



December 21, 2009

DEP says northern pine snake still threatened

Builders association sought to have snake removed from list

*BY KIRK MOORE
STAFF WRITER*

The northern pine snake is rightly considered a threatened species in New Jersey because development continues to overtake the snakes' habitat, despite strict building controls in the Pinelands region, the state Department of Environmental Protection said, in rejecting a petition from the New Jersey Builders Association to have pine snakes removed from the threatened and endangered species list.

"Our analysis shows that within New Jersey a wide range of threats exist, and many of these threats are increasing," wrote authors of a new DEP pine snake assessment, undertaken in response to the builders' challenge. Snakes are killed by road traffic and eaten by predators like feral cats and skunks that thrive side-by-side with people, the report says.

Most importantly the snakes are losing suitable habitat to development and, inside the Pinelands protected areas, decades of forest fire suppression is likely reducing the open, sandy forest floor habitat most favorable to the snakes, the authors say. Illegal snake collecting for sale to reptile enthusiasts continues to be a major threat despite recent attempts at enforcement crackdowns, they write.

The Builders Association petition filed six months ago questioned how pine snakes could be considered threatened without a comprehensive population survey, and criticized the DEP's periodic reviews of species status for not seeking out more outside expertise.

In its response, the agency maintains that habitat modeling is a scientifically justified proxy for counting snakes, and one used by other wildlife agencies that monitor pine snakes. DEP officials also defend their reviews of species status over the years, saying they have sought the advice of independent researchers and academics. While some of those reviewers were not pine snake specialists they were familiar with reptiles and principles of wildlife conservation biology, the agency said.
