

Why the Pine Barrens Deserves Its Reserve Status

by Katie Avagliano

When earning a badge for my Silver Award in Girl Scouts, I remember this prompt: *learn about and name all the trees in your backyard*. And I remember my sister's response to that prompt: *I can do that without even looking! White oak and pitch pine*.

White oaks and pitch pines. From my parents' back porch in the heart of the Pine Barrens the forest undulates like water in the summer breezes. I fly in from Florida now and am dazzled every time by the sweep over the coast, the wetlands protecting the barrier islands, the forest only occasionally broken up by fields and water towers. I've hiked with a rotating pack of dogs over cranberry bogs and through vine-covered iron mills and maybe can be forgiven for thinking this was all preserved by accident. After all, the Pine Barrens aren't as flashy as the Western National Parks, the cliffs and the canyons. It doesn't have the Appalachian Trail running through it like Shenandoah. The tallest point in any South Jersey park is a fire tower.

But Shenandoah is a National Park, federally owned and managed by the National Park Service; these places prioritize public access and tourism. And even though there's an awful lot of woods in South Jersey, this area isn't a National Forest, which are also federal land managed but operate with a "multiple use" premise. In a National Forest, the United States Forest Service also allows logging and grazing. No, the Pine Barrens is actually the originator of a different, much rarer category: a National Reserve, where there's a layer of federal oversight, but the land remains largely in private, local hands.



(Whitesbog, NJ, in the heart of the Pine Barrens. Photo by Peter Massas)

There is beauty here. Sprawling across seven counties, the 1.1 million acres that make up our local Reserve is larger than Grand Canyon National Park and sits atop a 17 trillion-gallon aquifer that supplies water to most of South Jersey. Though European settlers cursed the area as

barren, with the sandy, acidic soil unable to produce the Old-World crops, spend any time in these lower counties and you'll know how much of the Garden part of the Garden State is embedded here, in the corn fields and cranberry bogs, in the blueberries and tomatoes.

In 1968 John McPhee wrote *The Pine Barrens*, an ode to this ecosystem, but also to the Pineys. A visual elegy of the same name was produced in the 2010s, and just watching the [trailer](#) will remind any South Jersey resident of home. We need these love letters to our iron bog towns of Batsto and Atsion; memories of Martha's Furnace, a ghost town reclaimed by the pines. Our farmers and fields. In 1979, New Jersey passed the Pinelands Protection Act, partly because of the success of McPhee's book and his argument for this land and its ecosystem.

Along with the Comprehensive Pinelands Management Plan, these laws protect two-thirds of the Pinelands from intensive development, leaving one-third open for monitoring, suburban planning, and agriculture.



(Wharton State Forest, which surrounds Batsto Village, exemplifies the underbrush and trees of the Pine Barrens)

But exploitation of the land is an instinct we must fight against. South Jersey gas has already built pipelines through the Pinelands, and where there is infrastructure, development is not far behind. Aquifer management is another concern. Though New Jersey finally released a new Water Supply Master Plan in 2024, this revision came *twenty-eight years* after the previous 1996 plan, when water management is supposed to be audited every *five* years. [A lack of meaningful conservation programs](#) and over-pumping of the aquifer has led to drought conditions and damage to the Coastal Plain.

Our vast swaths of forests were written into protection by a well-observed book and a series of laws, but every day people can help---and hurt---our little ecosystem. Educators can bring Lenape heritage and local history into classrooms. Storytellers can update McPhee's book for the twenty-first century. Residents can advocate for the Pinelands Commission rather than resenting it.

It takes a community to maintain stewardship of this land. Our Reserve is not inevitable.