

A Forest Is at Stake

AT THE NORTHERN AND WESTERN FRONTIER of the vast urbanized New York City metropolitan area is a long swath of rugged upland, called the Highlands, that runs more than 170 miles, southwest to northeast, from Reading, Pennsylvania, to Litchfield, Connecticut.¹ Near the geographical center of this corridor and only 40 miles northwest of New York City is Sterling Forest, a large tract of land, more than 20,000 acres, with landscapes that are among the most beautiful in the East: masses of forested hills that recede into the far distance, narrow valleys over which loom rugged, steep-sided ridges up to about 1,400 feet, near-vertical drops along sheer rock outcrops, fantastically beautiful rock formations where the bedrock has broken through the thin soils, and dramatic views of lakes and wetlands from the hilltops.

This is a place of great natural drama: A young bear strips ripe berries from slender shadbush and leaves a tempest of broken branches and a trail of berry-rich scat; the force of winter meltwater punches holes in the ice covering a creek; a spring walk yields an unexpected encounter with a rare salamander or hard-to-identify warbler. Here you can still find mysterious stone walls as wide across as a rural highway, old rock constructions whose remains are still recognizable as iron furnaces, and 200-year-old pieces of slag littering the forest floor.

Although most of Sterling Forest is in New York State, its streams and creeks provide clean water to a number of New Jersey's major reservoirs. The forest also contains thousands of acres of varied wetland, forest, and rocky upland wildlife habitat, including sanctuary for dozens of imperiled plant and animal species. It preserves scenic, historic, and cultural riches that have been eroded or erased by the feverish pace of creative destruction that has gone on in more densely populated places. It provides an undeveloped land link to the vast Palisades Interstate

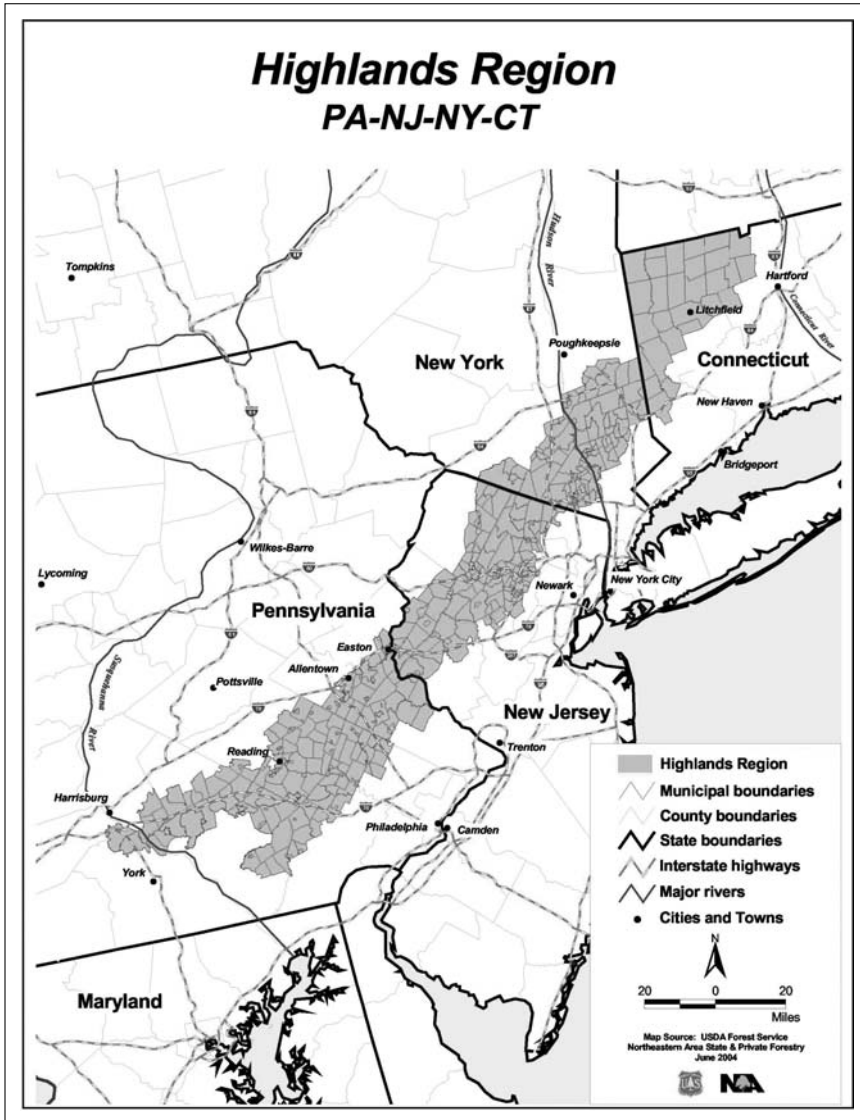


FIGURE 1. USDA Forest Service map of the Highlands region (2004). This map depicts the span of 3.5 million acres stretching from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to Hartford, Connecticut, that make up the Hudson Highlands, of which Sterling Forest is a key piece. In the fall of 2004, President George W. Bush signed the Highlands Conservation Act into law, committing \$100 million of federal funds to help conserve this region. Courtesy of the USDA Forest Service.

Park to its east and to several large protected New Jersey tracts to its west and south. And with its lakes, creeks, and trails it offers abundant opportunity for hiking, fishing, hunting—even the experience of solitude and quiet—all of which are hard to find in this busy region.

The battle to save this forest jewel from development embodied every painful and controversial facet of land-use conflict and the most basic economic and environmental aspects of land-use policy. Since few large tracts of private undeveloped land close to the metropolitan area remain, suburban development of Sterling Forest became a highly attractive goal for its long-time corporate owner, the Sterling Forest Corporation. The development also was important to the real estate community at large, as the forest's subdivision could trigger spillover development activity elsewhere. But the fact of its being a single large tract also made Sterling Forest an especially important place to environmentalists and area residents. While elsewhere in the outer metropolitan region open space was being lost night after night at municipal planning boards, with one piece after another falling to subdivision, environmentalists saw that focusing a single concerted effort on Sterling Forest might attain protection of this one large, critically located piece.

But the environmental community failed to anticipate just how difficult and how long the Sterling Forest fight would be—a quarter-century struggle, if you count an early but extremely bitter skirmish in the Town of Tuxedo, where the corporation first advanced plans to build on a large scale. Ultimately the battle for the forest was all about money—it came down to the question of how to negotiate a deal on 20,000 acres with a tough corporate adversary determined to squeeze the most profit possible out of its only asset—a corporation whose own fortunes came to be held hostage by larger global entities. The environmental community had the specially vexing problem of how to negotiate a deal on behalf of the public with no public or private money firmly in hand (for many years, not even in remote sight). New Jersey might have been willing to pay because its precious drinking water originated in the forest's New York uplands, but for a full decade New York was unwilling, and in some years unable, to open its purse strings; and the federal government, richly endowed with potential funding possibilities, was held in check by powerful regional and ideological conflicts. Luckily, the Sterling Forest struggle attracted a core group of the most impassioned and determined of the region's environmental advocates, and it was these hard workers and sophisticated strategizers, unflaggingly persistent, who made the deal happen.

The Sterling Forest struggle ended with a victory for the public and the forest, but the Highlands as a whole are now intensely vulnerable to the kind of pressure that once threatened the Sterling lands. Of the more than two million

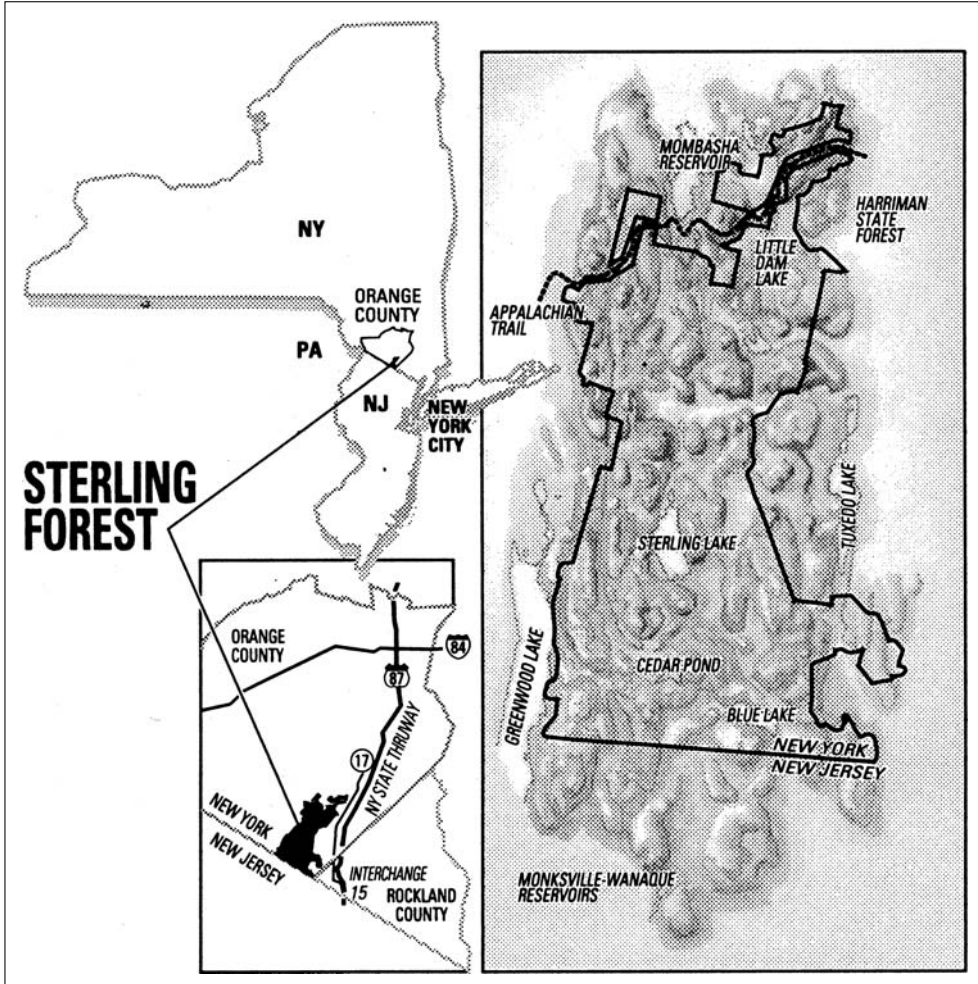


FIGURE 2. Tri-part map indicating location of Sterling Forest. Courtesy of Steve Butfilowski.

acres in the Highlands, several hundred thousand acres have been protected, but four-fifths remain in private hands. And, responding to market forces, the privately owned tracts are quickly being developed. Interstate highways have enabled commercial and industrial development to leapfrog out from traditional downtowns and inner suburbs to campus-style settings in bucolic exurbs, opening up big new markets for suburban housing tracts that are, literally, gouged out of the rocky upland forest.

Sprawl has begun to overtake the once sparsely populated Highlands much as it overran more accessible locales only decades before. Year by year, farms are lost and the traditional community fades, the watersheds and aquifers become degraded, and the rich biological diversity vanishes.² In town after town, people are fighting development projects; environmentalist Jeff Tittel summed up the despair: “For every parcel of land that gets saved, we lose another three or four. It’s like the Janis Joplin song: ‘Every new development tears a little piece of my heart out.’”³

This book is the story of the twenty-five-year struggle to save Sterling Forest from the fate that has befallen thousands of acres of land across the vast New York City megalopolis—conversion to lawn or median strip or simply, irreversibly, asphalt. The successful outcome of the Sterling Forest struggle—a large state park within easy access of millions of people living along our crowded seaboard—holds out hope for new solutions to what are long-festering problems of land use and for new land-use policies to replace those that are long out-moded. If the Highlands and other vulnerable areas can be saved, it will be in part because the struggle for Sterling Forest has provided a model and an inspiration for preserving essential but rapidly vanishing resources.