

# THE MID-ATLANTIC'S LANDLOCKED PUBLIC LANDS

Untapped Hunting and  
Fishing Opportunities in  
New York, Pennsylvania,  
and New Jersey



A New Collaborative Analysis by onX and TRCP



At the heart of America’s hunting and fishing traditions is access to public lands held in common by the people. These unique landscapes provide the opportunities that allow all of us—regardless of our income, connections, or property ownership—to participate in outdoor pursuits.

But in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, sportsmen and women are largely losing out on more than 80,000 acres of public land where there is no permanent, legal access.

These local, state, and federal public lands are, as a general rule, legally open to public hunting and fishing, but they are surrounded by private land with no public roads or trails to reach them.\* Landlocked parcels range in size from just a single acre to many hundreds of acres and guarantee access to no one except the neighboring landowners and those with permission to cross private lands.

Today, when time in the outdoors is more valuable than ever, unlocking public lands represents one of the most obvious and actionable ways to provide more opportunities for more people to enjoy the woods and waters of our country.

New York  
**39 K**  
Total Landlocked  
Acres

Pennsylvania  
**27 K**  
Total Landlocked  
Acres

New Jersey  
**14 K**  
Total Landlocked  
Acres

**Total in Three States: 80 K Acres**

\* Properties enrolled in state walk-in access programs, though hugely valuable—can change hands and/or drop out without being renewed and thus were not factored into this analysis. Conversely, permanent recorded easements do provide the public with access in perpetuity and, as a result, were incorporated into the analysis using the best-available data.



Derek Eberly

## Public Lands in the Mid-Atlantic

National conversations about public lands often center around the Pacific Coast and Intermountain West, where the vast majority of federally managed lands are located. Relative to the rest of the country, states in these regions have the highest percentages of non-private land.

But there are public hunting and fishing opportunities in every U.S. state that play a critical role in our ability to recruit, retain, and reactivate license-buying sportsmen and women.

Places like New York’s Adirondack Park offer as much of a chance to immerse oneself in adventure as any public lands in states farther west. And there are also millions of acres of federal, county, and municipally managed lands that provide critical access for outdoor enthusiasts close to home.

These days, anyone with a smartphone can take advantage of the opportunities offered by these smaller public tracts. For a hunter looking to hang a treestand for whitetails,

work the brush for woodcock, or call in a spring turkey, access to an overlooked public parcel could be a game-changer. And easy access to a shoreline, pond, or stream might give a parent the only place where they’ll be able to teach their kids to fish for trout, panfish, or flounder. As our nation continues to urbanize, the future of our outdoor pastimes depends on making it easier for families and individuals to get outside.

Strategically unlocking as little as a few dozen inaccessible acres at a time could mean the difference between someone having a place to explore the outdoors or not. A lifelong passion for hunting or fishing—and the conservation funding raised by those license purchases—could hang in the balance.

## Landlocked by History

Given their history as British colonies, the original thirteen U.S. states were not organized according to the gridded system of ranges, townships, and sections later used to parcel out land ownership in new states and territories as the country expanded westward. As such, property boundaries in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania were drawn around geographic features and other landmarks through an older survey system known as “Metes and Bounds.”

Nearly all land in these states became private property during the colonial period through charters granted by the British Crown to corporations or individuals, as well as through the sale of Crown lands. It was only much later that these states—faced with depleted soils, diminishing timber stands, and deteriorating water quality—began actively purchasing lands to address conservation, access, and resource management needs.

Over time, some Eastern states accumulated rather large amounts of public land. In New Jersey, the state owns 21 percent of the land base within its borders, the third-most of any state behind Alaska and Hawaii. In New York and Pennsylvania, those figures are similarly significant: 14 percent and 13.9 percent respectively, at fifth and sixth place in the nation.

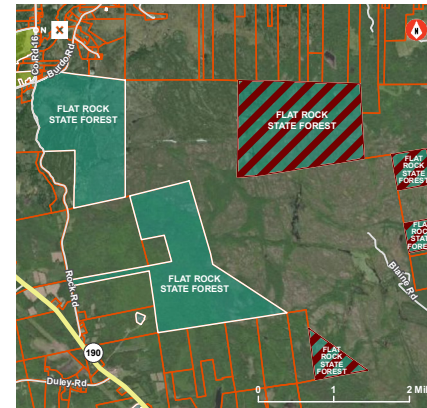
Managed for varying purposes and according to a diverse set of frameworks, public lands in these three states have a rich tradition. New York established the first state park

system in 1881 and created the Adirondack Preserve (later Adirondack Park) in subsequent years. New Jersey similarly has its own large, relatively undeveloped, and sparsely populated natural area in the state’s southern Pine Barrens.

Many of the state lands in the region, particularly in New York and Pennsylvania, were formerly abandoned farmlands or private timberlands on which the owners stopped paying property taxes after the parcels were cut over in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Other lands were acquired by the states to conserve wildlife habitat in the early 20th century. The Pennsylvania Game Commission, for example, manages nearly 1.5 million acres of State Game Lands for this purpose.

The result today is a unique system of county, state, and federal land holdings and, unfortunately, a remnant patchwork of landlocked public lands.

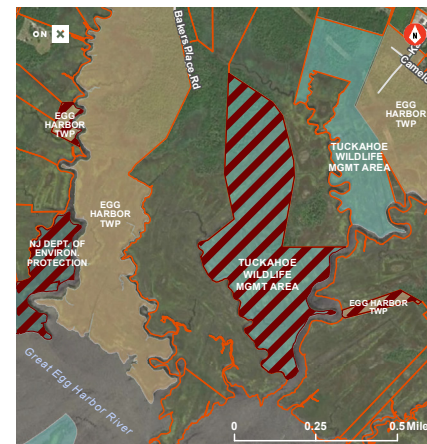
Because land ownership boundaries in this part of the country are far less likely to align neatly at corners like a checkerboard, “corner-crossing” as a contested form of public access is a much less significant debate in the East than it is in the West.



**New York:** Ten miles west of Lake Champlain’s northern terminus, this 600+ acre parcel of Flat Rock State Forest—home to whitetail deer, black bears, ruffed grouse, and turkeys—is surrounded by private holdings with no public trail or road offering access.



**Pennsylvania:** This 200-acre piece of state game land in south-central Pennsylvania is cut off from larger parcels of state forest and game lands by only a few hundred yards of private property. To the north, another 350+ acres of the Rothrock State Forest are surrounded by private holdings. Without means of public access, these forested hillsides are off-limits to public hunters.



**New Jersey:** The Tuckahoe Wildlife Management Area in New Jersey’s Great Egg Harbor Bay is a popular destination each fall for waterfowl hunters. This 115-acre tract, however, along with several nearby pieces of state and township property, cannot be reached by land without permission from one of the neighboring landowners.





## Solutions

Landlocked public lands are best made accessible through cooperative agreements with private landowners that result in land exchanges, acquisitions, and easements, but this critical work cannot be undertaken without funding. When it comes to opening inaccessible public lands, even small projects can offer big benefits. Here are key programs that support these efforts:

### **National** **Land and Water Conservation Fund**

The LWCF remains the most powerful tool available for establishing and expanding access to public lands and waters. And it just got more powerful with the recent passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, which fully funds the program at \$900 million annually for wildlife conservation and outdoor recreation, including \$27 million that is dedicated to public access. Importantly, the LWCF is not just limited to federal projects—at least 40 percent of the program must be used for state-driven projects. State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans are developed by each state to set priorities for state-side LWCF-funded projects and represent a key opportunity to unlock public lands.

### **New Jersey** **Connecting Habitat Across** **New Jersey (CHANJ)**

Recognizing the threat posed to wildlife by the increasing density of development within the state, New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection in 2019 launched the innovative CHANJ program to secure and improve habitat connectivity. By mapping core intact habitats and opportunities to establish corridors between them, the program helps guide strategic land acquisitions to benefit both game and non-game species, as well as sportsmen and women who enjoy new and improved access to public lands.

### **New York** **Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)** **and the Open Space Conservation Plan**

These two initiatives work hand in hand to conserve natural resources and open space and provide for public access to outdoor recreation. Supported through a real-estate tax, the EPF provided \$300 million toward a wide range of conservation programs in 2020 alone, and the land acquisition portion of the program has been funded at around \$30 million annually in recent years. Specifically, the EPF helps fund land acquisition priorities identified in the New York State Open Space Conservation Plan, which was established in 2016 and identifies seven major resource categories to receive attention by the state, including projects that “provide or assist in providing access to public land which has no access or limited access due to geographic barriers.”

### **Pennsylvania** **Community Conservation** **Partnerships Program (C2P2)**

Funded through a variety of sources, including the LWCF and the state's Environmental Stewardship Fund, C2P2 is administered by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to conserve and acquire land through several methods. This includes the acquisition of lands to be added to existing state parks, forests, and game lands, which could be used to tie together disjointed state holdings and establish access to landlocked parcels. The C2P2 can also be used to acquire conservation easements, some of which include permanent public access agreements.

When it comes to opening  
inaccessible public lands,  
even small projects can  
offer big benefits.

To learn more about this issue and what you can  
do to help, visit [UnlockingPublicLands.org](https://UnlockingPublicLands.org)

For more information contact:  
Lisa Nichols, onX - [access@onxmaps.com](mailto:access@onxmaps.com)  
Joel Webster, TRCP - [jwebster@trcp.org](mailto:jwebster@trcp.org)  
Cover photo Jess Delorenzo



# By the Numbers

Inaccessible Public Lands in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey



## New York

**39 K**

Total Landlocked  
Federal, State, County  
& Municipal Acres

Of those, **6 K** acres are  
adjacent to water.\*

## Pennsylvania

**27 K**

Total Landlocked  
Federal, State, County  
& Municipal Acres

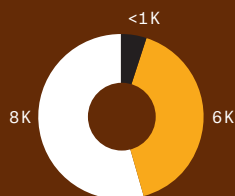
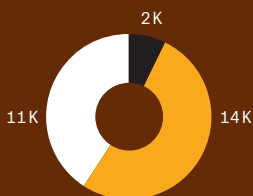
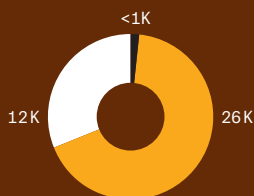
Of those, **4 K** acres are  
adjacent to water.\*

## New Jersey

**14 K**

Total Landlocked  
Federal, State, County  
& Municipal Acres

Of those, **5 K** acres are  
adjacent to water.\*



Landlocked Federal Acres

Landlocked County & Municipal Acres

Landlocked State Acres

\* While not all water adjacent lands are accessible by watercraft because they might be swamplands or otherwise not suitable for boat access, some are.

To learn more about these figures, visit [unlockingpubliclands.org](http://unlockingpubliclands.org)