

The Pendulum Has Swung



Mill Creek in the Hackensack Meadows with Manhattan on the horizon



(left to right) New Jersey Fish and Wildlife Director Robert McDowell, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Director Steve Williams, New Jersey Congressman Steve Rothman (NJ9th), New York / New Jersey Baykeeper Andrew Willner, Hackensack Riverkeeper Captain Bill Sheehan, and New Jersey Field Office Supervisor Cliff Day on the banks of the Hackensack River, August 27, 2002



(top) Andrew Willner makes a point about Meadowlands restoration as Steve Williams, Steve Rothman and Cliff Day listen (bottom) Steve Williams and Cliff Day converse

Photographs USFWS / Gene Nieminen

Clifford G. Day, Supervisor, New Jersey Field Office

After centuries of abuse, neglect and land-use planning debacles, the largest estuarine wetlands complex remaining in the NY / NJ Harbor Estuary is finally being recognized as an area to restore and manage, rather than a place to fill and degrade. Conservation now has an opportunity to take a major stride forward in New Jersey. The theme of this Field Notes is the "Hackensack Meadows."

Far from being "Phragmites strewn with garbage," or a convenient site for another shopping mall, the Meadows deserves a closer look. Despite severely negative impacts, this 8,400-acre area, 7 miles west of Manhattan, supports remarkable diversity and concentrations of migratory birds, fish, and other animal life, including 65 species of nesting birds and over 50 species of fish and shellfish. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) identified 88 species of special emphasis, including 15 State-listed species, 42 species and 6 natural communities considered rare or uncommon in the urban core, and 49 species considered rare in the estuary. Located on the Atlantic Flyway, the Meadows provides a critical stopover area for migratory birds. New Jersey supports the second largest

concentration of migratory birds in North America; 443 species have been documented. Most of these species are migratory, and 75% have been observed in the Meadows—which is a cornerstone for several migration routes connecting the New York Bight region with the eastern Great Lakes, Hudson River Valley and the Atlantic Flyway.

In 1986 the Service identified the Meadows as a "Priority Wetland Site" under the Emergency Wetlands Protection Act and, 10 years later, as a "Regionally Significant Habitat Complex" in the New York Bight Watershed. Others recognize the environmental importance of the Meadows. The National Marine Fisheries Service declared the Hudson-Raritan Estuary (including the lower Hackensack River) "Essential Fish Habitat" for 8 species of fish. The EPA identifies the Meadows as an "Aquatic Resource of National Importance." The Meadows are included within a "Joint Venture Area" under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. What truly makes the area special is its proximity to almost 20 million people. The conservation importance and scientific, educational and

recreational potential for this natural area, within view of the New York City skyline, has yet to be realized. To allow the Meadows and the potential it offers future generations to be filled and absorbed into a sea of urbanization is irresponsible.

When I toured the Meadows in December 1999 with then Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt, it was obvious how impressed he was with the calm of the area in contrast to the surrounding urbanization. It was also obvious how determined conservation groups were in inspiring people to action. At one stop during our tour the Secretary was presented a petition of some 10,000 signatures for protecting the area—a preview of the million plus signatures that could be obtained. Most recently, in August 2002, I had the privilege of accompanying the new Service Director, Steve Williams, along with Robert McDowell, Director, New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, and Congressman Steven Rothman (NJ9th) on a tour of the Meadows. The tour achieved a consensus that the Meadows ecosystem is worthy of protection (no surprise).

The Meadows must be protected. The stakes are high. Protection will retain the services realized from natural and semi-natural coastal systems, including flood water retention. Rather than entertain proposals to fill these wetlands and incur further habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation, intelligent land-use planning will steer proposed development into the surrounding urban areas that are in dire need of economic revitalization.



Service personnel including Regional Director Mamie Parker (right) tour the Meadows

Environmental restoration and management are being accomplished. Presently, the New Jersey Meadowslands Commission is overseeing 12 sites in various stages of wetland restoration including 3 that are nearly completed: Skeetkill Creek Marsh, Harrier Meadow, and Mill Creek. There is also a 206-acre wetlands mitigation bank on Doctor's Creek. Most impressive is the State's 800-acre Sawmill Creek Wildlife Management Area, proof that land use offers options other than rights-of-way, warehouses and landfills.



Former Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt tours the Meadows, December 1999



On the Hackensack River, Secretary Babbitt and Supervisor Day talk at the stern of the Fire - Rescue boat



Cliff Day and USFWS Special Assistant to the Regional Director Ralph Pisapia at the Elizabeth session



The third Stakeholder Work Session, Morristown, October 31, 2001



The second Stakeholder Work Session, Elizabeth, May 23, 2001



The first Stakeholder Work Session, Secaucus, October 17, 2000

During 2001, the Service held a series of "Stakeholder Work Sessions for the Conservation of the Hackensack Meadows." Projecting optimism, these sessions brought together State and federal agencies, conservation groups, foundations, and elected officials with a concern for the future of the Meadows. Presently, the Service, the Army Corps of Engineers and, as a non-federal sponsor, the New Jersey Meadowslands Commission, along with Congressman Rothman, are pursuing a "Comprehensive Restoration Improvement Plan" for the Meadows. Additionally, the Commission should be applauded for acquiring 1,700 acres to expand open space. Further, the Service and the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife developed "A Vision Plan for the Fish and Wildlife Resources of the Hackensack Meadows." This plan is presented on Page 27.

The time for environmental restoration and rehabilitation in the Meadows is now. Progress took about 300 years to transform a 21,000-acre fresh- and salt-water marsh and Atlantic white-cedar forest to the present landscape where *Phragmites* is the dominant vegetation. Restoration will not happen overnight, but as you read the following articles it will be apparent that the principal stakeholders are laying the groundwork that will contribute to, rather than borrow from, the future. Finally, the pendulum has swung.