

History and Planning

Northeastern Pennsylvania and Anthracite

During the 150-year existence of the Pennsylvania anthracite industry, over five billion tons of anthracite were mined from deposits underlying approximately 484 square miles of surface area in Northeastern Pennsylvania. This area, called the Northern Anthracite Coal Field, is the largest of its kind in the nation and was exploited to supply 80% of the world's anthracite coal.

Peak production was reached in 1917 when nearly 100 million net tons of coal were produced. In 1947, when the world turned to other fuel sources, the mines began to close, creating serious economic, social, and environmental problems. These included high unemployment, social fragmentation and a legacy of environmental degradation. The landscape, with its abandoned strip mines and industrial-era cities, is a reminder of the region's contribution to American industrial development. This region presents challenging opportunities for urban and community forestry initiatives.



Statistics show regional unemployment figures well above state and national averages. As late as 1992, the Census Data shows unemployment rates in Northeastern Pennsylvania were at an all time high of 9.7%. The rate for the U.S. at this time was 7.4% and for the state 7.5%. The average unemployment rate between 1986 and 1995 for Northeastern Pennsylvania was 7.5% versus the U.S. rate of 6.0% and a Pennsylvania rate of 5.9%.

Today, diversified and service-related industries have replaced mining as the economic base for the region. Industrial and office parks have been built throughout the valley. Historic landmarks and the natural beauty of the region attract thousands of visitors. However, much of the lower Lackawanna and Susquehanna watersheds remain degraded from coal mining activities.

Few "natural" areas in the anthracite regions are healthy environments. Impacts along the Lackawanna River have been particularly severe where nutrient-poor, acidic, culm and ballast were used to build railway corridors. These soils are incapable of supporting native plant communities which buffer and protect the river.

As mines were abandoned, underground mine pools formed, which feed acid mine drainage into local water sources. This drainage decimated local fish populations, stained the riverbeds orange, and ravaged riverine wetlands. Acid mine drainage, erosion, sedimentation and poor land use practices have all contributed to the continued impairments to local water quality. Only recently has this begun to change.