

Sparta Mountain WMA Healthy Forest versus “Clear Cut” Threats

“Forest wildlife diversity depends on large contiguous forest patches, connections to other habitats, structurally complex vegetation, intact seasonal wetlands, and the presence of native vegetation. Disruption of any of these components can dramatically reduce wildlife diversity.”¹ The creation of Sparta Mountain WMA in the 1990’s is an example of these principles. This WMA serves as an important greenway corridor particularly for neo-tropical birds, home for over 80 Threatened & Endangered Species, an excellent venue for hunting and ecotourism activities, and a water source and catchment basin within the NJ Highlands. The WMA contains a warm water fishery lake (Ryker Lake) and Category-1 waters (Franklin Pond Creek in Hardyston, Sparta Glen Brook, and Russia Brook tributaries). The presence of bobcat, bear, and raptors are indicators of an effective food chain. The botanical report (found in the Appendices of the Sparta Mountain WMA Forest Stewardship Plan and based on 2013/14 survey) shows an aggregate Plant Stewardship Index score of 48. This score is clear scientific evidence that this is a high quality site that harbors many plant species, many of which are the most vulnerable to disturbance. Without human intervention, pitch pine is replacing dying hemlock groves and rare fishers have been sighted near Beaver Lake. Resiliency and diversity are true indicators of a healthy forest.

“The SM WMA Plan proposes actions that would cause serious harm to forest health, forest resilience, and wildlife by fragmenting and impairing unusually intact and biodiverse mature forests”.² Over a 10 year period, a range of 135-380 acres are planned for clear cuts on 10 wood lots (2322 acres). In regards to fragmentation, two powerlines transect the Sparta Mountain WMA- one along the western boundary and the other west to east just north of Edison Bog. Between 2011 and 2016 NJDEP cut 58 acres. Most of the stands are along powerline right of ways. The planned clear cuts (Seed Tree or Shelter wood treatments) on the west side appear to be along the power line right of ways. Aerial photographs of Edison Bog and Beaver Lake clear cuts North clear cuts show the extent of **forest fragmentation**. In regards to **forest impairment**, the SM WMA Forest Stewardship Plan uses NJ Best Management Practices for defining setbacks and habit zones in lieu of the more stringent Highlands Council’s regulations. The Collin’s Pond Cut is at the top of a ravine. The future cuts on the Eastern side of the WMA particularly those between Beaver Lake and Edison Bog, are in areas of vernal pools, wetlands, or “Endangered & Threatened Species Habitat.

The Forest Stewardship Counsel 2016 NJAS audit cited violations and criticized standards used as insufficient. “During the field audit a vernal pool/wetland complex was observed adjacent to a 15-acre harvest block with less than 50% of canopy cover retained; the harvest extended to within 30 feet of the nearest pool on two sides and covered all of the 400-foot “amphibian life zone” on those sides.” (This occurred on New Jersey Audubon Society’s Sparta Mountain Sanctuary). The FSC 2016 NJAS audit also noted that NJ Best Management Practices are inadequate. The report observes that “seed tree harvests as applied at SMWMA have averaged roughly 15 acres in size and result in approximately 80% canopy removal and thus would likely be similar to clearcutting in terms of potential nitrate and aluminum runoff.”³ This contaminates surface water and our well water.

¹ Presentation by Eric Stiles, “Impacts of Ecosystem Degradation on Forest Wildlife Diversity” Proceedings of the State of the Forest Symposium: Ecological Issues Regarding Highlands Forest Degradation & Restoration Held October 3, 2002,

² Letter, NJ Highlands Coalition, Subject:: Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area Forest Stewardship Plan, March 8, 2016.

³ Rainforest Alliance, “Forest Management Audit for New Jersey Audubon Society in Port Murray, New Jersey, USA finalized July 21, 2016,