



on the ground

A NEWSLETTER OF THE OPEN SPACE INSTITUTE

VOLUME 19 • FALL 2017

GOING GREEN IN ORANGE

Protecting open space in a fast-growing community

Long-time Orange County New York resident Kieran Conroy remembers when his boyhood home was still surrounded by unbroken forest. “I grew up hiking and escaping into nature,” he recalls.

But as the years rolled by and Orange County became one of New York’s fastest-growing regions, great swaths of the local landscape were developed. “Seeing how heavy the traffic is, and how noisy it’s become, we need to give people the opportunity to experience nature,” Conroy urges.

Conservation amid congestion

In the face of Orange County’s development pressure, the Open Space

Institute (OSI) and its partners have been mobilizing landscape-scale conservation to ensure the region’s most precious natural areas stay green, forever.

OSI first began protecting land in Orange County, just an hour drive from New York City, in the mid-1990s. From creating Sterling Forest and Schunnemunk state parks, to more recent additions at Goosepond Mountain and Harriman state parks, OSI’s incremental conservation efforts have totaled more than 27,000 acres. These projects expand the region’s parks and recreational trails and protect local drinking water.

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From creating Sterling Forest and Schunnemunk state parks, to more recent additions at Goosepond Mountain and Harriman state parks, OSI has protected more than 27,000 acres in Orange County.

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Our Mission

The Open Space Institute protects scenic, natural, and historic landscapes to provide public enjoyment, conserve habitat and working lands, and sustain communities.

OSI conserves diverse landscapes including parks and preserves, working farms and forests, and utilizes climate science to identify critical landscapes for protection.

ON THE GROUND

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Volume 19 Fall 2017

On the Ground is distributed to friends and donors of the Open Space Institute. We welcome your support, suggestions, contributions, and photographs.

NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS

EDITORS Tally Blumberg
Eileen Larrabee
WRITERS Maria Garcia
Kelly Proctor
ART DIRECTION Susan Morningstar
DESIGN doubleclick first, llc

COVER: Sterling Forest State Park (Brett Cole)
COVER SIDEBAR: Schunnemunk State Park (Greg Miller)
ABOVE: Kim Elliman at Harriman State Park (OSI)
BACK COVER: Pappy's Island (Mac Stone)
PAGE 3: Thacher Park Center (Dave Kraus)
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LANDSCAPES OF CONSERVATION

Kim Elliman, President and CEO

The concept of the landscape drives conservation today. At OSI, we often talk about landscapes in terms of our long-term commitment to places like New York's Hudson Highlands, the Shawangunk Ridge, and the Helderberg Escarpment. We protect landscapes for their historic, visual, and recreational value, and we also work with partners to identify and save climate-resilient landscapes.

It's less often that we speak of political "landscapes": the shifting national, statewide, and local priorities that define our efforts to protect the land we value so much.

At OSI we have always prided ourselves on acting strategically and creatively to achieve lasting results. We work across party lines, prompted by results rather than politics. Today, this doctrine is being put to the test – particularly on the national level. And yet, even as we read disheartening headlines about national agendas, there are some areas of success and sustained commitment to conservation.

New York State, where OSI got its start and remains committed, continues to fund and support land protection and improved recreational access to public land. Our state is and has long been a beacon for conservation.

Under Governor Andrew Cuomo, New York has been a champion of smart and effective land conservation. He recognizes that protecting land not only preserves the scenery and the recreational value of our beautiful state but also provides natural buffers against severe weather and protects valuable water sources and habitats. Over the past several years, the Open Space Institute, in partnership with New York State, has added thousands of acres to state parks, forests, and conservation areas in the Adirondacks and Catskills and throughout communities in the Hudson Valley. At the same time, an infusion of capital dollars is transforming a once beleaguered state park system. Here again, OSI is partnering with the state to bring private support and creativity to projects aimed at improving recreational access and the overall visitor experience at state parks.

As we look across the various landscapes in which we work, we see conservation happening. A number of states and local governments are carrying the mantle of conservation forward. Our task is to support these efforts and shine a light on their successes with the hope they will inspire new supporters and promote more conservation across many landscapes.

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**OPEN SPACE
INSTITUTE**

1350 Broadway, Suite 201
New York, NY 10018

212.290.8200
212.244.3441

www.openspaceinstitute.org

DISCOVER • LEARN • PLAY

New center welcomes visitors to Thacher State Park



Less than seven years ago, John Boyd Thacher State Park in New York's Capital District was slated to close because of state budget cuts. The news was met with alarm, and a clamor grew to save the 2,500-acre park that over the years had become neglected and run down. But the park supporters joining the protest at the time could hardly have known they were witnessing the unprecedented rebirth of a beloved state park.

The commitment of the Open Space Institute to Thacher began well before the park was threatened with closure. Over the previous four decades, OSI had doubled the size of the park. Yet despite its popularity, the park lacked a central gateway where visitors could gather or learn about the park's unique geology and recreational offerings.

"The public's support for Thacher was extraordinary. Once the decision to close the park was reversed, we were

inspired to rethink the park and how to best serve the public," said Alane Ball Chinian, the Saratoga–Capital regional director for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. "From that renewed approach came the motivation to build a new visitors center for the park."

Under Governor Andrew Cuomo's NY Parks 2020 initiative, \$3.8 million was provided toward the creation of the Thacher Park Center. Then, OSI took the next step to elevate the project, launching a private fundraising campaign and raising \$800,000 to support the building's new, engaging educational and interpretive exhibits.

Today, this public-private partnership has produced a brand-new gateway to serve the public and to encourage more meaningful outdoor experiences for the park's 300,000 annual visitors.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 5)

and matters

From Hunger to Helping

Turning personal hardship into an opportunity to help others is the story behind SUNY Ulster student Michael Burke's commitment to fight hunger. His first-hand struggle with lack of food led him on a journey to help others. Now, thanks to OSI's McHenry Award program, Burke is fighting food insecurity in Ulster County.

Named for Barnabas McHenry, OSI trustee and founding member, the McHenry Award supports promising young environmental leaders in the Hudson Valley. As one of five 2017 McHenry winners, Burke worked for the Rondout Valley Growers Association (RVGA) to lead students in gleaning and processing produce for local food pantries. He also helped developmentally challenged adolescents from The Arc of Ulster-Greene to build raised garden beds for fruits and vegetables that were then donated through the RVGA initiative.

Burke is candid about his experiences and what inspires him. "I had a child when I wasn't prepared for one, and if it wasn't for food stamps, I don't know what I would have done," he said. "It was through people reaching out that I was able to get my life back on track. The McHenry Award has introduced

me to farmers and other amazing people, and together we're showing the community how easy it is to help."

"The extra capacity that the McHenry gave us this summer in the form of this special, young talent helped enormously in our outreach around food insecurity," confirmed RVGA Executive Director Carol Reiser.



Michael Burke (Times Herald-Record: Kelly Marsh)

Young Farmers Putting Down Roots



Ashlee Kleinhammer (Greg Miller)

Connecting young farmers to productive farmland was the goal of a lease-to-own arrangement between OSI and a energetic young couple looking to put down roots in New York's Champlain Valley. After leasing a property from OSI for four years, Ashlee Kleinhammer and Steven Googin have now formally purchased the land that houses their popular North Country Creamery.

The 115-acre premium dairy is one of nine properties conserved by OSI in the central Champlain Valley, with the generous support of philanthropist Nat Klipper. Over the past five years, OSI's Klipper Family Fund has protected almost 3,300 acres of regional farming and forest lands.

The small premium dairy produces cheese, milk, and yogurt from a grass-fed milking herd. In addition to the dairy operations, Kleinhammer and Googin run the beloved Clover Mead Cafe & Farm Store.

"Since land access is one of the biggest hurdles facing young and beginning farmers, we hope the opportunity created by these two organizations will serve as an example for land conservancies and philanthropists across our country," said Kleinhammer. "Our deepest appreciation goes out to OSI, Nat Klipper, and the Klipper Family Fund for the faith and support they placed in us and this wonderful landscape."

Focusing Conservation Efforts in Sussex County, New Jersey

Contaminated runoff, industrial pollution, stream bank erosion, and flooding are just a few of the water management issues facing the Delaware River Watershed, which provides drinking water for some 15 million residents of New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.

Recently, a model project in Sussex County, New Jersey, supported by OSI's Delaware River Watershed Fund and funded by the William Penn Foundation, showed one promising way forward. Using a \$25,000 Catalyst Planning Grant from OSI, the northern New Jersey county created a state-of-the-art, science-based open space plan. The useful blueprint shows the best lands to conserve in order to naturally, effectively, and cheaply filter local water.

"Very few counties are able to complete this depth of analysis, due to constraints in time, technology, and expertise," said Barbara Heskins Davis of The Land Conservancy of New Jersey, which received the OSI grant and worked with the county on the plan. "OSI helped us pull off a huge win."

The plan will inform spending of the county's Open Space Fund, which was in danger of being eradicated without a clear plan for its use. After a vote, Sussex County council members approved the open space plan. "This process was very useful because it showed that we've got a lot of properties left that can be preserved," said Byran Township Council Member Scott Olson.



View from Wawayanda Mountain (Nicholas Tonelli)

For more information on conservation planning in Sussex County, see this PBS video:

www.bit.ly/osi-sussex

DISCOVER

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3)



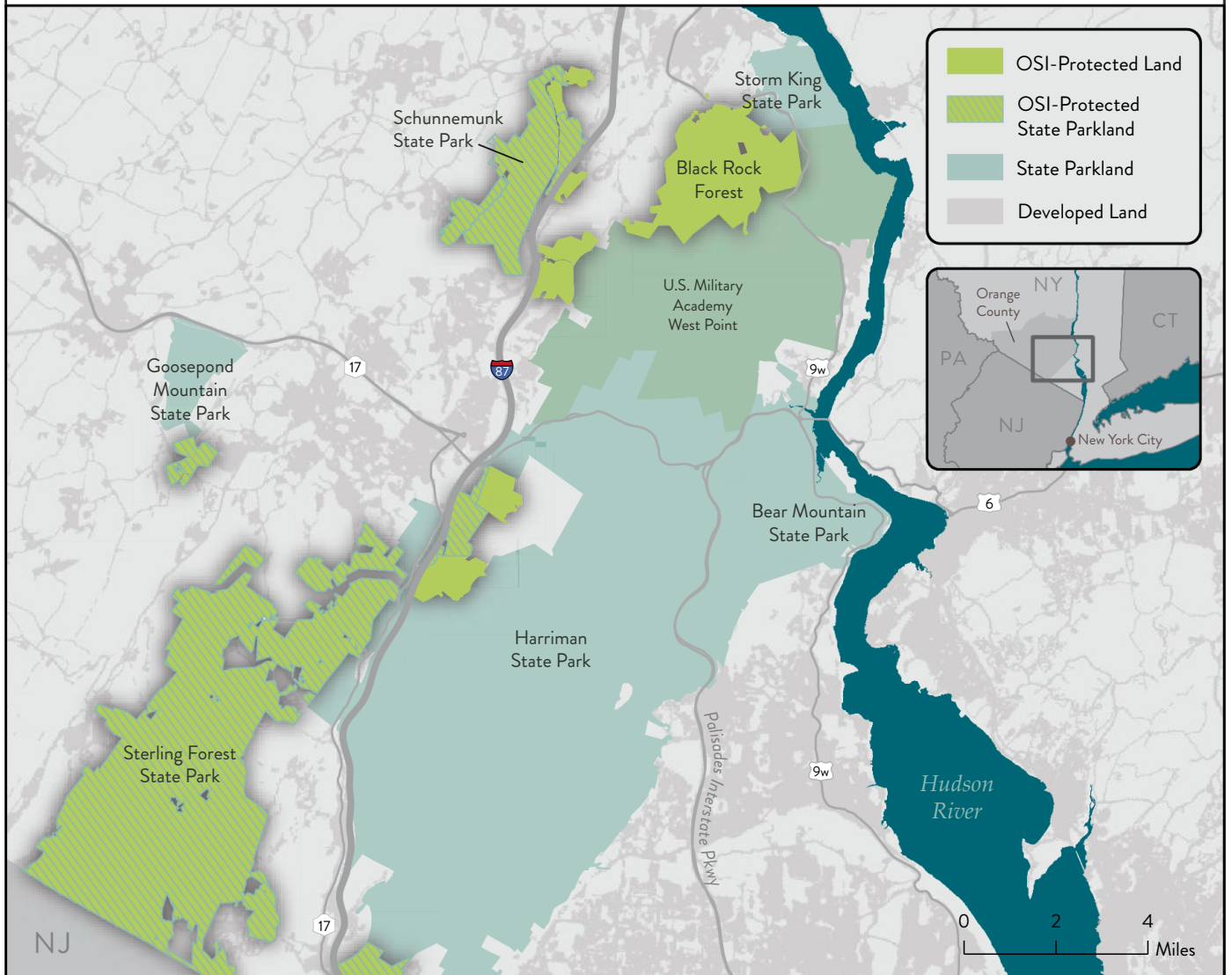
Girls exploring the bat cave at Thacher Park Center

"What they have done with Thacher Park is amazing. As a child, my parents took me and my sibling there just about every other weekend to walk the trails and swim. I wish that they had the visitors center when I was younger," said Sonya Barker, program administrator for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Albany, during a trip to Thacher with 50 young explorers in tow.

With the opening of Thacher Park Center, OSI has furthered its goal of improving recreational access and making parks more enjoyable, while enriching the experience of park visitors.

"Our collaboration with OSI was truly essential in improving the overall quality and functionality of the visitor center," said Alane Ball Chinian. "What's more, there is new life in Thacher. The new visitor center has transformed the way that people discover, explore, and play in our wonderful Thacher Park."

OSI in Orange County's Hudson Highlands



CLIMATE CHANGE CONSERVATION

In addition to having protected land that serves as a recreational destination and filter for drinking water, Orange County also features the rugged topography and intact forest cover that make a landscape climate resilient: meaning it is likely to remain a haven for a diversity of plants and animals even as the climate changes. OSI has been at the forefront of identifying climate-resilient landscapes. Black Rock Forest, a biological field station and ecological marvel protected thanks to OSI, lies at the heart of Orange County's climate-resilient corridor and is a prime example. In the largest-ever conservation easement in New York State, the nearly 4,000-acre property was permanently protected in 2014.

A boon for recreation

Building on its success in creating and adding to state parks, OSI secured a public-access conservation easement at Black Rock Forest and donated it to the State of New York. Today OSI is championing a transformative, long-term vision: connecting five of Orange County's state parks — Storm King, Schunnemunk, Goosepond Mountain, Harriman, and Sterling Forest — into a ring of protected land and hiking trails in the midst of a densely populated area.

"Linking these parks with protected land will help expand recreation, support wildlife habitat, and protect clean water even as Orange County continues to grow," said Jim Delaune, executive director of the Orange County Land Trust, OSI's regional conservation partner. "As a result of our partnership with OSI, this plan is gaining real momentum."

The rate of growth in Orange County only underscores the importance of OSI's work and its ongoing commitment to securing critical natural resources forever.

in conversation



DIVERSITY IN CONSERVATION

Recognizing that the environmental movement is strengthened by different perspectives and voices, the Open Space Institute launched its Conservation Diversity Fellowship in 2016. The year-long, competitive fellowship provides a professional opportunity for recent college graduates or postgraduates from diverse backgrounds to explore various facets of land conservation and environmental protection. As OSI's first Conservation Diversity Fellow, Dyaami D'Orazio reflects on her year spent "in the trenches" with OSI.

What drew you to the OSI Diversity Fellowship?

The Conservation Diversity Fellowship was the perfect opportunity to learn more about the field, and about nonprofits. As a first-generation college student and woman of color from a low-income background, having the support of an established, respected organization like OSI has leveled the playing field for me in terms of opportunity.

Do you have any thoughts on the value of expanding the cultural diversity of the conservation community?

Diversity in conservation is crucial to the movement's success. Low-income and communities of color are disproportionately impacted by climate change, pollution, and the lack of access to open space. We all have an equal stake in the well-being of our planet and natural resources. Diversity brings the needs of a multiplicity of communities to the attention of decision-makers, adds creativity, and a more nuanced problem-solving that is not possible without the voices of many people.

Can you tell us about one of the highlights?

Meeting up with Jen Melville [OSI's Vice President of Conservation Grants and Loans] in Maine made the work come to life. I learned about community forests and I got a better sense of their potential for strengthening surrounding communities. I got to see how the conservation community could support community forests, provide resources to land trusts, and advance fundraising for more of these amazing forests.

What are you planning to do next?

I am ecstatic because I just got a new job! I will be a catalyst organizer at Partnerships for Parks. During the interview, I talked a lot about the opportunities and experiences I had at OSI. The Conservation Diversity Fellowship allowed me to establish myself as an independent professional in New York City, and that's been absolutely amazing. There wasn't one time this past year when someone said, "We can't help you achieve that." I will always be grateful to and involved with OSI.



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1350 Broadway, Suite 201
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A SAFE HAVEN AND STORM BUFFER

The wild barrier islands of South Carolina's Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge not only provide a safe haven for migrating birds, they are also an irreplaceable natural buffer for the state's interior communities – a function ever more important in this era of climate change and intensifying storms. In 2016, OSI protected the largest barrier island within the refuge, the 104-acre Pappy's Island. Earlier this year, the island was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, making it a permanent part of the refuge and improving protection for coastal South Carolina communities.

