

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS



## **Solace in the Storm**

*When life returns to "normal," will we reevaluate what's important and support the preservation of our open spaces?"*

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

It seems that in darkness there is light, or, to quote the famous words of Dickens, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." These are surely strange days. As I write this everyone's hour-to-hour, day-to-day experience is so very different. You may be mourning the loss of a friend or family member without available support, or being stressed by an

inability to help a child with math, or struggling with the uncooperative convalescent home; you may have no paycheck as you contemplate the rent, you may be ill and neglecting to go to the hospital... endless variables for each of us. In offering contrasts or COVID positives, I by no means intend to disrespect those of you who are in your darkest hour. Accept my condolences and concern and know I am not naïve about the ugliest realities of the current plague. In this season of light and season of darkness I would like to write about the light, though I too, like you, experience some darkness and many unknowns.

I'm amazed by the resilience of the human spirit. So many of us resort to humor to lighten the darkness. The YouTube clip of an air drop that starts off ominously and then drops hundreds of rolls of toilet paper onto a Main Street brings tears of laughter to my eyes. The continual email exchange of one-liners: "They said a mask and gloves were enough to go to the grocery store; they lied! Everybody else had clothes on." No, that was not me in aisle 5!

Speaking of uncovered, the virus has exposed weaknesses in our healthcare systems, especially in adult care, and has demonstrated the failure of the

mass transit system to provide a sanitary environment. It has unveiled our social inequities and revealed our very efficient mass production system to be less resilient than we assumed. Ultimately the silver lining may be that consideration of these problems will cause us to reinvent our systems to provide tomorrow's success.

In the environmental arena many interesting take-aways might be learned. The lockdowns around the world have unveiled some things not seen before. In many smog-filled cities the horizon - or even the other side of town - has come into view, a sight not seen for a long time. People so accustomed to experiencing pollution have become aware of what it is like to enjoy clean air, see a blue sky, hear a quieter street, and breathe fresh air. If you get a chance to see photos of LA or New Delhi before and during lockdown it is shockingly and literally revealing.

I serve on one of New Jersey's Division of Fish and Wildlife committees. At our bi-monthly meeting the Director, Dave Golden, said that with social distancing, people out of work, and entertainment venues closed Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) have had more users than ever before. And when the State Parks were closed even more people flocked to WMAs. Where people have available

time and the stress of the world's pandemic they seek solace in the out-of-doors, not just in Wildlife Management Areas but at preserves that remain open. Near my home The Nature Conservancy's Maurice River Bluffs Preserve have always been popular, but the new increase in visitation is astounding.

In an odd way the pandemic couldn't have hit at a more wonderful time - the cusp of spring. It's filled with new arrivals, the promise of birth, a future - filled with birdsong, nest building, fishing opportunities, chipmunks scampering, misty morning rivers, turtles, and yes, even snakes sunning themselves. People have been hiking like never before.

I went to see the migrating shorebirds this weekend and the number of folks enjoying Fortescue, fishing, bird watching, boating, and the like was marvelous.

It took me a while to get here but this is my take-away. When people return to what has been dubbed a "new normal" will they still continue to rely on nature's restorative qualities? Will they support the preservation of our open spaces and invest in their necessary improvements? Will they advocate for protections and demand a

smaller carbon footprint from our government? Will they remember to pay back the blessing these preserves bestowed during these troubled times?

And most importantly will individuals and families who had not formerly placed importance on these areas join those of us who always have and advocate for the necessary resources to manage them? Will families reassess that which is important and continue to revel in the natural world?

Yes, the pandemic is horrid. But there are lessons to be learned. The seasons and migrations have not stopped. But there are no guarantees of their continuance unless we commit to a different tomorrow. How we treat our planet going forward will determine whether our children and our children's children will be able to seek solace in the great out-of-doors and with nature.

Well, it's time to step off my soap box and grab a pair of binoculars; I have things to see. I hope you do, too!

Pictures: Top Cox Hall Creek Wildlife Management Area, Villas, NJ. Cox Creek has paved paths popular for walking and bicycles. Fishing is the number one use in NJ's Wildlife Management Areas.