

OTHER VIEWS

Confessions of a New Jersey environmentalist

By CATHERINE SCHMITT

CANOING the Hackensack River, through raw sewage, shopping cart graveyards, and schools of tennis balls, my paddle interrupts a flotam of plastic bags and chunks of styrofoam. A green heron stands hunched in a tree, and egrets hunt along the shores. Smokestacks and scarecrow antennas rise above the tops of buildings. As I pass beneath a bridge, iron beams and an evening sky flash above in a blur of black and red and gold.

Along the edge of the river, there are plants with dangling orange-spotted flowers that remind me of growing up in Glen Rock. I'd spend late summer afternoons popping touch-me-nots down by Diamond Brook that ran through my backyard. The black seeds and ready to explode with the slightest touch. I would play in the brook for hours, searching for the ever-elusive turtles and the fish that only appeared every few years or so.

My Jersey roots, as sunk as they are in pavement, murky water, and smog, have given me valuable perspective as an environmental scientist. I now know that touch-me-nots, *Impatiens capensis*, are something of a weed, as common in roadside drainage ditches as in soggy backyards. I know the reason my yard was so soggy was that it used to be wetland before the country club made it a golf course, before the golf course was made a subdivision of split-level houses, cul-de-sacs, and wide tree-lined streets, before the subdivision became my backyard.

Back then, "the brook" was the short segment that bordered my yard. To the north, fences and landscaping prevented exploration to its source as the brook deepened, its flow restricted by concrete parking lot drainage behind the A&P. To the south, and corrugated metal. And it kept flowing south af-

ter that, along playgrounds and swampy woods, eventually draining to the Passaic River, where it became part of someone else's backyard. I now know that the lower Passaic River is contaminated with a long list of toxics, including arsenic, cadmium, copper, chromium, lead, mercury, zinc, cyanide, silver, thallium, phosphorus, ammonia, and pathogenic bacteria.

I now know that Diamond Brook is considered "biologically moderately impaired", just one of over 800 rivers and streams in New Jersey listed as impaired by the EPA. I know that the reason the brook is so devoid of life, so shallow and silty, is from non-point source pollution: the runoff after big storms that picks up dirt and chemicals from roads, parking lots, and lawns. I know that non-point source pollution is the nation's biggest water quality problem.

But the textbook of problems and examples of environmental degradation in New Jersey allows us a unique opportunity to draft solutions. If you think of environmental degradation as a reverse bell curve, New Jersey has a long history of development and pollution, has hit the bottom, responded with aggressive policies and clean-up standards, and is now on its way back up. Other states, on the other hand, which are younger and less populated, are only now experiencing development and pollution pressures, and so are still on the descent.

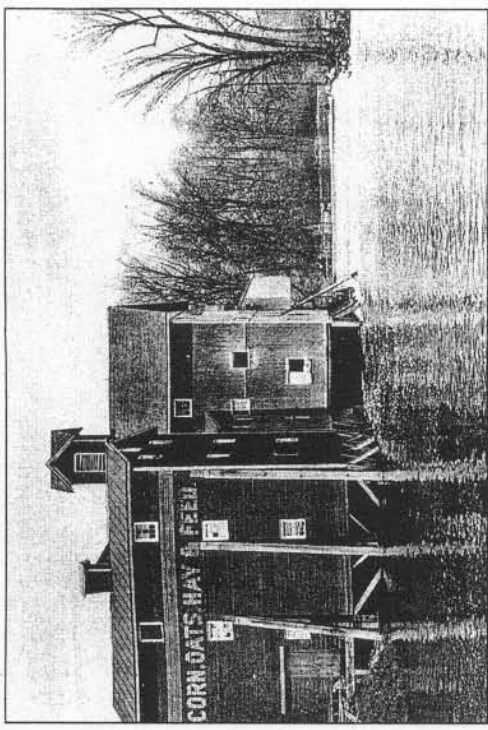
New Jersey has already dealt with the issues that other states are now struggling with. An influx of population and development? With 1,158 people per square mile, New Jersey has held the title of the most densely populated state in the nation for more than 30 years. New Jersey's history of human interaction with the environment is a lengthy one. Part of the original 13 colonies, New Jersey had the fortunate location between New York City and Philadelphia.

New York was the major port of debarkation for European immigrants, the major seaport of the nation, the country's financial and banking center.

Philadelphia was also a major port and financial center, as well as being a center of woolen, textile, metal, and heavy machinery industries. As the metropol bloomed, so did Jersey, and so did development and industrial pollution. New Jersey has 113 Superfund sites, more than any other state. The state's list of known contaminated sites runs for 1,211 pages.

Sprawl? Been there, done that. While parts of the state are still struggling with suburban sprawl, older parts of the state are actually a model for new smart growth developments: many towns in northeastern Jersey are small, with schools and businesses often within walking distance. Downtowns are structured around the train station. Most people work in New York City, and most of those people take the train or the bus into the city. Driving is not even an option that's considered. Kids can walk to school, home from the soccer field. With so many people and so many houses, open space is greatly valued and is being increasingly protected.

So I confess my roots. Living other places has given me perspective, has allowed me to appreciate New Jersey in a way I might not have had I stayed.



Veldran's Feed Mill sat along the Hackensack River in Oradell, circa 1967. MIKE ZAKIAN / STAFF PHOTO

Yes, New Jersey is the namesake of concrete highway dividers ("jersey barriers") and walled, manipulated beaches ("jerseyfication"). But rooted in that landscape, at the edges where the lawns turn wild and the pavement ends, is an environmentalism as fierce as any. Because anything not growing from the cracks of sidewalks is a jungle, and any stream not dammed by shopping carts is a river raging wild and free. If natives of other states took the time to look around, they might notice that their own surroundings are not that far from becoming turnpike hell. We all live off an exit.

Catherine Schmitt, a Glen Rock native, is a graduate student at the University of Maine and a freelance writer.