

# The Hudson Hills & Highlands Focus

*The Quarterly Newsletter of the Environmental Leaders Learning Alliance*

**Summer 2008**

Dear ELLA Members,

We hope you enjoy the first issue of the Hudson Hills & Highlands Focus, which will be published quarterly in June, September, December and March. As a starting point, the newsletter will serve as a communication device to share news about the Alliance and synthesize regional environmental information. As we move forward, we also hope that the Focus will be a forum for members to share experiences and lessons learned from their towns and villages. If you have any comments or questions, please let us know.

Fred & Linsay



## Setting our Compass: Next Steps for ELLA

Fred W. Koontz, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Teatown Lake Reservation

ELLA aims to bring together town-appointed environmental leaders from conservation commissions and open space committees from across the Hudson Hills and Highlands for environmental training, sharing lessons learned, and fostering collaboration. The primary goal of ELLA is to strengthen its members ability to educate and advise their communities on the management and protection of natural resources. A secondary goal is to spark both inter-municipal cooperation and environmental action at the regional level, the spatial scale most appropriate for addressing many of today's key environmental issues (e.g. non-point pollution of watersheds and invasive species).

Since launching ELLA last December, we have assembled the core structure for the program, including: 1) hiring a part-time coordinator, Linsay Cochran; 2) registering 77 persons from 31 towns and villages; 3) creating four communication tools (membership database, email-based listserve, "SurveyMonkey" online questionnaire device, and quarterly e-newsletter); and 4) starting our workshop series. This summer we will tackle the issue of invasive plants at our July workshop, strengthen our ability to communicate by developing an ELLA website, and form a "Program Committee" to help develop topics for our workshop series.

By September, ELLA's basic infrastructure will be in place and we will know each other better through meeting at our first two workshops -- and as a result, we will be ready to take our next steps. Specifically, we will be aiming to increase the communication and information sharing among members. Our intent is for each ELLA member to be both a student and a teacher! We plan to solicit some of you to help teach workshop sessions and prepare briefing summaries on environmental issues. Linsay and all of us at Teatown also will be helping on these compilations. Please consider how ELLA could best serve your needs and let us know. We appreciate your hard work in protecting natural resources in the Hudson Hills and Highlands!

# ELLA Workshop on Vernal Pools



**The first ELLA workshop took place at Teatown Lake Reservation on Saturday, April 12 from 8:30am-12:30pm, with 27 participants from 17 Hudson Hills and Highlands towns.**

The workshop focused on "vernal pools," fishless, seasonal woodland pools that are home to spring-chorusing frogs and a myriad of life forms. Despite their small size, often less than 0.25 acre, conservationists prioritize their protection because the life that emerges from these wetlands provides essential nutrients for forest biodiversity. ELLA members discussed land use planning methods to minimize vernal pool harm and possible regional identification, assessment and mapping of vernal pools.

## **Lessons Learned:**

- Certain species such as fairy shrimp, wood frogs, and mole salamanders can only reproduce in vernal pools; therefore, these habitats are crucial to the survival of these obligate vernal pool animals.
- It is essential to identify vernal pools during the spring season, as they dry up at other times of the year and aren't easily discernable.
- To help determine the potential location of vernal pools, there is information available from aerial photographs, National Wetlands Inventory Maps (NWI), soils maps, & topographic maps.
- The easiest way to identify a vernal pool in the field is to document presence of obligate vernal pool species ([A Field Guide to Vernal Pools](#) is useful).
- To determine if a vernal pool is high or low quality for prioritizing its protection, use: number of obligate and facultative species, number of egg masses, hydroperiod (drying time) and position/condition of the landscape (i.e.- close proximity to roads etc).
- Best management practices to protect a pool include: maintain a minimum of 100' buffer area with no disturbance; a 750' "critical terrestrial habitat" with limited disturbance; and forested habitat connecting pools.



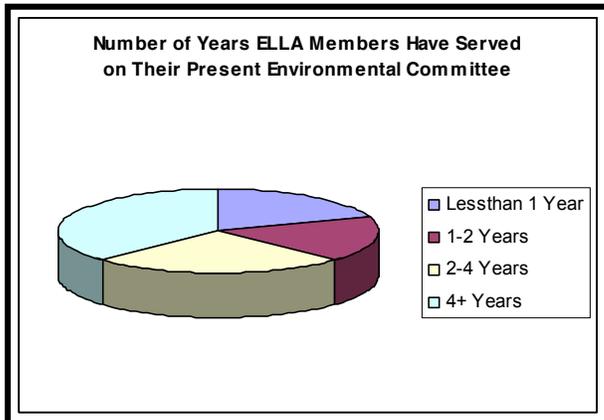
***Participants in the workshop received a copy of [A Field Guide to the Animals of Vernal Pools](#), a useful & convenient reference to carry on site visits. A limited supply of guides are still available: if you were not able to attend the workshop and would like a copy, please contact Linsay at [lcochran@teatown.org](mailto:lcochran@teatown.org) or (914) 762-2912 x123***



# Summary of ELLA Learning Needs Assessment

This past spring, the first ELLA Learning Needs Assessment (created with the internet survey tool SurveyMonkey.com) helped us to get to know the group better, and to guide us in our future activities. Thanks to all who took the time to fill out the survey; as of June 2008, 52 of 77 ELLA members from 27 Hudson Hills Highlands towns and villages completed the survey. We found the survey to be an effective tool, and plan to continue to use it to keep up to date with the interests and needs of ELLA members.

## WHO ARE ELLA MEMBERS?



- The average ELLA member spends 2-10 hours per month working on their environmental committee matters.
- The average ELLA member estimates that 2-5 hours per month would be reasonable to spend learning about subjects to strengthen their advisory role as a member of their environmental committee.
- ELLA members are most interested in environmental issues at the Town/Village level (followed in order by County, Regional, State, National, & Global levels).

- We asked those surveyed to rank from 1 (little knowledge) to 5 (great knowledge) their understanding of the physical (air, water, soil & climate), biological & human dimensions of the Lower Hudson Valley. By far, the most frequent ranking was a 3, and only 10% responded that they had great knowledge.
- The **environmental issues** ELLA members are most keen to learn more about are:
  1. Water quality & over-consumption
  2. Tree protection
  3. Regional Planning, Stormwater & flooding, Overdevelopment
  4. Habitat loss & fragmentation
  5. Invasive Species

**Other suggestions:** Transportation alternatives & impacts, lake eutrophication, wetlands hydrology,, preserve management plans
- The **environmental tools** that ELLA members are most keen to learn more about, in order of interest, are:
  1. Prioritizing land parcels for protection
  2. Environmental ordinances and regulations
  3. Smart development
  4. Environmental mapping/GIS
  5. Biotic corridor building

**Other suggestions:** Native & invasive plant ID, stream assessment

## GUIDING FUTURE PLANNING FOR ELLA

- The types of **learning opportunities** that ELLA members would find most helpful are:
  1. Conferences & workshops
  2. Website-based resources
  3. E-mail newsletter
  4. Printed handouts
  5. Multi-session course

**Other suggestions:** Field ID & assessment, efficient tools to reach local officials

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- The **skills** that ELLA members would most like to improve are:
  1. Evaluating Site Plans
  2. Wetlands identification
  3. Understanding/evaluating Environmental Impact Statements
  4. Environmental education methods/techniques
  5. Facilitating & consensus building

**Other suggestions:** Environmental terminology training, alternative septic technologies, transfer of development rights, conservation easements

- For **scheduling future ELLA workshops**, the preference is half-day Saturday or a few hours on a weekday evening, followed by half-day Sunday.
- **In keeping with the shared learning goals of ELLA**, approximately 30% of ELLA members would be interested in helping to teach/lead learning exercises in their area of special expertise, including GIS, native tree biodiversity & ID, conservation, water issues, land use planning, and citizen-scientist efforts

## July 19<sup>th</sup> Summer Workshop

### Invasive Plants: Considerations for Conservation Planning

The USDA defines an invasive plant as an alien (non-native) species whose introduction does or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health. To help identify non-native plants in our region, the NY Flora Atlas, [www.atlas.nyflora.org](http://www.atlas.nyflora.org), has a searchable database of all catalogued plants by county. It lists 1062 plant species found in Westchester County, 279 of which are non-native (~25%), with similar numbers for Putnam, Dutchess, Orange and Rockland counties.

The workshop will focus on the current efforts to control invasive plants in our region, with programs like PRISM (Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management), and how ELLA members can influence the control of invasives in their towns (eg: prioritizing which invasive plants are causing the most significant environmental damage and keeping new ones from coming in and spreading--- Mile-a-Minute, Giant Hogweed, etc.)



Mile-a-Minute Weed, *Persicaria perfoliata*  
Photo: Britt Slattery, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, [Invasive.org](http://Invasive.org).

#### **Tentative Workshop Agenda:**

- **Lecture:** Troy Weldy, Director of Ecological Management, The Nature Conservancy Eastern New York Chapter
  - A brief review of invasive plants and consequences to biodiversity preservation
  - Current efforts and available tools in our region to address the issue
- **Discussion:** Incorporating strategies to mitigate damage by invasive plants in our CAC & OSC activities: considerations for site plan reviews, possible local ordinances
- **Field Session:** Identify invasive plants and discuss control methods

**Please join us!**

**To register for this free workshop, please contact Lindsay by Tuesday July 8**  
 at [lcochran@teatown.org](mailto:lcochran@teatown.org) or (914) 762-2912 x123.  
**ELLA membership is required to attend the workshop**

# 77 individuals from 31 towns, villages and cities are currently members of ELLA

<u>Municipality (Town unless otherwise noted)</u>	<u>Board/Council/Committee</u>	<u>Members</u>
<b><u>DUTCHESS COUNTY</u></b>		
Beacon, City of	Conservation Advisory Commission	1
Beekman	Conservation Advisory Council	1
"	Open Space Committee	0
East Fishkill	Conservation Advisory Council	0
Fishkill	Environmental Board	2
Pawling	Conservation Advisory Board	4
<b><u>ORANGE COUNTY</u></b>		
Cornwall	Conservation Advisory Council	4
<b><u>PUTNAM COUNTY</u></b>		
Carmel	Environmental Conservation Board	2
Kent	Conservation Advisory Committee	4
Phillipstown	Conservation Advisory Council	1
Putnam Valley	Commission for the Conservation of the Environment	3
Southeast	Open Space Advisory Committee	1
<b><u>ROCKLAND COUNTY</u></b>		
Clarkstown, EMC representative from	Rockland County Environmental Management Committee	1
Orangetown	Open Space Committee	0
<b><u>WESTCHESTER COUNTY</u></b>		
Ardley, Village of	Conservation Advisory Committee	2
Bedford	Conservation Board	4
"	Open Space Acquisition Committee	0
"	Wetlands Control Commission	1
Briarcliff Manor, Village of	Conservation Advisory Council	3
Cortlandt	Conservation Advisory Council	1
"	Open Space Committee	1
Croton, Village of	Conservation Advisory Council	1
Dobbs Ferry, Village of	Conservation Advisory Board	0
Greenburgh	Conservation Advisory Council	4
Hastings-on-Hudson, Village of	Conservation Commission	0
Irvington, Village of	Environmental Conservation Board	2
Lewisboro	Conservation Advisory Council	3
"	Open Space Advisory Committee	2
Mount Kisco	Conservation Advisory Council	1
Mount Pleasant	Conservation Advisory Committee	1
New Castle	Conservation Board	0
"	Open Space Advisory Committee	0
North Salem	Conservation Advisory Committee	2
Ossining	Environmental Advisory Committee	3
Ossining, Village of	Environmental Advisory Council	9
Peekskill, City of	Conservation & Parks Advisory Board	1
Pleasantville, Village of	Conservation Advisory Council	2
Pound Ridge	Conservation Board	1
Pound Ridge	Open Space Acquisitions Committee	0
Somers	Conservation Board	2
"	Open Space Committee	2
Tarrytown	Environmental Advisory Council	0
Yorktown	Conservation Board	3
"	Advisory Committee on Open Space	2

# Calendar of Upcoming ELLA Events: SAVE THE DATE!

Quarterly ELLA workshops will be held once per season, in April, July, October & January

## JUNE

**First ELLA Program Committee conference call:** Thursday, June 26 (12:30 to 1:30 PM)

The ELLA "Program Committee" is currently forming. Ideally 8-12 members will help guide the strategy and content for future ELLA workshops and projects. We envision meeting four times a year by telephone conference call, usually on a Monday-Friday at the beginning of the day (9AM), lunch hour (12:30 PM), or end of the day (4PM).

**If you would like to be considered for this Committee, please drop an email to Linsay at [lcochran@teatown.org](mailto:lcochran@teatown.org) at your earliest convenience.** We will choose individuals based on finding a balanced geographic scope for the Hudson Hills and Highlands. If we have too many volunteers (!), we will rotate members over the upcoming months. Thank you for giving this idea consideration!



## JULY

**Summer ELLA Workshop:** July 19, 8:30am-1pm. Topic: Invasive Plants: Considerations for Conservation Planning. Workshop will include lecture, discussion & field components, and participants will receive printed materials. **To register for this free workshop, please contact Linsay at [lcochran@teatown.org](mailto:lcochran@teatown.org) or (914) 762-2912 x123. ELLA membership is required to attend the workshop.**

## AUGUST

**Program Committee meeting:** Date to be announced

## SEPTEMBER

**Launch of ELLA website:** Resources such as relevant PDF documents will be posted for members

## OCTOBER

**Fall ELLA Workshop:** Date & topic to be announced in September newsletter

## **About the Hudson Hills and Highlands**

The Hudson Hills and Highlands bioregion includes parts of five Hudson Valley counties: Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess, Rockland and Orange. It is defined by the hills and highlands of the Lower Hudson River Watershed between Yonkers and Beacon. Nearly 80% of the area lies east of the Hudson River in Westchester and Putnam counties. The 936-square-mile Hudson Hills and Highlands is home for 785,000 people and provides habitats for a rich diversity of plants and animals. The nationally-acclaimed Hudson River Estuary and majestic Hudson Highlands form the region's backbone. Its natural bounty is surprising considering that New York City and its 12 million residents are located less than 45 miles to the south.

The Hudson Hills and Highlands is experiencing significant loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation caused by sprawling overdevelopment, rapid spread of non-native species, pollution of ground and surface water, and other factors. Each of the 31 towns that comprise the Hudson Hills and Highlands has a core of dedicated town-appointed environmental leaders committed to addressing important issues in their communities, and in recent years, those interested in protecting natural resources in the Hudson Valley have created a number of effective organizations and projects.

The Hudson Hills and Highlands Collaboration believes that protection of nature – biodiversity, natural resources, and ecosystems -- throughout this entire important bioregion is achievable only with the involvement of town officials, environmental leaders, and informed citizens. In particular, local environmental committee persons will increasingly have a key role in our communities, as we move toward more sustainable living practices that safeguard the many essential benefits provided to us by nature.

**ELLA is a project of**



For more information, please contact Linsay Cochran at [lcochran@teatown.org](mailto:lcochran@teatown.org) or (914) 762-2912 x123