

The Tocks Island Dam Project: The Community and Environmental Impact of Government Intervention

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Introduction/Background

- Less than a two hour drive from Manhattan, the Delaware Water Gap is a 40-mile strip of land acquired by the federal government for a 1960s dam project that was eventually deauthorized in 2002. The unbuilt dam project displaced 15,000 residents, leaving a legacy of visceral governmental distaste resulting from eminent domain.
- Today, it's the 72,000 acre Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (DEWA) controlled by the National Park Service. To this day, residents I interviewed continue to fight against new government proposals and environmental concerns of droughts, floods, and worsening climate patterns.
- While existing research examines the disruptiveness of eminent domain to local communities, research rarely connects these impacts with environmental patterns and ongoing environmental concerns.
- My research explores how differing perceptions of what constitutes the ‘environment’ and what is deemed grounds for environmental intervention fed recurring concerns over unwanted governmental authority like eminent domain that continue to linger in the DEWA today.

Goals and Objectives of the Project

- As an Environment & Sustainability and Human Rights major at Barnard, my research sought to expand upon my passion for human rights, land rights, and the environment, after hearing from local families about the 15,000 people displaced from eminent domain in the Delaware Water Gap.
- My research was deeply fueled from my experiences living in DEWA, as I had already heard from campers’ families how eminent domain disrupted communities and have observed the remnants of rewilded homes along trails and abandoned roads.

Methods

- This research project compiles personal accounts and historical environmental records to illustrate a narrative of environmental impact, governmental overreach, and community resilience. Through a focus on secondary sources both published and unpublished, and original interviews with former residents, I sought to better understand the clear contestation between resident perception and government perception of environment and what is deemed grounds for environmental intervention.
- During the research process, I assessed environmental knowledge of the area, documenting findings from land surveys, almanacs, population records, and environmental data. Then, I combined local interviews and lawsuit testimonies with Pocono Record and other newspaper reports to reveal accounts of displacement, resistance, and economic hardships.
- I had never conducted research interviews before, and I found that speaking to residents and former residents about my project and hearing more about their experiences, shifted my project quite a bit from my more policy-based thesis. I transcribed and coded all 10 interviews in addition to the various interview records I had previously unearthed during my research.
- My focus on interviews has truly informed my project, which shifted to examining how the federal government frames and responds to environmental challenges in the area differently from residents' framing and responses, resulting in legacies of visceral governmental distaste.
- These interviews have allowed me to connect deeper with the communities impacted by the Tocks Island Dam Project. I am incredibly grateful to have met with so many wonderful people who were willing to share such harrowing and life-altering experiences with me.

Discussion and Results

- In the decades between when the Tocks Island Dam Project was authorized and subsequently deauthorized, the federal government seemed to focus more on the natural environment as something to control and reshape, while residents included man-made components in the environment they hoped to protect and sustain. The Army Corps of Engineers hoped to dam the Middle Delaware River, due to flood concerns, drinking water needs, and recreational purposes. Although the government used catastrophic flooding from 1955 to justify dam construction for safety and recreation, residents argued the project relied on flawed environmental analysis and ignored unstable geological conditions. Through the use of eminent domain, thousands of people were forced from their homes, leading to the destruction of historic towns and a lasting mistrust of federal authority.
- The Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, now curated by the National Park Service, is a haven for hiking, canoeing, and fishing. The forest and farmland once freckled with towns now form a park with public access to waterfalls, streams, and hiking trails.¹
- For former residents, the park is a skeleton of what was once there. Communities like Dingmans Ferry, Bushkill, Layton, and Walpack, were close-knit, and many residents hunted or fished for subsistence, viewing wildlife then through the lens of mutual necessity, rather than conservation for ‘aesthetic preservation.’²
- Now that the Park Service has added trails, parks, and boat-launch amenities, locals don’t often use them—they prefer to reminisce about what the area used to look like.³ Overgrowth and roads reclaimed by nature have swallowed up old, informal boat launches. Given the influx of visitors, the Park Service now implores people to use official launches at curated beaches to paddle along the Delaware.⁴ Most locals avoid crowded spots like Akenac Park, Milford and Smithfield Beach, preferring their unofficial trails and boat launches to remember what the Middle Delaware once was.⁵
- As the community faces environmental issues and dangers from new proposals, residents are using their perspective from 50 years ago to inform their perspective now. This community is especially suspicious of the government, not only due to acts of property seizure, but the accumulation of threat and response over the last 60 years, and the likelihood of environmental backing of governmental intervention.⁶ Deep-seated distaste for federal authority continues, manifesting as fierce opposition to redesignating the area from a National Recreation Area to a National Park, due to fears of further eminent domain and commercialization.⁷
- While a new National Park proposal may seem like a good thing for environmental protection and funding, residents fear the government will use eminent domain again. Once the pattern of eminent domain and proposals begins, there’s little trust in the government not to stop. Residents remain hypervigilant about National Park Service actions, continually critiquing NPS decisions. Particularly as government analysis framed eminent domain as ‘needed’ environmentally to benefit the greater good, residents viewed it as a sacrifice of their livelihoods.⁸



Left: Map of Towns in the Proposed Recreation Area (Courtesy of the Minisink Bull, 1967)
Right: Map of Current National Recreation Area (Courtesy of the National Park Service 2026)



Conclusions & Next Steps

- The ground we walk on holds deep history, particularly in federally managed parks. It’s important to understand the land and history we’re walking into the next time we enter a park, or a preserve. Understanding these historical takings helps us curate the conversation around conservation politics and the need to remove people for recreation, or to return the land to a "pristine" state by kicking others out. When eminent domain removed the people, the environment and identity of the area was forever changed. In terms of community resilience and stopping the dam project from being constructed, flooding the entire area, this story matters.
- Historically, ‘water resource development’ projects by the Army Corps of Engineers—whether they be dams or man-made flooding—have wiped out towns throughout the country with differing environmental perceptions between residents and government. Displaced residents in the Delaware Valley, at least those who remain in the area, continue to fight against federal systems by staying alert to emergent policies and maintaining what community they have left. Despite the damage and destruction the Tocks Island Dam project caused to people and the community, residents continue to use their trauma as fuel.
- Community activism continues to show that the Delaware Valley has an incredible history worth preserving, as residents continue to rally against oil pipeline and nuclear energy proposals, the increasing threat of AI data centers, and the ever-growing worry of clean water access amidst an ongoing climate crisis. Residents fight both current proposals and future fears of political change, all while enduring ongoing environmental shifts like worsening droughts and flooding, providing optimism necessary for stopping future government overstep and egregious environmental interventions in years to come.

References

- [1] Oplinger and Halma, The Poconos, 19.
- [2] Sandy DeRenzis, interview with author.
- [3] Fazzino, Historic Takings, 192.
- [4] Sandy Hull in Ghost Waters - Tocks Island Dam - Delaware River, Patrick, Nick, dir. 2015.
- [5] Fazzino, Historic Takings, 212.
- [6] Steve Schoonover, telephone interview with author.
- [7] Sandy Hull, interview with author.
- [8] Fazzino, Historic Takings, 211.

Acknowledgments

- Special thanks to the Laidlaw Foundation for its generous support of Barnard students.
- I am so incredibly thankful for all the interviewees who were willing to share their stories with me, many thanks to my wonderful mentor Debbie Becher, and my lovely friends who edited my many rough drafts.