



# South Mountain Conservancy

South Mountain Reservation Stewardship, Advocacy & Public Engagement

## SMC: A 25-Year Retrospective



2017 Board of Trustees

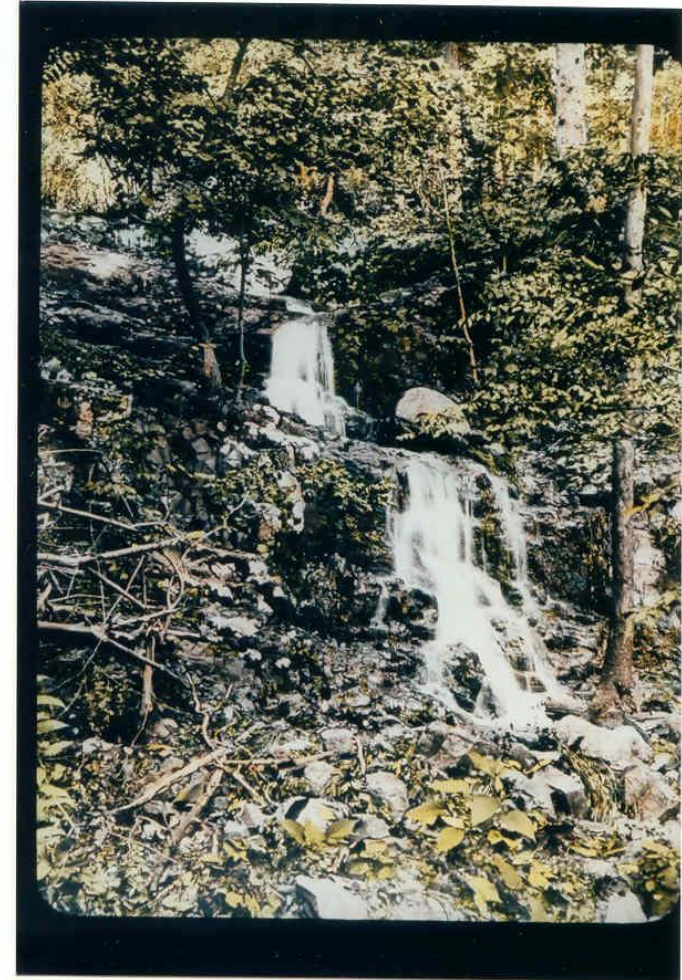
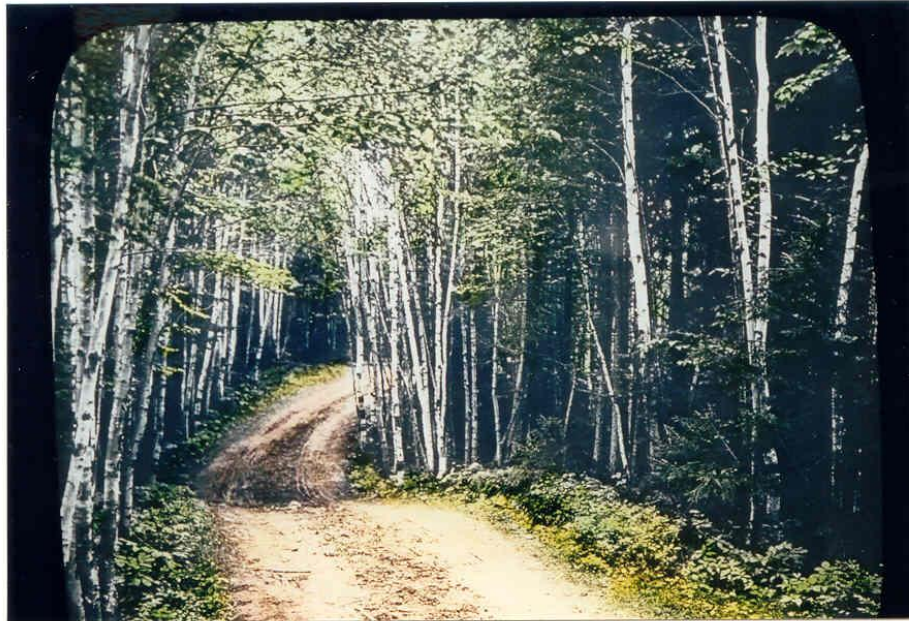


2015 Winter Hike



## South Mountain Reservation – A Unique Essex County Resource

- **Scenic:** Enclosed valley bounded by the ridges of the Watchung Mountains with a river, waterfalls, ponds, great variation in terrain and views of NY City.
- **Historic:** Largest park in the country's first county park system. Established in 1895 and designed by the Olmsted Brothers landscape firm.
- **Governance:** Overseen by a Park Commission until 1979, then by a department of Essex County.







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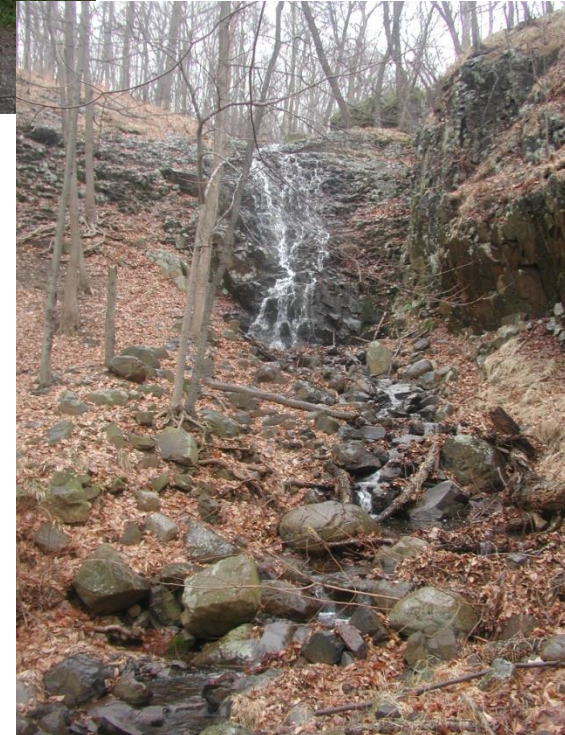
## SMR's Prominent Water Features



Diamond Mill Pond



Hemlock Falls

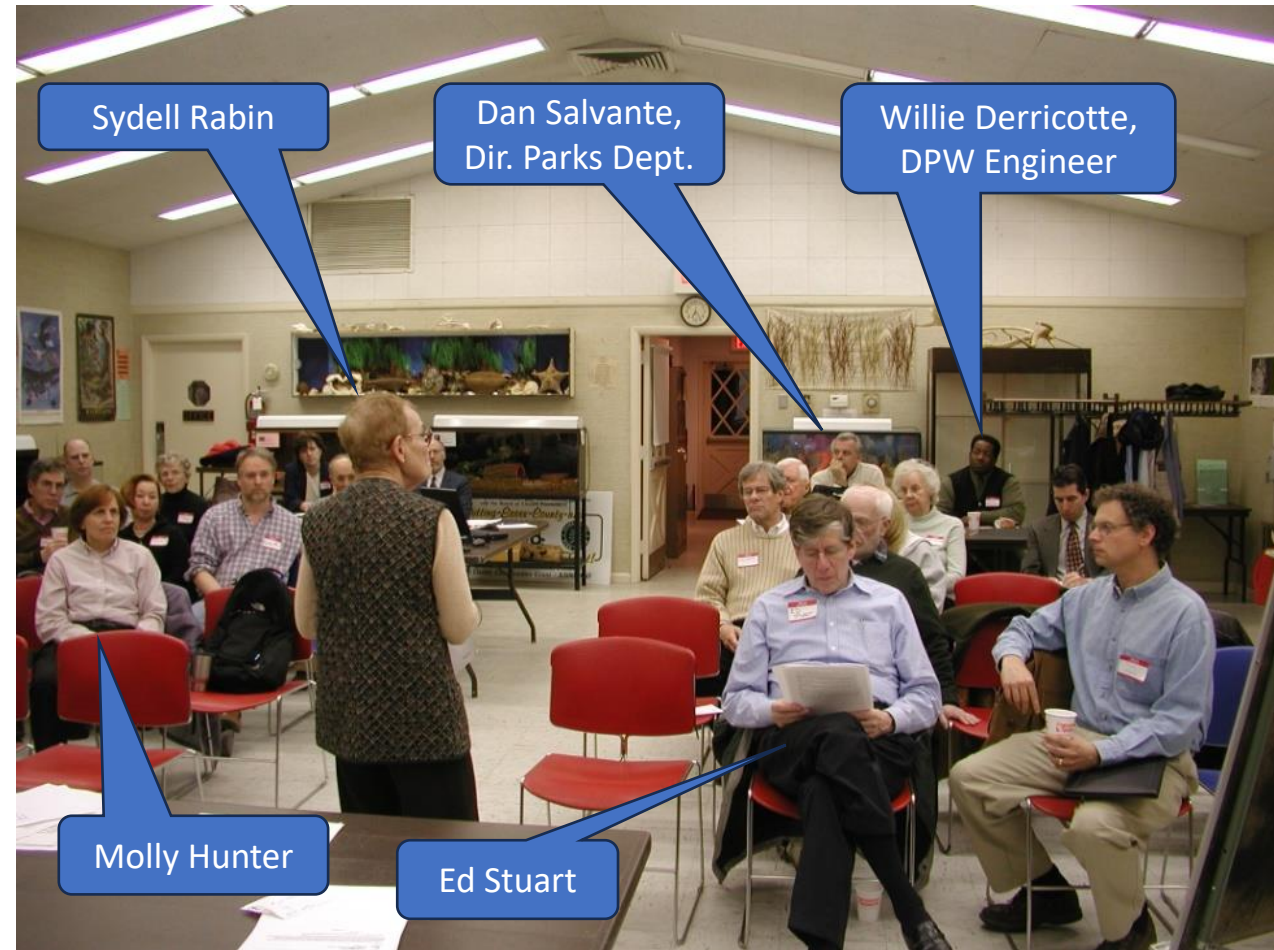


Maple Falls



## South Mountain Conservancy: Background

- Begun by Sydel Rabin in March, 2000, encouraged by Essex County
- Somocon.org web site established in 2003
- Non-profit status in Dec. 2005, prior to that worked under Friends of Essex County Parks
- 2006 Board:
  - Sydel Rabin, Chair
  - Vic Benes, Vice Chair
  - Dennis Percher, Secretary, Publicity
  - Dave Ogens, Treasurer
  - Ed Stuart
  - Molly Hunter



2005 SMC Annual Meeting at Turtleback Zoo

## Our View in 2006: SMR Neglect follows Reduced County Funding

- **Commission Dissolved:** Park Commission dissolved in 1979 and SMR placed under Essex County Parks Department. Minimal funding available. Naturalistic setting seen as self-sustaining and requiring little attention.
- **Environmental factors and usage cause degradation:** Invasive species, forest transition, clogged culverts causing poor trail drainage and erosion, proliferation of deer, heavy usage, dumping of trash.
- **Minimal maintenance:** Maintenance crew has decreased over last decade. Currently 6.5 people spend one quarter of their time at SMR mostly for mowing, removing litter, and cleaning, no forest management. The current allocation amounts to \$44 and 1 hour 15 minutes of attention per acre per year.



Trash at Mayapple Hill

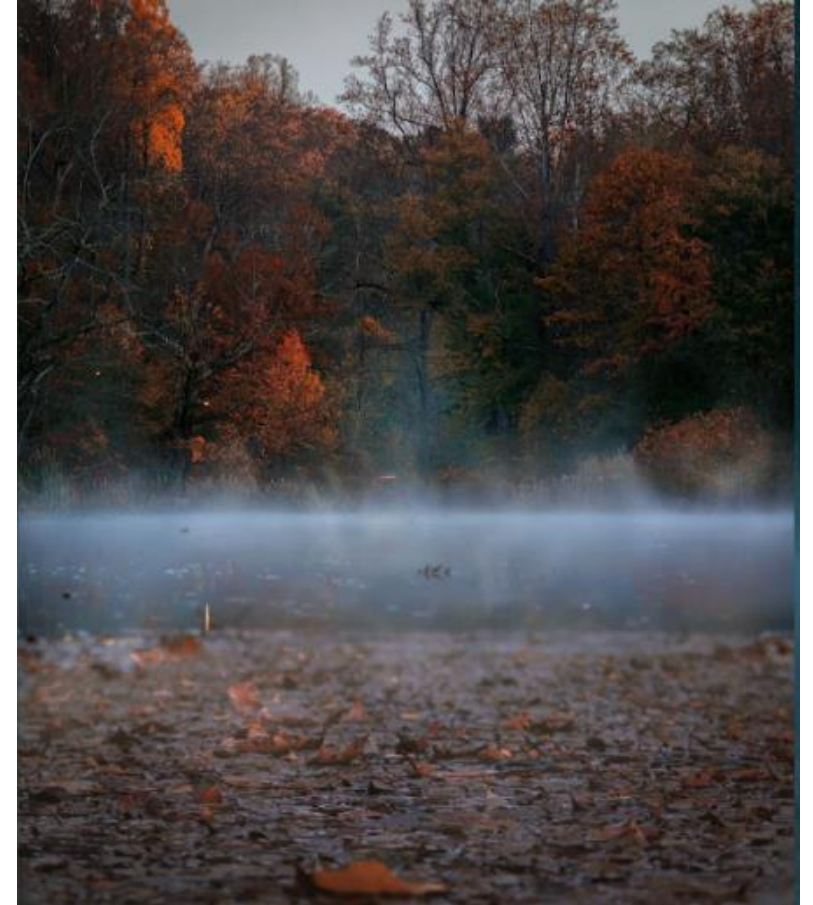




## A 25-Year Retrospective

### The mission of the South Mountain Conservancy is to:

- **Preserve** the 2,110-acre South Mountain Reservation by maintaining and improving its trails, infrastructure, ecology and landscape so that this unique Essex County resource can continue to provide natural beauty and lasting value to the residents of northern new Jersey;
- **Promote** the wise use of the Reservation and environmental awareness through activities, educational programs and public service efforts, including advising local government agencies and representing public opinion to them; and
- **Partner** with the Essex County Park System, community groups and allied organizations in support of the above objectives.





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## A 25-Year Retrospective

2000

2001

2002

2003

2004

2005

2006

2007

- **Conservancy Formed**

- Hikes begin
- Trash Tacklers

- **Erosion Volunteers**

- Website  
[www.somocon.org](http://www.somocon.org)

- Non-profit status
- **\$800k NJ Green Acres Trail Improvements**
- 1-Yr., \$140k SMR Assessment & Plan

- 1<sup>st</sup> SMR Map
- 9 Info kiosks
- Rec Trails Grant
- **Start of Trail Work**



2005, Green Acres Locust Grove Steps: Sanjiv Varghese (l), DPW head, and Joe DiVincenzo, County Executive



First Trail Work Crew, June 2007



# A 25-Year Retrospective

2008

2009

2010

2011

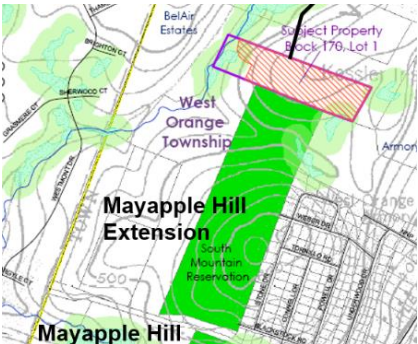
2012

2013

2014

2015

- 1<sup>st</sup> Deer Culling
- June Bio-Blitz
- Preserve, Forest Regen Sites Constructed → →
- Installed Hemlock Falls Benches
- Mt. Biking Proposal
- **52-acre Mayapple Hill Extension + 12-Acres →**



- 2<sup>nd</sup> SMR Map
- Oct. Snow-storm cleanup
- **Art Festival and Mayapple Trail Run Run Starts**



2010 South Mountain Reservation  
**Mayapple Festival**  
May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010  
Rain date: June 5<sup>th</sup>



- Sculpture Park started by T. Zimic
- 2<sup>nd</sup> NJ Green Acres Trail Grant., \$984k

- **Post-Sandy Trail Cleanup (start of Chainsaw Gang)**



- **Fight against US Army Core of Eng. Detention Basin**



- Stopped 2<sup>nd</sup> Dog Park
- S-Curve Planting, Crest Dr.
- **First SMR Family Campout**







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## 2008 - Creation of the Wildflower and Forest Preserve



Removing invasive plants in Preserve meadow with a Weedwrench, April 2008



Initial planting of several hundred plants, May 2008



Goldman Sachs volunteers removing old deer paddock fencing, August 2008

## 2009 - 41 Exclosures/ Regeneration Sites



**2015**, T. Zimic, D. Percher, & J. Stout laying part of 34,000 sq. ft of plastic to smother Japanese knotweed at south fence.





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# A 25-Year Retrospective

## The Aftermath of Sandy: Hundreds of Trees Down, Hundreds of Volunteer Hours



**Chain Saw Gang**



**& Helpers**







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# A 25-Year Retrospective

## Special Projects (examples from dozens)



**2011, 110' of bog bridges in Preserve built by Girl Scout Isabella Cocussa**



**2013-2014 Pergola at Wildflower and Forest Preserve built by Boy Scout Noel Donlan**



**2019 Jackson Maganz (right) First Forest Regen fence repair by Scouts**



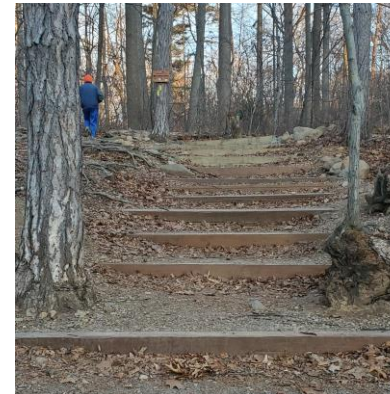
**2021 Graffiti Removal**



**2020 Fairy Trail bridge built by Scout Gene Lu**



**2021 Newark Academy at Trail Work creating cobble crossing**



**2023 Repair/Expansion of Tulip Springs steps by Scout Leonard Yu**

**2024 Addition of upper steps by Scout Spencer Brown**



**2020 Mini-map installed by Scout Owen Kasmin (r)**





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2016

2017

2018

2019

2020

2021

2022

2023

• 3<sup>rd</sup> Map

• Android Map App, Trail Guide



• Signage System Completed, 45+ maps + signs

• 4th SMR Map

- Fight Cleared Hill in Short Hills
- Work on WO Lenape Ext.
- Community Science



• 2015 on...More Signage



Forest Regen, Tricia Zimic (l.) & Tanya Prescott



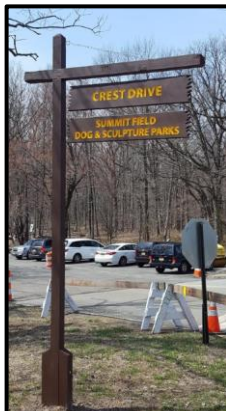
Wendy Klemperer's Catamount, installed 2019, purchased 2020



• First Fairy Tales on the Fairy Trail event



Crest Drive Shelter, 2017

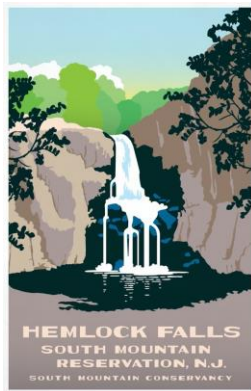


• Lori LaBorde, Leaves Board and becomes 1st Ops Director



- Christy Zolty, leads Forest Regen
- Penni Malakates, becomes 2<sup>nd</sup> Ops Director
- Therese Ojibway( l.) leaves NJ and Fairy Trail: Julie Gould & Beth Kelly step up

• First SMR poster



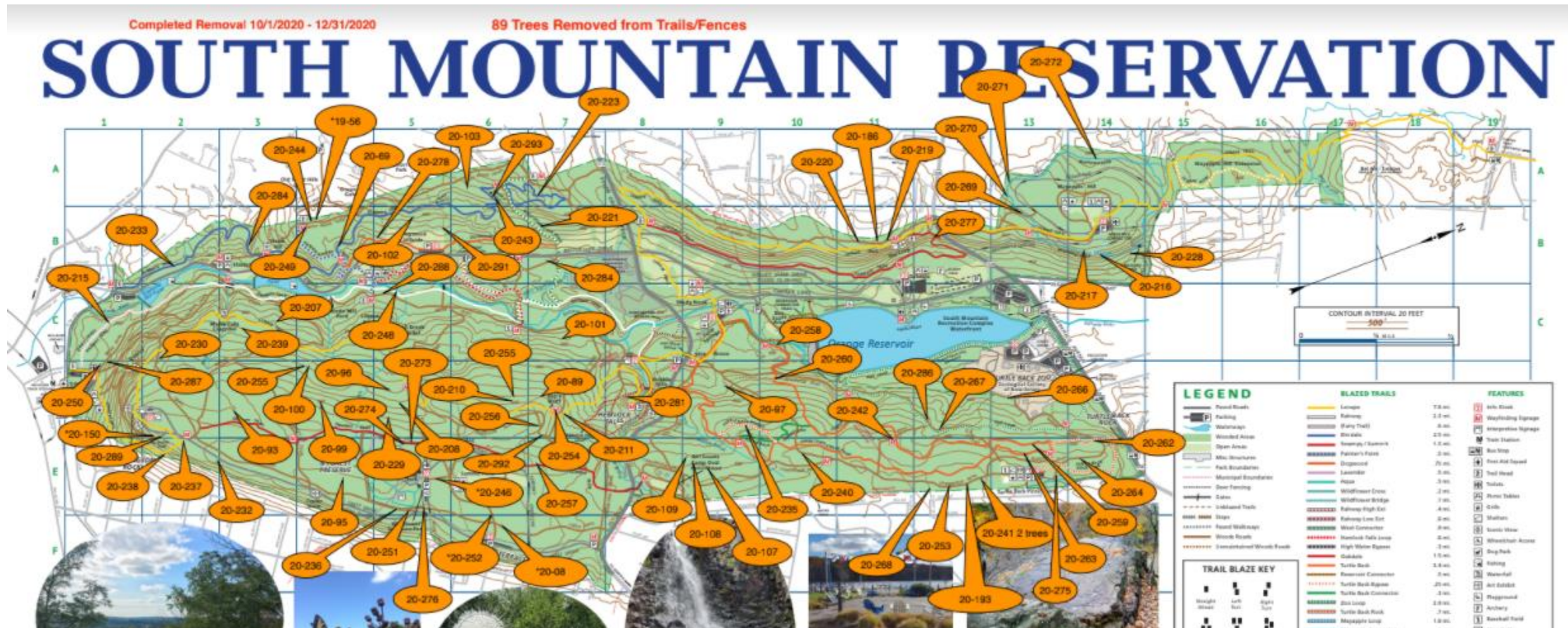
2019





# Chainsaw Gang – 89 Trees Removed Oct.- Dec. 2020

***If a tree falls on a forest trail, we may not hear it, but we hear of it and soon it is gone.***





# A 25-Year Retrospective

## 2024 – Nearly 5,000 hours of Volunteer Time Doing...

- **Forest Regeneration:** Invested over \$31k in SMR Forest Regeneration through:
  - NJ Invasive Species Strike Team study & ten-year plan for managing invasive plants
  - Two paid summer interns maintain Preserve along with monthly volunteer events
  - Seeding the Preserve Meadow and Pollinator Meadow
- **Trail Work:** Woods roads and hiking trails repaired to improve storm water management through monthly events and Dave Berry's SWAT teams. (Since 2007, we have constructed, or planned the building of, over 11 miles of new trails and repaired many miles more.)
- **Fairy Trail:** Over 400 come to 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual *Fairy Tales at the Fairy Trail* in May. \$25k Bolger Foundation challenge grant awarded in October.
- **Fairy Trail Improvements:** In October, we received a \$25k challenge grant from the Bolger Foundation! Need \$50k to match. Plans in 2025 to finally tap \$500k NJ Green Acres Grant (approved Nov. 2020).
- **Trail Maintenance:** 55 miles of trail monitored, 188 trees and 215 bags of garbage removed.
- **Wildflower Sculpture Park.** [Three new artists](#) offered exhibits to supplement our permanent collection.
- **Free Hikes.** Over 65 leader-led hikes were offered for a range of capabilities attracting some 460 hikers. We had special hikes for young children and a [poetry hike](#).
- **SMR Family Campouts:** Held in the spring and fall for over 90 families.
- **Mayapple Trail Run.** 176 runners participated in our May event with distances now ranging from 5 to 50 miles (plus a one-mile Kids Run).







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**Over the Decades, Volunteer-Driven Stewardship and Partnerships  
Form a Broad Community to Sustain the Reservation**

