Benjamin L. Spinelli, Executive Director:

Additional PUBLIC COMMENTS to the Council Meeting of 9/21/23

Subject: Parsippany officials continue to slander official website: NJDEP/NJHC reports and maps taken from the "internet" as hoaxes; not valid.

As per our conversation at the before the Council Meeting 9/21, concerning Parsippany Official/Zoning Board of Adjustments deeming Highlands Advanced Property Reports. and Interactive Maps. Internet Hoaxes; or not valid. This prevents board members from any detailed scrutiny, in their responsibility of due diligence. The Reports are for them to make better decisions in land-use. The issue of being an expert is not the the contention here. Parsippany 100% in the planning area, is refusing to use the best tools possible in land use issues.

Update on Parsippany's Position:

Zoning Board Adjustments Public Session 9/20/23. Continued effort to declassify official NJDEP Reports as not being internet hoaxes.

I Stated at the Public Session: , (near verbatim) "*was here on the the matter of the validity of certain sites from from NJDEP on Property Reports; that the Board had received the letter, return receipt requested" form Ben Spinelli NJHC. Also mentioned Iracane had requested a higher source from a state official, as to the legitimacy of said reports ;and this letter was in compliance with that request. (Iracane then stated something more direct in the line of an expert source) forget now the exact response.*

Iracane Chairman of the Zoning Board Adjustments, first response was; "**They are Still invalid**", and that he and Nora had discussed it. Got the feeling all ZBA members were not aware of the letter, and possibly nor was Attorney Peter King. *King then spoke and said about (me) being an expert; I explained it's not about me being an expert, but that the Reports were from expert sources of the best science available, that the board should be using these reports, as they are admittedly not experts. Iracane mumbled something again about the internet being the source. I then requested that each member of the board be in possession of the Ben Spinelli letter. I supplied Nora with 9-copies. Thanked them, and bid good evening.*

Parsippany Conformance process 2020

I did ask when Parsippany entered conformance if Planning and Zoning officials were versed in the Highlands Criteria, i was told by Susan Favate, at the time (Soriano Administration) that they were.

At my previous attempt to appeal to the ZBA after the Puddingstone session at the high school,

Attended ZBA meeting August to contend the validity of the reports(witnessed by Ken Dolsky), ZBA member Scott Joskowitz stated to me, quote: "we don't even know what your talking about". Iracane then requested i obtain a valid source to confirm; aka your letter of explanation dated August 22. How can officials not known what an advanced property report is, especially in a conforming municipality, and in matters of major developments?

ZBA Meeting July 19th. First opposition to the APR bein internet hoax.

The developer Attorney for Puddingstone LLC O'Neil objected to the Property Report being used, by me in questioning him, on July 19th. In other words, I not being an expert, or the creator of the report, but that the report was from the internet, no matter downloaded from an official State of NJ website, available to the public. Iracane sustained his objection, with no remarks or objections from the Board including attorney Peter King.

Is there anything else Highlands or NJDEP officials can further do to correct this ridiculous behavior?

With Respects, any question please contact.

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The Board talks of drainage and water collecting on a property, but the issue of for example: Groundwater recharge, may very well still be escaping their scope of scrutiny. The land character existing seems not to be a priority, only the developers plan, as that plan is acknowledged by them as no internet fantasy or hoax. ridiculous.