

How to Save a State Forest: **The Fight for Stewart**



Stewart State Forest. Photograph by Nick Zungoli

By Wayne A. Hall

Retired school
teacher Sandra
Kissam's husband,
Ben, gave her really
bad news after
walking their dog
Star at 7000-acre
Stewart State Forest
in 1987.

ONE OF THE STATE WORKERS out there said to enjoy this while you can. He said they're planning to turn this whole place into industrial facilities that will support cargo and the airport expansion."

Actually, that was going to be at least seven million square feet of industrial development in four separate business parks rumbling in soon to obliterate huge chunks of this rich forest with its meadows, streams flowing under huge oaks, blue heron rookeries, many ponds, twenty-two miles of hiking trails, and loads of wildlife.

A big part of this well-used and needed forest for hunters and nature lovers was about to be mowed down with official approval, despite formal agreements that had officially made much of it a Wildlife Management Area for hunters and anyone else who enjoyed the out-of-doors.

No one really should have been surprised.

The airport's growth potential was being ballyhooed as sky high. Officials brayed about the airport becoming metropolitan New York's fourth jetport. They already had constructed a 12,000-foot runway, expecting Concorde.

The same economic boosters expected Stewart to be Orange County's growth engine. After all, the forest was ringed by heavily traveled roads, including the New York State Thruway, where Ben Kissam worked as a toll collector supervisor. It was time to get cracking, said developers.

GREAT WALL OF **ORANGE COUNTY**

One developer was even hoping to snag some of that land to build a China USA theme park replete with a Great Wall. Fun for all ages.

So who could step in and stop this on behalf of those who wanted to save these so-called airport buffer lands? Organized opposition to gutting the forest was limited. Groups had tried to halt the runway extension but failed.

The Kissams stepped into the breach. Not novices, they had successfully helped a group of local homeowners in their neighborhood halt a developer from ruining local drinking water. But at Stewart, the fight was going to be much bloodier and cost a bundle because their mission was nothing less than saving 7000 acres, the bulk of the forest. Their heavyweight opponents included governors George Pataki and Mario Cuomo,