

Duck Pond and a Better Way to Think About Land

by Brian T. Lynch, MSW

Let me introduce you to a 12,000-year-old feature of Roxbury, New Jersey, that has been off limits to the general public for more than 125 years.



View of Duck Pond.

This photo, courtesy of Ashland Chemical Corporation, is likely your first peek at the beautiful Duck Pond. It was my first view as well. It is a 15-acre, spring-fed pond in the northeastern corner of the 1,000-acre Hercules property in Kenvil.

Duck Pond appears on the earliest maps of the area. It has no natural inlet or outlet and apparently never did. Spring water vents up into the pond and then infiltrates back into the shallow, unconfined aquifer upon which it sits. This has likely been true since it was created when the Wisconsin Glacier receded thousands of years ago.

Old historical documents I've read indicate that the Hercules tract of land was once the summer home of the Leni Lenape natives, who undoubtedly fished and swam in this pond. These original people referred to the southern wetland on the property as the Great Spring. Early settlers call the stream flowing from this wetland the Black River, but the native Americans called it "Alamatong," which means "place of gentle flowing." This describes the rapid yet smooth flow of its water over a bed of glacial sand. From this Algonquian word, we derived the name Lamington, which remains the official name of this stream.

Most of us have never seen Duck Pond because it is located within a polluted industrial area that has been off-limits to residents and the public for well over one hundred twenty-five years. The dangerous production of explosives required that the property be fenced off. Production ceased nearly three decades ago, but hot spots of pollution on the land remain, making it an unsafe place to roam freely.

I was motivated to write about the pond because of a PowerPoint presentation given by Hartz Mountain Corporation during a Roxbury Township Planning Board hearing. At the time, Hartz Mountain was seeking to build 54 acres of warehouses on a 200-acre parcel of Hercules land. One of their PowerPoint slides labeled Duck Pond as a drainage area. This is in keeping with the site's remedial investigation report that calls the Black River a drainage ditch.

I was struck by this sterile language, which I've seen in other Hercules-related documents. Indeed, Duck Pond is a drainage area, as is every freshwater lake in the world. However, using the term within the context of "clean-up operations" conveys how the pond was utilized during explosives manufacturing. It may be how some developers still view the pond today, with Duck Pond just another place to clean up on a property that has been badly abused.

Just as groups of people can be marginalized and robbed of their personhood through word choices, so too can it happen to portions of our biosphere that we call "property." Property is a lifeless term that allows our consciences to treat a piece of land as something other than a living habitat.

I see it differently. I view Hercules as a compromised yet beautifully regenerating habitat. This should be the foundation for all subsequent considerations. Whether we take active measures to clean up our mess or allow nature time to renew the land on its own, the language we choose to describe it will influence our decisions and the outcomes that follow. We should always be respectful, even reverent, of biological spaces and land use. We should not treat the Hercules property with less respect or consideration because of its troubled past.