

# Habitat Connectivity Policy Opportunities in New Jersey

Analysis conducted by the Center for Large Landscape Conservation

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## Connectivity Conservation Needs and Opportunities in New Jersey

Conserving biodiversity in an era of rapid environmental change requires connecting habitat across large landscapes. Such “connectivity conservation” is especially important in New Jersey, where growing development pressures and climate impacts are threatening the state’s valuable natural resources and fragmenting its landscapes. Indeed, New Jersey is predicted to be the first state in the nation to reach buildout, meaning it will have no remaining acres for development.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, New Jersey currently has plans and guidance in place to promote connectivity conservation at the local, regional, and state levels of government. However, these visions cannot be effectively implemented without the necessary accompanying policy frameworks to integrate connectivity considerations into conservation, development, and recreation decisions. New Jersey must implement a forward-looking strategy that establishes a cohesive network of conserved lands across the state to bolster climate resilience, biodiversity, and community well-being.

## Policy Recommendations

The Center for Large Landscape Conservation conducted a policy analysis to evaluate the challenges and opportunities to advance connectivity conservation in New Jersey on behalf of The Nature Conservancy’s state office (TNC New Jersey). The following findings and recommendations were developed based on a literature review and interviews with 14 experts regarding current and potential connectivity policies. Ultimately, connecting New Jersey’s habitats and landscapes will require a collaborative approach that engages a diverse array of governmental and non-governmental decision-makers (a top-down, “grass tops” influence campaign) as well as key stakeholders on the ground (a bottom-up, “grassroots” outreach campaign). The report highlights four key recommendations for developing and implementing such a connectivity policy strategy in New Jersey.

Connectivity conservation can help New Jersey address the following pressing issues:

### Urbanization and Sprawl

New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the U.S., with approximately 32% of its land considered “urban.”<sup>2</sup> Increased urbanization often leads to expanded transportation networks or increased traffic on existing roadways.

### Roads and Animal-Vehicle Collisions

The state has one of the densest roadway networks in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> and the 12th highest number of “animal loss claims” in the nation.<sup>4</sup>

### Climate Resilience

The expected increase in flooding in New Jersey due to climate change could devastate poorly designed and managed culverts across the state. This creates major issues for fish and wildlife who rely on sufficiently large, functional culverts to pass safely beneath roads, as well as drivers facing inundated roads where culverts are too small to convey flood flows.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Create a local wildlife crossings master plan

To qualify for state conservation funding programs, New Jersey's 564 municipalities must create Master Plans, which often contain open space, recreation, and habitat conservation components. These local plans serve as roadmaps for conservation action on the ground and therefore present an important opportunity to identify and protect key areas of aquatic and terrestrial habitat connectivity. Moreover, these plans can identify locations to build wildlife crossing projects based on local data.

### Modify land use requirements across jurisdictions

Fish and wildlife migration transcends jurisdictions and geographic boundaries as species move across large landscapes to meet their daily and seasonal needs. Therefore, while advancing connectivity through local plans is critical, so too is coordination across these plans at the regional level. After assessing which current land use requirements impede versus promote connectivity, relevant statutes could be revised by the legislature in order to consistently incorporate connectivity mandates across the state.

### Enact wildlife crossings legislation

Legislators could advance connectivity conservation by addressing transportation planning, given that roads are a major source of habitat fragmentation. For instance, Assembly Bill 5088 was introduced in 2023 to direct the New Jersey Department of Transportation to establish a wildlife crossings program. Ultimately, the bill stalled due to a lack of awareness about the proposed legislation. A more concerted advocacy and public education campaign led by a diverse coalition of stakeholders would increase the likelihood of wildlife crossings legislation passing in New Jersey.

### Promote interagency coordination to identify key connectivity areas and advance projects

While legislation can establish new agency mandates and funding for connectivity, the executive branch also can advance policies such as executive orders (EOs) and memoranda of understanding or agreements between wildlife and transportation agencies. New Jersey has a history of issuing EOs to promote conservation, including the 2003 EO that established the Highland Task Forces, which provided recommendations to advance conservation efforts, smart growth, regional planning, and water resource protection – all of which support connectivity.

## Conclusion

Connectivity conservation in New Jersey is critical for improving roadway safety, helping wildlife adapt to a changing climate, ensuring equitable access to nature, and providing important ecosystem services. New Jersey is a leader in habitat conservation, with residents consistently voting for open space funding and other measures that have conserved over a third of the state's land mass.<sup>5</sup> However, the state's investment in its rich natural heritage is at risk due to unparalleled development pressures as its population, cities, suburbs, and road network continue to grow. With buildout expected in the next several decades, it is imperative to act now to solidify a strategic connectivity plan across the state. Developing and implementing that plan requires urgent policy action at all levels of government, across all branches of government, and from conservation, transportation, climate, and energy agencies. The recommendations outlined above create a menu of connectivity policy solutions in New Jersey at nested scales.

## References

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