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FRIDAY FORUM

Today's topic: Remembering Howard Zahmiser
Readers and writers share their thoughts on crucial community issues

Pennsylvanian made federal Wilderness Act happen

Saturday marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Howard Zahmiser, the father of the federal law under which Congress preserves wilderness areas for future generations of Americans to use and enjoy.

Born in Franklin, Zahmiser drafted this landmark legislation and, as the head of the Wilderness Society, headed the campaign that led to its enactment in 1964. America's National Wilderness Preservation System now embraces portions of our federal public lands across 44 states, from a 5-acre island in Florida to a 13 million-acre area in Alaska's Brooks Range — more than 106 million acres in all. Only 9 million acres were immediately protected when the law was enacted by President Lyndon Johnson in September 1964.

Year after year, Congress has applied the Wilderness Act to additional areas. Some proposals come from agencies

**Kirk Johnson
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like the U.S. Forest Service; others are advocated by citizen groups. It was such a citizen proposal that led Congress to protect the natural treasures of the Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands Wilderness Areas in our own Allegheny National Forest near Tidouate.

Millions of Americans treasure these wilderness areas for recreation of many kinds (such as hiking and camping with our kids, kayaking or stalking elusive game on the hunt of a lifetime). Wilderness offers places for solitude and reflection, protects our cleanest waters, and affords havens for many wildlife species. Zahmiser grew up on the banks of the Allegheny River in Tonesta. Hiking our wild

“Some of us think we see this so clearly that for ourselves, for our children, our continuing posterity and our fellow men we covet with a consuming intensity the fullness of human development that keeps its contact with wildness.”

—Howard Zahmiser, wilderness preservation pioneer

Allegheny landscape shaped his deep love for the natural world. In a 1985 letter, he told his sister that being in Tonesta “always strengthens me. To be near the river, the hills and the country without the harshness of industrial and commercial activities should be of renewing value to the nerves.” Currently, the landscape of the Allegheny National Forest is being debated again as the Forest Service revises its

long-term management plan. A local citizens group, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, proposes to protect eight additional tracts. Less than 2 percent of the 513,000-acre forest is now protected wilderness, compared to 11 percent for all national forests in the East, leaving the home national forest of the father of the Wilderness Act significantly underrepresented.

Zahmiser died just four months before the Wilderness Act became law and is buried along the Allegheny River in Tonesta.

Using his law, ordinary Americans have worked with lawmakers from both political parties to preserve special wild places they love — people like a casino waitress in Nevada, a hardware dealer in Montana and a hunter in West Virginia.

In 2006, President George W. Bush signed laws protecting new wilderness areas in New Mexico and Puerto Rico, and another this January protecting a 100,000-acre wilderness area in Utah.

Zahmiser's ideas continue to resonate deeply with the American people. “We are part of the wilderness of the universe,” he wrote. “Some of us think we see this so clearly that for ourselves, for our children, our continuing posterity and our fellow men we covet with a consuming intensity the fullness of human

development that keeps its contact with wildness.”

Of the Wilderness Act, he wrote, “With the enactment of this measure we shall cease to be in any sense a rearguard delaying inevitable destruction of all wilderness, but shall rather become a new vanguard with reasonable hopes that some areas of wilderness will be preserved in perpetuity.”

Readers interested in future wilderness protection for the Allegheny National Forest may visit the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness Web site at www.pawild.org.

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DOUG SCOTT is policy director of the Campaign for America's Wilderness and author of “The Enduring Wilderness: Protecting Our Natural Heritage through the Wilderness Act.”