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HELPING WILDLIFE ADAPT



From left, Jeff Simms and Paul Elconin of Open Space Institute and William Schuster, Black Rock Forest Consortium executive director, stand at the 702-acre Legacy Ridge parcel in Orange County that the institute recently purchased. JOE LARESE/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Highlands land buy links areas, lets fauna move with climate

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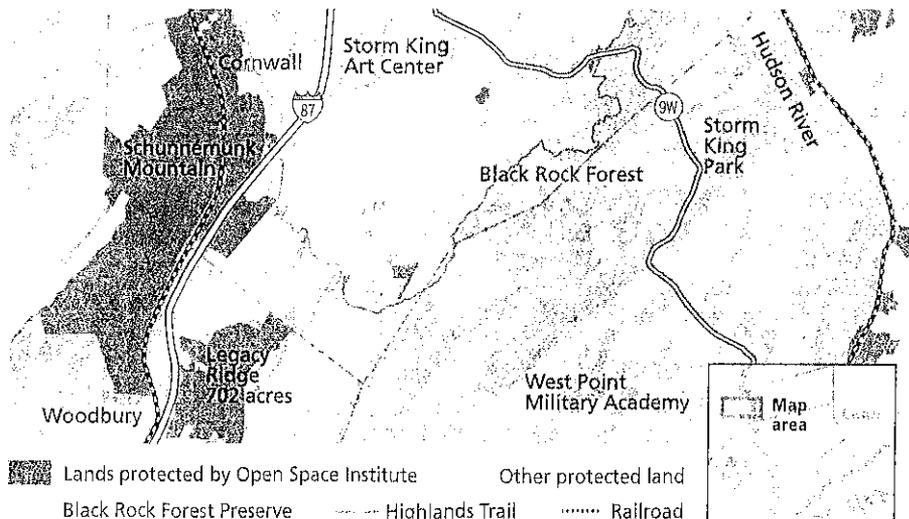
The recent protection of a former dairy farm in the Hudson Highlands can be considered the scientific equivalent of helping to build an ark.

Once planned for almost 300 homes, the farm on the edge of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point is now part of a blanket of open space stretching from west of the New York State Thruway to the Hudson River. The effort is part of what natural-resource managers at all levels refer to as "connectivity," a means of providing wildlife with impediment-free access to diverse habitats.

Polar bears struggling with disappearing sea ice may have one of the highest profiles in illustrating climate-change impacts. But flora and fauna closer to home also will have to cope with such forces. In the face of climate change, connectivity is an important tool.

"As the environment changes over

Legacy Ridge, a 702-acre former dairy farm, will be part of a blanket of open space protecting habitat and allowing movement of animal populations in the face of climate change.



SOURCE: OPEN SPACE INSTITUTE

CHRIS BROWN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

HIGHLANDS: Institute buys 702 acres

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time, that's an additional reason to limit barriers. What's currently good habitat for a plant or an animal may not be so in the future," said William Schuster, executive director of the Black Rock Forest Consortium.

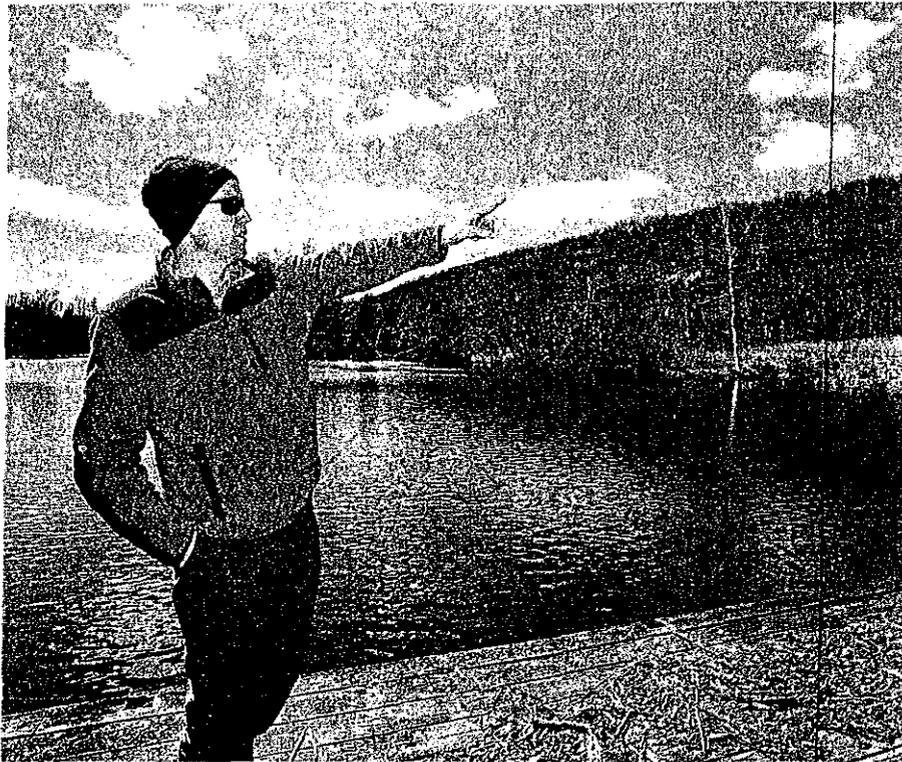
The consortium is an alliance of colleges, universities and other educational groups that manages the 3,830-acre Black Rock Forest. The forest, the 2,700-acre Schunemunk State Park and 10,000 acres of undeveloped training land at West Point surround the 702-acre former farm, known now as Legacy Ridge.

Preservationists long have set aside forests and fields to protect and conserve plants and animals. But as climate-driven changes like warming temperatures and increasingly intense storms begin to mount, officials and scientists realize land conservation can cushion those impacts.

"A lot of what we're already doing" like land acquisition and habitat preservation "will help species adjust," said Patricia Riexinger, director of the state Department of Environmental Conservation's Division of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Resources.

Species that can thrive in varied conditions, like deer and woodchucks, will do fine, she said, as will birds because they are highly mobile. But animals at the edge of their ranges, like the mink frog; those who depend on colder water, like brook trout; and those who need specific habitat, like the Karner blue butterfly; will have more trouble, she said.

Riexinger was part of a team that developed a national wildlife-climate change strategy released last month by the Obama administration.



"This is the largest parcel in the corridor. It's unusual to find 700 acres in one owner," says Terrence Nolan, the Open Space Institute's vice president of land conservation.

READ THE REPORT

To read the "National Fish, Wildlife and Plants Climate Adaptation Strategy," go to <http://www.wildlifeadaptationstrategy.gov/pdf/NFWPCAS-Final.pdf>.

The report's goals include conserving land, maintaining species and educating the public.

"For many species and for many of the climate changes that are going to occur, all we can do is give the critters a chance to adjust to the conditions," she said.

Climate change will exacerbate existing problems of habitat loss, the national report said. Not all species will survive, the document cautioned.

"Faced with a future climate that will be unlike that of the recent past, the nation has the opportunity to act now to reduce the impacts of climate change on its valuable natural resources and resource-dependent communities and businesses," the 120-page report said.

Making landscapes

more permeable to wildlife isn't necessarily about stitching together large parcels. Rather, stepping-stones of small patches of green among the big pieces will let species move around, said Tim Howard of the New York Natural Heritage Program. He co-authored a study examining how climate change might shift habitats in the Hudson Valley for rare or imperiled species of snakes, salamanders, turtles and birds.

Using computer models incorporating future climate predictions, the study found habitats moving up slope, farther north or just shrinking.

"We recognize now that you can't just set aside land and expect it will be effective in conserving our natural resources," Howard said. "You have to think about how plants and animals move around the landscape and how the landscape will be changing over time."

The Open Space Institute, which has bought and preserved land in Put-

nam and Westchester counties, in April announced the purchase of the former farm for \$2.2 million as part of its Hudson Highlands Connectivity Project.

"This is the largest parcel in the corridor. It's unusual to find 700 acres in one owner," Terrence Nolan, the institute's vice president of land conservation, said during a hike on the land.

Its oak-covered ridges can hide bobcats, spring peepers and wood frogs call from its pond, and coyotes saunter across its grassy field. Legacy Ridge links Schunemunk with Black Rock and West Point, said Chris Pray from the military academy's natural resources branch. West Point then links the ridge to the river, Bear Mountain State Park and the Palisades Interstate Park System.

"The Legacy Ridge is a remarkably diverse parcel and an excellent choice for conservation," Pray said. "It's a centerpiece in a large conservation puzzle."