

EDITORIAL & COMMENTARY



Pterois glaucus, male Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, gets some nectar from a butterfly bush in Fair Haven on Aug. 11. S. LONGFIELD

IT'S YOUR TURN

Commentary

Highlands Act Turns 10

By Michele S. Byers

"These watersheds should be preserved from pollution at all hazards, for upon them the most populous portions of the state must depend for water supplies. There has been too much laxness in the past regarding this important matter."

New Jersey Potable Water Commission, 1907, commenting on the New Jersey Highlands region.

More than a century later, these words still ring true. This month marks the 10th anniversary of the signing of the landmark 2004 New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, one of the most significant steps New Jersey has taken to protect its water supply.

It became clear decades ago that our state's 565 municipalities could not, acting alone, adequately protect water and natural resources. As a result, regional planning initiatives in the Meadowlands and Pine Barrens were enacted and have made New Jersey a national leader in innovative land use planning. The Highlands is the most recent example.

A major, but not sole, driver in establishing the Highlands Act and plan was safeguarding our water supply. More than 5 million New Jerseyans, including those in the state's most populous cities – Newark, Jersey City, Paterson and Elizabeth – depend on Highlands water. So do numerous industries, including pharmaceutical firms and food and beverage companies like

Anheuser-Busch.

Anyone who follows world news knows that water is a precious commodity, becoming scarcer every day. An adequate supply of clean water makes life and civilization possible, with lawsuits and wars fought over it. And what would the economy of this state we're in be without it?

After more than 100 years of discussion and debate about protecting Highlands water, the time was finally right in 2004 and Governor James McGreevey signed the Highlands Act into law.

The act established an independent Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council, charged with creating a regional master plan to guide development into appropriate areas and protect water resources, forests, critical wildlife habitat, farmland, historic sites, recreation and scenic beauty.

Today, the Highlands Act is making headway in preventing the loss of thousands of acres of open land.

Over the last decade, a huge investment has been made in protecting the water supply for nearly two-thirds of the state's residents. More than a third of the Highlands has been preserved and 47 of the 88 Highlands towns have begun to align their master plans and zoning ordinances with the regional master plan, which is now undergoing a mandated review.

The Highlands Act implementing rules restrict development in the most environmentally sensitive areas. Owners of those lands can apply for compensation through open space and farmland preservation programs. While funding

for these preservation programs is currently depleted, the possibility of new funding in the near future may be welcome news to landowners.

This November, New Jerseyans will vote on a ballot question that would continue state funding for land protection, including land in the Highlands. This would provide much needed funds to acquire critical conservation lands and help landowners at the same time.

In addition, a bill to extend the federal Highlands Conservation Act through 2024 is under consideration in Congress. This act also provides funding for land conservation projects and assistance to private landowners.

Politics may be ever changing, but the need for clean, plentiful water is constant. Our health depends on it, our jobs depend on it, and our economy depends on it!

To learn more about the Highlands and what is being done to protect it, go to Highlands Council website at www.state.nj.us/njhighlands. Another great resource is the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, a nonprofit devoted to protecting, enhancing and restoring the region – www.njhighlandscoalition.org.

And to learn more about preserving New Jersey's land and natural resources, visit the New Jersey Conservation Foundation website at www.njconservation.org or contact me at info@njconservation.org.

Michele S. Byers is the executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

Why Incumbents Keep Getting Re-elected

By Lee H. Hamilton

It's no news that Congress is unpopular. In fact, at times it seems like the only real novelty on Capitol Hill would be a jump in its approval rating.

In June, a Gallup poll found members' standing with the American people at a historic low for a midterm-election year. Which might have been notable except, as The Washington Post pointed out, that "Congress's approval rating has reached historic lows at least 12 ... times since 2010."

Here's the interesting thing: nearly three-quarters of Americans want to throw out most members of Congress, including their own representative, yet the vast majority of incumbents will be returning to Capitol Hill in January. In other words, Americans scorn Congress but keep re-electing its members. How could this be?

The first thing to remember is that members of Congress didn't get there by being lousy politicians. They know as well as you and I that Congress is unpopular, and they're masters at separating themselves from it and running against it – appearing to be outsiders trying to get in, rather than insiders who produce the Congress they pretend to disdain. They're also adept at talking up their own bipartisanship – which is what most general-election voters want – when, in fact, they almost always vote with their own party's leadership, especially on the obscure procedural votes that can decide an issue before the actual up-or-down vote is taken.

Just as important, incumbents enjoy an over-

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whelming advantage in elections: a large staff, both in Washington and at home, whose jobs focus on helping constituents. They find lost Social Security checks, help get funding for economic development projects, cut through red tape to secure veterans' benefits. At election time, voters remember this.

That's not the only help members can expect. They're buttressed in ways challengers can only dream about. They're paid a good salary, so they don't have to worry about supporting their families while they campaign. They get to spend their terms effectively campaigning year-round, not just at election time, and they are able to saturate their state or district with mass mailings. The nature of their work allows them to build ties to various interest groups back home – which quite naturally seek out the incumbents and ignore challengers.

Incumbents receive invitations to more events than they can possibly attend: challengers have trouble finding a meeting interested in having them. Incumbents get the honored place in the parade, the prime speaking position, the upper hand when it comes to raising money; challengers have to fight for visibility and money. And the news media seek out incumbents, often ignoring the challengers.

In fact, challengers are at a disadvantage at almost every point in a campaign. From building name recognition to arranging meetings to building credibility with editorial boards, donors, and opinion leaders, they're trudging uphill. They do get one leg up – they're in the district all the time, while the incumbent has to be in Washington regularly – but that's a small advantage compared to the obstacles arrayed against them. Especially when districts are gerrymandered, as they often are, to protect incumbents. This means that in primaries, incumbents generally need to focus just on the most active voters, while in general elections the vast majority can consider themselves on safe ground.

But there's another reason incumbents keep getting re-elected that's also worth considering: voters, that's you and me. Most Americans don't vote, which means that a U.S. senator or representative might be elected by only 20 percent of the eligible voters. And those who do vote often cast their ballots for narrow or unusual reasons. They like the way they got treated by the incumbent's staff, or they shook his or her hand at a county fair, or they like his or her stand on a particular social or economic issue, or perhaps they just recognize the name. Whatever the case, they don't look at an incumbent's entire record: votes on a cross-section of vital issues; willingness to work with members of different ideologies and backgrounds; ability to explain Washington back home and represent home in Washington; skill at forging consensus on tough policy challenges.

It's really no mystery that incumbent members get re-elected. Their advantages are baked into the system.

Lee Hamilton is director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.



COURTESY DORN'S CLASSIC IMAGES

Two River Moment

People gather to look at a beached whale on the Monmouth Beach beach in this 1961 photo.