

EDITORIAL & COMMENTARY



Fishing at Swimming River Reservoir, Colts Neck

SCOTT LONGFIELD

IT'S YOUR TURN

Commentary

Celebrating 50 Years of Wilderness and Parks

By Michele S. Byers

Sept. 3 marked the 50th anniversaries of two conservation milestones that literally changed the face of our nation: the Wilderness Act and the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The two landmark bills were signed by President Lyndon Johnson on Sept. 3, 1964, at the same Rose Garden ceremony, launching the protection of millions of acres.

"It was one of the most amazing days for conservation in the history of this country. Probably the most amazing day," said Sally Jewell, U.S. Secretary of the Interior. "It was a day when 9-million acres were set aside for wilderness."

One hundred million more wilderness acres were added over the next half-century.

Jewell was keynote speaker recently at New Jersey's Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, the first wilderness area to be designated under the Wilderness Act. Joining Jewell were three New Jersey Congressmen, Rodney Frelinghuysen, whose late father Peter led efforts to save the Great Swamp from becoming an international airport; and Rush Holt and Leonard Lance.

The Wilderness Act poetically defines wilderness as an area "where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." The Great Swamp is only about 30 miles from downtown Manhattan, yet half of the refuge's 7,800 acres are designated wilderness.

As Jewell noted, birds, animals and plants thrive there. "The Great Swamp is a taste of what this country was, and what we need to

protect," she said. "Species need these old growth forests. Species need swamps and wetlands."

Fifty years after the signing of the legislation, the wilderness area of the Great Swamp may still be expanding, with a proposal to designate more than 150 existing refuge acres as wilderness.

Protecting the Great Swamp was also the genesis of New Jersey Conservation Foundation. Originally the Great Swamp Committee, New Jersey Conservation today protects thousands of acres of land throughout New Jersey.

Although not as well-known as the Wilderness Act, the Land and Water Conservation Fund is just as important. This fund is a dedicated, permanent, national means of funding land preservation – everything from natural lands and wildlife refuges to parks, recreation areas and historic landmarks.

And it doesn't use taxpayer dollars; it's funded by a small portion of federal revenues from offshore oil and gas royalty payments.

"The Land and Water Conservation Fund helped protect this land here," said Jewell at the Great Swamp ceremony. "This visionary Congress, 50 years ago said, 'we're going to develop offshore oil and gas and it's going to have an impact.'"

The funding mechanism was based on the idea that, since revenues from offshore energy belong to all Americans, damages from energy extraction should be offset by conserving land for the public to use and enjoy.

Unfortunately, over the years, far less than the full amount authorized – \$900 million a year – has been appropriated by Congress. And, unlike the Wilderness Act, the Land and Water Conservation Fund at 50 years old must be reauthorized by Congress

by next September.

For 50 years, the fund has enjoyed bipartisan support in Congress and with American citizens. A recent poll found that 85 percent of voters surveyed think Congress should honor its commitment to fund land conservation through the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Its economic engine supports outdoor recreation, conservation and historic preservation, contributing more than \$1 trillion annually to the economy and supporting 9.4 million American jobs.

To find out more about the Land and Water Conservation Fund, check out a new report, "50 Years of Conserving America the Beautiful," at www.lwcfcoalition.org/lwcf-50. The report recounts conservation success stories and makes policy recommendations to improve the fund as it enters its sixth decade.

For more information 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.

And, most important of all, take a hike and explore the Great Swamp, a wilderness right in your own backyard! Go to www.fws.gov/refuge/great_swamp/ for information and maps.

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

The Summer of Our Discontent

By Lee H. Hamilton

Despite these last few months of summer, it's been hard not to notice a cold political wind blowing through the country. The magazine *Foreign Affairs* captured it with its latest cover, a mockup of a travel poster featuring a crumbling U.S. Capitol with the tagline, "See America: Land of Decay and Dysfunction."

Americans are clearly uneasy. I know it anecdotally, because at virtually every public gathering I've addressed over the last few months someone has spoken up with his or her worry that our nation is in decline. And the polls bear it out. In June, a Washington Post article, "Is the American Dream Dead?" noted a string of polls showing majorities of Americans believe their children will be worse off than they were.

By early August, an NBC-Wall St. Journal poll was reporting that a full three-quarters of those surveyed lacked confidence that the next generation would be better off – the most pessimistic results in the history of the poll. Regardless of income, ethnicity, religion, or gender, Americans don't think much of our future.

This is a ground-shaking turnabout. Since well before I began my political career in the early 1960s, the keystone of our politics was an unflinching optimism that as Americans we could face head-on the task of improving our own and others' lives and deliver on our responsibility to future generations. As Chris Cilizza wrote recently in *The Washington Post*, "So much of every politician's patter –

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Democrat or Republican – is built on the idea that America has always overcome hard challenges, always made things better for our kids than for us, always had achieving the American dream as a real possibility." Now, he notes, "A large bloc of the electorate no longer believes any of that."

Why not? Partly, it's the economy: growth has been sluggish, we're not generating enough good jobs, and the benefits of the recovery have flowed more to some than to the many. The growing awareness of a lopsided society – one in which a rising tide fails to lift all boats – has put many people in a surly mood. That problem of income inequality is joined to a host of others – from climate change to crumbling infrastructure to a world in which the forces of chaos and turmoil appear to be expanding.

Yet I think Foreign Affairs has nailed the biggest factor: the perceived dysfunction of our political system. As political scientist Francis Fukuyama writes in the lead essay, dealing with our problems "requires a healthy, well-functioning political system, which the United States does not currently have."

Simply put, Americans have no confidence that our system can resolve the challenges before us. They don't expect miracles, but they do expect political leaders to make progress, and they haven't been seeing much.

I can understand why so many people would be pessimistic, yet I don't find myself sharing their fatalism. That's because political moments are just that: moments. Over the long reach of our history, we've learned time and again that when our political leaders do focus on our challenges, speak to one another directly and are determined to find a solution to our problems, they can overcome their differences and make progress.

Our Constitution has been in effect for 225 years. The system it created, with its checks and balances, and its carefully constructed equilibrium between constraining and enabling government, has seen us through no small share of bruising times. It has protected our freedom, given hundreds of millions of Americans by birth and Americans by choice an opportunity to pursue the lives they wanted, and allowed us to speak freely, associate with the people we choose, and openly follow the religious and spiritual lives we want.

There is no shortage of challenges facing the system – from the influence of money on elections to the encrusted rules that hamstring capable public officials to the scorched-earth political culture that reigns in Washington these days. But, I am convinced that they are no match for an aroused and determined public that recognizes we are all in this together, that we can adapt to changing circumstances, and that we should not give up on 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.



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Two River Moment

Area residents work on the deck of a ship, believed to be the sloop *Clearwater*, when it docked at Marine Park in Red Bank in 1971. The 39th Annual New Jersey Friends of *Clearwater* Festival will be held from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 13, on the Great Lawn in Long Branch. The free festival will honor the work of folk singer Pete Seeger, who founded the *Clearwater* organization to help save the Hudson River from pollution.