

OUR OPINION

Fast-track too high a price for Highlands

The Highlands bill, designed to protect 398,000 acres of New Jersey's northern watershed lands from development, is being hailed as one of the most important pieces of environmental legislation in the state's history. Interestingly, it was signed 150 years almost to the day after Henry David Thoreau published "Walden; or, Life in the Woods."

Our position

On the 150th anniversary of Thoreau's classic, "Walden," legislators need to heed his message to preserve the environment.

While the timing is coincidental, Thoreau's message is worth revisiting as politicians and environmentalists continue to debate the impact of the Highlands legislation and the accompanying "fast-track" law that will expedite the approval process for residential development in other parts of the state.

When Thoreau published Walden, he never would have guessed that the book would become a seminal influence on the 20th century environmental movement. He wrote of living self-sufficiently from 1845 to 1847 in a one-room hut near the small pond in Concord, Mass., from which the book takes its name. But he despaired that this celebration of a simple life in tune with nature would fall on deaf ears. His first book, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," in which he described his vision of pollution-free water, sold only 294 copies. With 706 unsold copies gathering dust in his attic ("I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself," he said), Thoreau worried that "Walden" would also go unread. Though most of the original printing of 2,000 had sold by the time of his death in 1862, "Walden" was never a best-seller in his lifetime.

That would change. Reprinted within a month of his death, "Walden" was destined to become a literary classic; and it has never been out of print since.

But despite "Walden's" popularity, its message has yet to be wholeheartedly embraced by policy-makers. In Thoreau's small realm at Walden, the symbol of environmental degradation was the Fitchburg Railroad, a harbinger of the the Industrial Revolution that would transform the landscape of the Northeast. The train traversed Walden's southern perimeter, polluting the air with noise, soot and the restless energy of commerce, and, in Thoreau's words, whirling the pastoral life "past and away." He likened the "devilish Iron Horse" to one of the Trojan variety, with a thousand men in its belly intent on destroying a way of life.

In today's New Jersey, the corresponding symbol is suburban sprawl. Thoreau, who boasted that he had once lived for a year on \$65.99, would have detested the huge houses that have sprouted throughout the countryside, just as the Iron Horse, as Thoreau put it, had muddied the spring at Walden with its soot and browsed off the woods on Walden's shore 150 years earlier.

By protecting the region, the Highlands bill does much to preserve New Jersey's Walden Ponds for future generations. But in giving with one hand, state officials took away with the other. Environmentalists decry the so-called fast-track law, passed hand-in-hand with the Highlands legislation, that will expedite the approval process for builders in other parts of the state. The bill is generally viewed as a sop to large-scale developers restricted by limits on building in the Highlands region.

Though the railroad never paused to ponder Walden's beauty, Thoreau imagined that the passengers were better off for having seen it, however fleetingly. "The engineer does not forget at night, or his nature does not, that he has beheld this vision of serenity and beauty once at least during the day. Though seen but once, it helps to wash out State Street and the engine's soot." Similarly, Thoreau might have observed that commuters traveling Central Jersey's highways are better off for having glimpsed a countryside unsullied by suburban sprawl. Such a glimpse, he might have observed, helps cleanse the cares of Wall Street, Broad Street — even Interstate 287.

Thoreau lamented his age's disregard for nature and the willingness to exploit it in the name of profit and progress. "Talk of heaven! ye disgrace earth," he exclaimed in Walden. On the sesquicentennial of Walden's publication, state officials need to take greater heed of his message. The Highlands bill has come at a heavy price, which they should have refused to pay.