

Exploring New Jersey's Pine Barrens Forest: Its History, Culture and People¹

My name is Michael T. Rains. I am currently a substitute teacher at the middle school level in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.² My certifications are in math, science and history. Now retired from government service, I used to work for the USDA Forest Service for almost 50 years, beginning as a wildland firefighter to becoming a Deputy Chief of the agency. Recently, I was part of a group of conservationists reviewing the destructive impacts of wildfires due to the lack of forest maintenance over the last 30+ years.

While the focus of our work has been "especially in the west," we cannot forget these wildfires represent a *national* emergency. Accordingly, I was drawn to a recent publication entitled, [Exploring New Jersey's Pine Barrens Forest: Its History, Culture and People](#). It is in the January 2025 issue of the Evergreen™, the magazine of the Evergreen Foundation. It is a superbly written piece that highlights another piece of America's forest puzzle known as the [Pine Barrens](#) or the Pinelands of New Jersey. I wanted to share some thoughts.

Recently, I wrote a [short piece](#) about a document known as [A Call to Action](#) and I mentioned the "LA Fires." I know the area so well. I was born and raised in Los Angeles. What has happened is so unsettling but not unexpected. So much of the area is a "fire adapted ecosystem" and we know what that means. We talk about development density, home hardening, the criticality of defensible space, the impacts of a changing climate and everything imaginable that we must be aware of to help avoid what is happening. We are starting to see the same thing in the East, clearly at a much smaller scale. But the signs are clear. We know what to do to be safe, or safer, but "nothing changes if nothing changes." You might want to check out Appendix A.46. *Keeping the Pinelands, New Jersey*, page 200 of the [A Call to Action](#).



Figure 1. The Pine Barrens, New Jersey

Yes, we are beginning to see the same concerns about wildfires in the east, witness the wildfires in New York and New Jersey in 2024. We are faced with a national emergency. The piece about the Pine Barrens could not be more-timely.

The "Exploring New Jersey's Pine Barrens Forest: Its History, Culture and People" is written by the iconic team of Julia and Jim Petersen, of the non-profit Evergreen Foundation. They spent a week discovering the landscape, guided by Bob Williams, New Jersey's "John the Baptist" of Pine Creek Forestry. Bob is a legend in forest care; I call it forest maintenance. In interviewing locals for the article, Julia and Jim talked to some 25 folks, all acquaintances of Bob Williams. Jim Petersen concluded, "in my 60 some years as a working journalist I've never found 25 people willing to speak so highly of anyone." Bob Williams is indeed a conservation *Giant*.

¹ <https://www.landcan.org/pdfs/EG-NJ-final.pdf>

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The piece is extremely instructional. I am originally from the west, born in Compton, California. But I have been on the east coast for about 30 years. It's common for us to view the east as only "cities." It may surprise some that in New Jersey, our most densely populated state, traditional forests cover 42 percent of the land. "From the sandy soils in the pinelands to the towering hardwoods in the north, New Jersey's forests contain a rich habitat for a diversity of species, as well as a place for residents to escape."

This is not uncommon. The states in the Northeast are heavily forested, about 40 percent of the total land area. Pennsylvania is 58 percent forested and New York is 61 percent. Maine is the most heavily forested state in the United States at almost 90 percent. Clearly, forests are a key part of the culture where I live. Areas like the Pinelands of New Jersey are iconic pieces of this culture. Julia and Jim describe this in vibrant, eloquent ways. It is so critical to strike a balance with both the preservation and conservation paths across all landscapes. This is a basic issue in landscape scale conservation in America right now. The national emergency of destructive wildfires we are facing is partly due to our inability to properly balance these paths. The "LA Fires" are simply a manifestation of this dilemma. What a shame. It does not have to be this way.

The article about the Pine Barrens is chock full of personal stories of people that live in the area. For example, Mr. Spike Wells, the last of the "old Pineys." At 73 years, he is a 3rd Generation cedar mill owner; "I've never worked anywhere else", Mr. Wells says. One can also read about Marty McHugh, a conservation leader who refers to the Pine Barrens "as a unique ecosystem, nothing like it anywhere else. Clearly, we need to conserve it."

The text you will read in "Exploring New Jersey's Pine Barrens Forest: Its History, Culture and People" is unique: informative; helpful; historical; indeed magical. I love the Pine Barrens. So will you after reading the article. Perhaps more importantly you will see how the landscapes in New Jersey and other states, help form a unique American culture that demands our best stewardship. That is, maintenance, protection and wise use of the land.

Thanks to Julia and Jim Petersen, Bob Williams, and all the others who made the week in 2024 in New Jersey's Pinelands come to life for so many. *Exploring New Jersey's Pine Barrens Forest: Its History, Culture and People* is a must read. It is restorative.

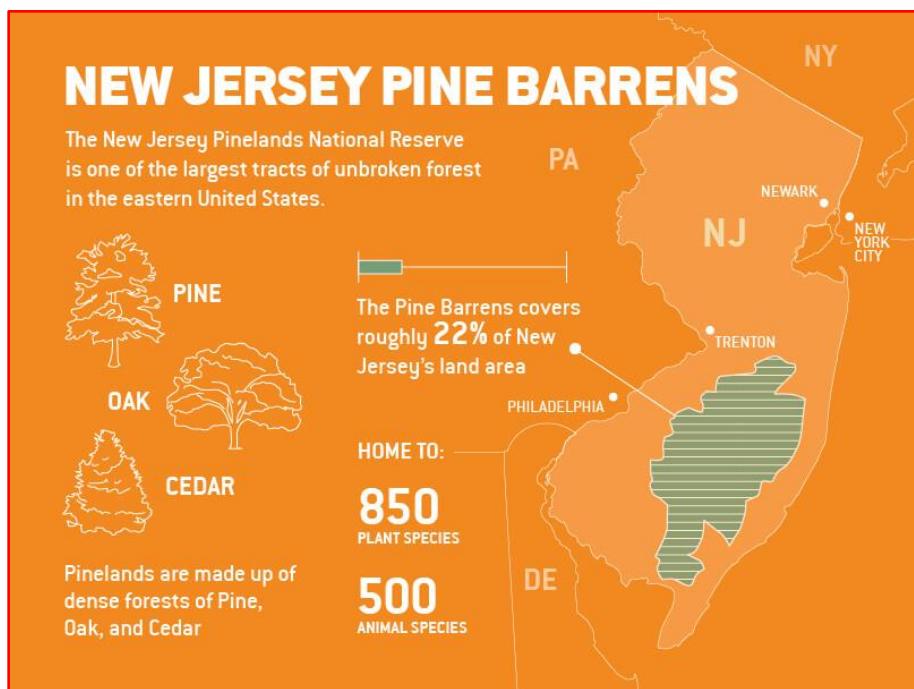


Figure 2. Fast Facts, the New Jersey Pine Barrens