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## Snakes on a plain

Scarce species alter development decisions

Posted by the Ocean County Observer on 10/2/07

### THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TRENTON — They're common in other parts of the country. But in New Jersey, the lowly corn snake and northern pine snake are rare enough to get state protection, and the ability to halt development projects in an already crowded state.

The mere sight of the snakes — common elsewhere in the country, and even kept as pets — spurs government bureaucracy into action when it involves a piece of Garden State land slated for development.

The corn snake — a colorful, docile, rodent-eating species that's a popular choice for a pet reptile — has been under state protection since 1979, and is currently listed as an endangered species. The dull-colored, secretive northern pine snake is listed as threatened.

When two snakes were spotted on the site of a proposed Wal-Mart Supercenter along the border of Manchester Township and Toms River, the Wal-Mart developer offered to relocate the snakes to a piece of land that would become a snake reserve, according to Manchester Township Mayor Michael Fressola.

The state Department of Environmental Protection turned down the plan — a decision that's been appealed to an administrative law judge.

The sighting of three corn snakes caused enough additional requirements from the New Jersey Pinelands Commission that Bob Meyer recently gave up plans to develop a 110-home project in Medford.

"I think sometimes we create laws and follow the letter of it, and the bigger picture is forgotten," Meyer told the Philadelphia Inquirer.

But Carleton Montgomery, an advocate for preservation of New Jersey's Pinelands, defended the state standards.

"These snakes are part of the ecosystem and they're a predator in the life of the Pine Barrens," Montgomery said. "If you say, 'Well, there's a healthy population of them in Georgia — let's get rid of them here,' you'd be removing one of the key pieces of the puzzle in our ecosystem."

Issues with snakes and other wildlife were enough to cause the New Turnpike Authority to propose a \$9 million tunnel under a planned Garden State Parkway expansion, providing a crossing point for endangered species. The DEP is considering the proposal.

For Montgomery, the director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, paying attention to some cases of snakes halting development misses the overall need to preserve New Jersey's natural beauty.

"People need to look at the ecological imbalance that would be created if the snakes' habitat was destroyed," Montgomery said.

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SHAWN HUBER PHOTO

Robert Zappalorti, president of Herpetological Associates, Inc. holds a northern pine snake during a presentation in Stafford Township in August.

