

Think you've seen Liberty State Park? You ain't seen nothing yet. In the coming years, more than 250 acres of the park's interior that have been fenced off since its founding will finally be opened to the public. For decades, the only people allowed into the interior were a handful of scientists. But a massive \$32 million restoration project that is set to begin this fall will transform the park and give parkgoers access to one of the largest protected pockets of nature in the region.

Picture by Richard LaRovere



The Man with the Plan

Ecologist Frank Gallagher discusses his role overseeing the transformation of Liberty State Park's interior

Tell me a little about this project.

The way the park is designed, you have this interior 251 acres that we're in the process of restoring. That will come in three phases. The first phase will construct the freshwater wetlands. Phase two will be to actually dig out the old retention area, take the spoils - we have to dig down about 10 feet - put them up into this warm-weather grass area and cover it [with] clean fill. The dug-out area then gets connected to the bay and becomes 30 to 40 acres of salt marsh and upland wetland habitat. And then phase three is to look at the emerging forested [area]. There's about 110 acres of continuous forest in the middle of this, and phase three is to look at the management of those for a wooded site.

When does all this start?

The freshwater wetlands is phase one. With any luck at all, that work should start late fall. When we finish this, we'll be able to connect the science center with the interpretive center. That's, in my mind, very significant because at that time, the fences will come down, planting will go in, the path system will go in, so it opens for the first time to the public the interior of the park.

Right now that whole area...

This whole area's fenced off. So here you have another 251 acres of green space that's becoming open to the public.

Seems like a pretty major project.

It's something unique. It's a fairly large area. I know Central Park is a little bit bigger in size. Central Park is designed and landscaped. But what we're doing with this 251 acres is saying, 'Hey, let's see what happens,' which is something that's not generally done in an urban area. This is an old railroad yard, and we're saying, 'Hey, you know what? There are some ecological restoration processes that are occurring innately without our intervention, and let's study the value of those and see where they lead.' So I think this is a little bit unique. I know that there's nothing similar to it on the East Coast. So it's really kind of special.

Maybe you could paint a picture for me. When this project is nearing its end...

[Laughs.] You mean after I've retired?

Somebody who's going to come to the park, what are they going to see?

Let's talk about just the casual visitor, right? Just, 'Hey, I live up in The Heights, getting hot here in the summer, and I want to walk down to the park.' For those people, you not only have the active recreational areas right around the perimeter, but I want to get away from everything and I want to do a two-hour hike through the woods, around the top of the salt marsh, and back down to my picnic area. If I'm a group of kids who live out in the Lafayette section of Jersey City and I want to have a pickup game of football, hey, this is a nice flat-topped dome over here on this side of the park now, which is just a five-minute walk from Lafayette.

What's it like in the interior now?

What's really neat about this is that we've got a 30, 40 year history here. Trains pulled out in 1969 and the area's been closed off since then. There's been no development of that area for the last 37 years or so. So you get into the middle of it - it's, 'Where am I?' That's really important. If we can get people to understand why even urban ecologies are important, it begins to build a land ethic, an ethic which says that sustainability is important, that all life forms are of some value, an ethic that says, 'Hey, in order for all of us to live comfortably on this planet, our actions count.' That's the underlying premise of any land ethic: that our actions count.

You mentioned earlier that you might end up retiring by the time the project's finished. Are you going to be around to see it completed?

Oh, I hope so. It's really one of the most significant projects I've had a chance to work on. I've worked for the Division of Parks and Forestry for 27 years, and this is probably one of the most interesting things I've worked on. I'd sure like to see the whole thing completed.

Let us know what you think: jcmag@hudsonreporter.com.

Think you've seen Liberty State Park? You ain't seen nothing yet. In the coming years, more than 250 acres of the park's interior that have been fenced off since its founding will finally be opened to the public. For decades, the only people allowed into the interior were a handful of scientists. But a massive \$32 million restoration project that is set to begin this fall will transform the park and give parkgoers access to one of the largest protected pockets of nature in the region.

The Man with the Plan

Ecologist Frank Gallagher discusses his role overseeing the transformation of Liberty State Park's interior

Tell me a little about this project.

The way the park is designed, you have this interior 251 acres that we're in the process of restoring. That will come in three phases. The first phase will construct the freshwater wetlands. Phase two will be to actually dig out the old retention area, take the spoils - we have to dig down about 10 feet - put them up into this warm-weather grass area and cover it [with] clean fill. The dug-out area then gets connected to the bay and becomes 30 to 40 acres of salt marsh and upland wetland habitat. And then phase three is to look at the emerging forested [area]. There's about 110 acres of continuous forest in the middle of this, and phase three is to look at the management of those for a wooded site.

When does all this start?

The freshwater wetlands is phase one. With any luck at all, that work should start late fall. When we finish this, we'll be able to connect the science center with the interpretive center. That's, in my mind, very significant because at that time, the fences will come down, planting will go in, the path system will go in, so it opens for the first time to the public the interior of the park.

Right now that whole area...

This whole area's fenced off. So here you have another 251 acres of green space that's becoming open to the public.

Seems like a pretty major project.

It's something unique. It's a fairly large area. I know Central Park is a little bit bigger in size. Central Park is designed and landscaped. But what we're doing with this 251 acres is saying, 'Hey, let's see what happens,' which is something that's not generally done in an urban area. This is an old railroad yard, and we're saying, 'Hey, you know what? There are some ecological restoration processes that are occurring innately without our intervention, and let's study the value of those and see where they lead.' So I think this is a little bit unique. I know that there's nothing similar to it on the East Coast. So it's really kind of special.

Maybe you could paint a picture for me. When this project is nearing its end...

[Laughs.] You mean after I've retired?

Somebody who's going to come to the park, what are they going to see?

Let's talk about just the casual visitor, right? Just, 'Hey, I live up in The Heights, getting hot here in the summer, and I want to walk down to the park.' For those people, you not only have the active recreational areas right around the perimeter, but I want to get away from everything and I want to do a two-hour hike through the woods, around the top of the salt marsh, and back down to my picnic area. If I'm a group of kids who live out in the Lafayette section of Jersey City and I want to have a pickup game of football, hey, this is a nice flat-topped dome over here on this side of the park now, which is just a five-minute walk from Lafayette.

What's it like in the interior now?

What's really neat about this is that we've got a 30, 40 year history here. Trains pulled out in 1969 and the area's been closed off since then. There's been no development of that area for the last 37 years or so. So you get into the middle of it - it's, 'Where am I?' That's really important. If we can get people to understand why even urban ecologies are important, it begins to build a land ethic, an ethic which says that sustainability is important, that all life forms are of some value, an ethic that says, 'Hey, in order for all of us to live comfortably on this planet, our actions count.' That's the underlying premise of any land ethic: that our actions count.

You mentioned earlier that you might end up retiring by the time the project's finished. Are you going to be around to see it completed?

Oh, I hope so. It's really one of the most significant projects I've had a chance to work on. I've worked for the Division of Parks and Forestry for 27 years, and this is probably one of the most interesting things I've worked on. I'd sure like to see the whole thing completed.

Let us know what you think: jcmag@hudsonreporter.com.