Urban Society vs. Rural Cultural Traditions The Real Crisis in the Forest

BY ROBERT R. WILLIAMS

For many decades, urban society and its "illusion of preservation" has continued to obstruct and suppress our rural communities and their use of the land and natural resources. We are seeing the elimination of a cultural heritage in our time.

In southern New Jersey by government legislation, 1.2 million acres of the landscape has been reserved and protected in what is designated as the Pinelands National Reserve. This reserve includes all aspects of the land ownership both public and private.

The primary reasons for designating the Pine Barrens for protection was to perpetuate and sustain the unique ecological natural heritage and the Indigenous local cultural heritage.

We understand the essential need to sustain and conserve the ecological integrity of the land and the natural systems it supports.

Our urban policymakers understand little about the need to conserve our cultural heritage, which includes both tangible and intangible heritage assets, that the local people inherited from past generations.

Whether intended or not, this policy of an environmental priority approach has all but eliminated one aspect of our cultural heritage, which is forestry. The region's local people traditionally used the forest to provide a living for themselves and used the wood products produced on the land.

Over the decades, the importance of sustaining our historical cultural human resources has never been given any serious consideration or discussion.

In the early eighties, the government stressed the need to sustain and conserve the cultural heritage of the Pine Barrens. This concern was so important that social contractors were hired to interview and record local Pine Barren residents to have them explain what specific things they did to sustain themselves and their desire to keep their sense of "place" in the woods.

Yet when I bring this subject up, I'm asked what cultural heritage has to do with forestry regulations. My answer: everything.

Interviews with local folks included many cedar landowners, wood cutters, and sawyers. They all owned their land, cut their trees, and had their sawmills to sell culturally linked forest products to boat builders, clammers, fisherman, and historic home restorers, among other uses. As this effort to document and develop policy to sustain the cultural and natural history of the region continued, the important role these woodsmen played in sustaining the unique character and ecology of this region became clear.The forest use played a major role in the creation of the very environment of the Pine Barrens. It was so important that by 1987 the New Jersey State Museum, the State Council on Arts, and the State Historical Commission opened the largest exhibit ever mounted at the museum featuring four men who were fully devoted to the traditions and the environment of the Pine Barrens. Yet the future of these traditions remained a concern.

Initial forestry practice rules and regulations subjected forestry efforts to onerous land planning rules similar to a housing development. By the early 1990s many families had simply gone out of business while a few tried to supply their mills with imported wood from Canada or New England. The acquisition of the large, forested parcels by federal, state, county, and local governments and land preservation trusts – none of which support active harvest of wood – simply starved the local mills of their needed wood resource, and the decline continues today.

Our southern New Jersey wood cutter/sawyer culture is almost gone. At the beginning of the creation of the Pinelands Reserve, the state documented more than 50 sawmills and operations across the Pine Barrens. I have watched as our forestry infrastructure with its 300-year history simply fades away falling into the "illusion of preservation."

The original planners for the Reserve had it right: there should be a balance between people's use of the forest and protecting the unique biodiversity that resulted from 300 years of their activities. Yet I see little hope for any of the few remaining sawmills to survive. How are things looking in your region of the country?

Robert R. Williams is a certified forester and is the owner and founder of Pine Creek Forestry LLC.
Email: bob@pinecreekforestry.com