

Mercer County Parks Inventory and Analysis

Final Draft, December 17, 2021



Delivered as a Final Draft
December 17, 2021

**Only Executive Summary
and Conclusion**

Executive Summary

Overview

The Mercer County Park Commission manages a complex system of public parkland owned by the County of Mercer. To date, the Mercer County Park Commission (“Park Commission”) does not have a comprehensive inventory and analysis of the open space

and park facility network. The Park Commission commissioned Rutgers Center for Urban Environmental Sustainability (CUES) to inventory the park network and provide recommendations for amenity and ecological enhancements. This analysis documents an overall well maintained, high quality open space system that contributes

significantly to the quality of life of Mercer County residents. Continued open space acquisition along with improving non-motorized accessibility and enhanced invasive species management will be important components of a resilient open space system that serves all current and future residents.

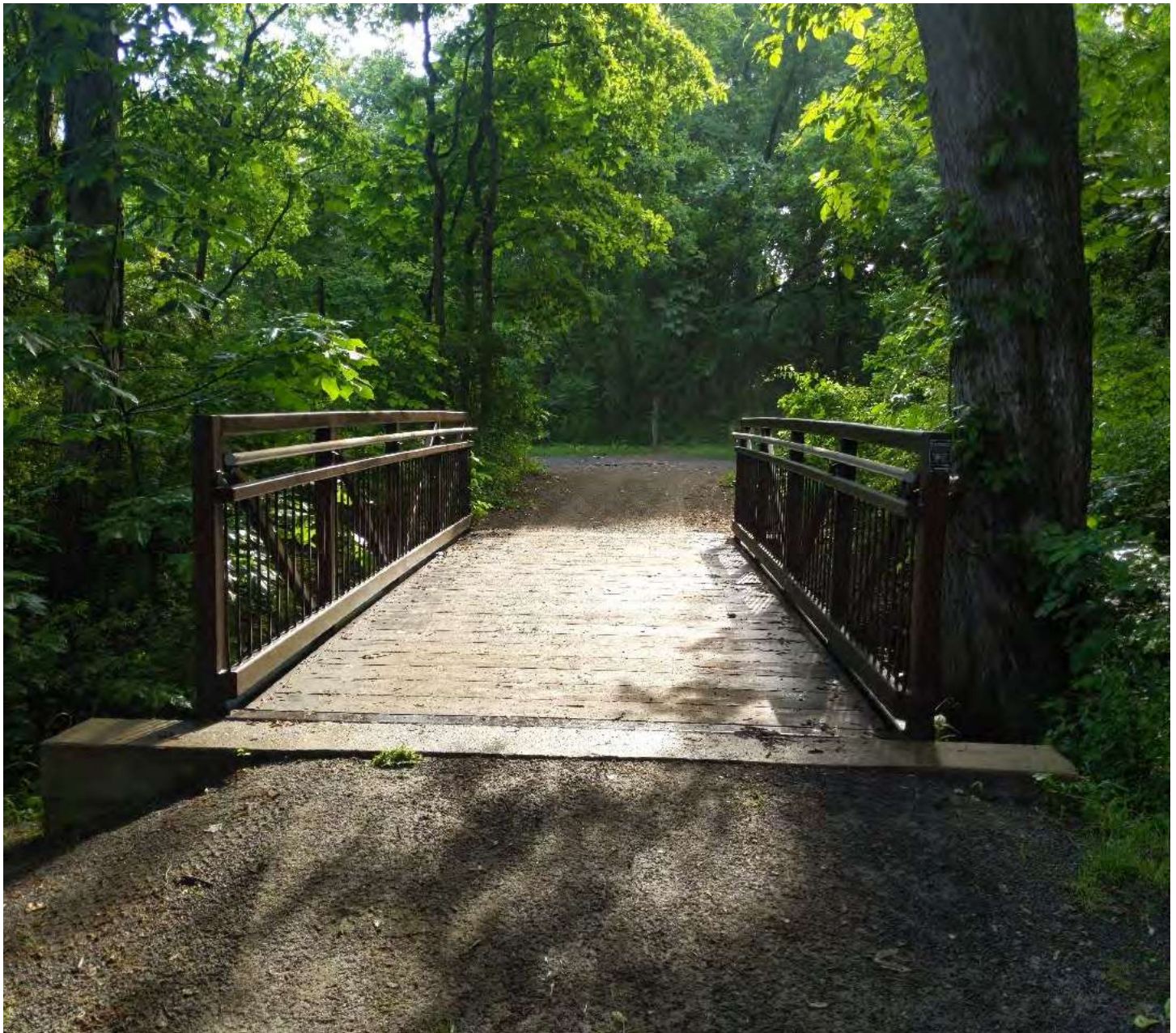


Figure 1: Pedestrian Bridge at Mercer Meadows.

1.1 Regional Inventory and Analysis

History

Development patterns are seen to align with Mercer County's historic sites and districts which have a major influence on Mercer County's cultural landscape. Some of the most notable historic districts and parcels include but are not limited to Mercer County are the Delaware and Raritan Canal towpath, Washington Crossing State Park, Abbott Marshlands, and the Pleasant Valley Historic District. These farmlands, battle grounds, and historic transportation routes characterize how the landscape is used today.

Demographics

The population is heavily distributed throughout the industrial epicenter which once occupied the City of Trenton. The rural areas of the north and south have a lower population density with larger swaths of forest and agricultural lands. It is not surprising that the urban area houses a higher percentage of the low-income population, with a higher income population throughout the suburban center of the County.

Land Use

Mountainous regions show signs of early development and today provide pristine hiking/biking trails with the majority of the County's wetlands in the south. Urban land cover is the most predominant land cover type across the County and the progression from 1986 to 2015 exemplifies how rapidly agricultural land use is converted to urban/

suburban use. The County Parks are the large parcels which have protected natural lands throughout the County's urban areas and have the highest tree canopy cover density.

Ecology

The County Parks are vitally important for several wildlife species of concern and provide specific habitat resources. The piedmont region (north) of Mercer County contains important upland oak forest resources as well as northern swamps along water courses which are high in biodiversity and encompass vernal habitat. The southern inner coastal plain area contains much coastal plain swamp habitat that provide habitat for abundant species of flora and fauna. Larger areas of tidal and freshwater emergent marshes can be found in John A. Roebling Memorial Park and they provide vital habitat for the endangered pied-billed grebe. The collection of ecologically diverse habitats in Mercer County provides vital resources to all native flora and fauna, maintains the natural heritage of the landscape, which translates into cultural heritage and heterogeneity between each community.

Open Space

Open space identifies the recreational character of Mercer County. It provides habitat for wildlife and flora; and gives people a place to experience the outdoors. The Park Commission manages several different types of open space including but not limited to

large regional parks, golf courses, urban parks, and natural areas not managed for recreational use. Acquiring and protecting land is a necessary step in ensuring that the landscape is left intact and can serve the local communities through both recreational opportunities and ecosystem services.



Figure 2: Hiking Trail across Stream.



Figure 3: Hiking Trail across Stream.

1.2 County Open Space Connections

Regional trails provide accessible open space and connections between County owned park facilities, open space, and other non-county owned parks. Forging partnerships and allowing non-profit organizations to support land management will help enhance County owned open space and will lead to the continuation of open space acquisition when resources may be limited. There are numerous examples of non-profit organizations aiding in the creation of County owned open space and even park facilities throughout New Jersey.

1.3 Park Facility Inventory and Analysis

The inventory and analysis of the 12 parks have led to the findings that Mercer County has been excelling at its efforts to undertake land stewardship and management, acquire open space, and provide quality and varied open space for the Mercer County community. The Active Recreation Regional, Passive Recreation Regional, Golf Courses, and Urban Park facilities managed by the Mercer County Park Commission make up over 7,000 acres of Mercer County's landscape. These Park facilities offer a wide array of recreational opportunities such as mountainous trails, waterfront parks, wetland experiences, golf activities, and active recreational fields. The mountainous northern portion of the county is an ideal location for Passive Recreation Regional Parks with hilly trails and summit views; whereas the southern half of the County is on flatter terrain with more active recreational opportunities.

1.4 County Analysis Summary

Our list of recommendations for the individual park facilities and general recommendations throughout are steppingstones for further studies in land acquisition, habitat quality studies, and open space access and connection opportunities. The priority recommendations include removing dead trees, monitoring native and invasive vegetation, setting trail blazing standards, conducting a desire path study, incorporating ecologically viable stormwater management techniques, discouraging illegal dumping, and increasing bicycle and pedestrian accessibility throughout the County. The next steps recommended post inventory and analysis findings include an extensive examination of each park property with outlined implementation strategies, an open space acquisition study, a regional trail network plan, and finally, a master plan for the Mercer County Park system.

1.5 Appendices

Items in the appendices include:

1. Inventory Definitions: identified by CUES for field inventory purposes
2. Inventory Features & Attributes listed within the ArcCollector Application
3. New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife list of New Jersey Endangered and Threatened Wildlife.
4. Natural Heritage Rare and Endangered Plant Species Rank Definitions
5. Natural Heritage Rare and Endangered Plant Species Rank in Mercer County

Conclusion

The Mercer County Parks inventory and analysis has led to the findings that Mercer County Park Commission has been excelling at its efforts to undertake land stewardship and management, acquire open space, and provide quality open space the Mercer County Community. Throughout the park facilities, Mercer County Park Commission's attention to detail was evident by the presence of new facilities and numerous restoration efforts. The Park facilities were clean and well kept. Although there is always room for improvement, the ecological efforts throughout Mercer County are evident by the vast expanse of protected open space.

Preliminary inventory studies to assess the county wide landscape helped us to understand the ecological and cultural diversities across Mercer County's built and natural environments. The mountainous northern portion of the county is an ideal location for Passive Recreation Regional Parks with hilly trails and summit views; whereas the southern half of the County is on flatter terrain with more active recreational opportunities. Waterways, wetlands, and forest land cover make up a large portion of the park systems property hosting many rare and endangered wildlife species and habitats. The many man-made lakes create wildlife habitats and recreational opportunities across the Regional Parks. The many streams and waterways cutting through Mercer County's landscape provide both recreational and habitat corridor connections.

Active conservation and restoration efforts are the only way to ensure habitat resilience and sustainability for the future. Not to mention that these habitats offer groundwater recharge opportunities, surface water storage, and healthy hydrological systems to help aid in climate risk reduction for the surrounding communities. County support for the ongoing stewardship efforts in Mercer County is crucial in protecting existing open space and reducing the pressures of future development.

Our list of recommendations for the individual park facilities and general recommendations throughout are steppingstones for further studies in land acquisition, habitat quality studies, and open space access and connection opportunities. With continued work and support of non-profit organizations Mercer County has the opportunity to enhance the park systems recreational, habitat, and trail connection quality reaching the entire community through an interconnected web of County owned park properties and open space parcels.