

## ALLEGHENY

### Here's an opportunity to widen protection for state's U.S. forest

**C**an public land left to nature's devices spawn economic benefits?

The answer is "yes." Studies have found higher property values in municipalities with the highest amount of protected open space.

Add in the dollars spent by anglers, hunters, nature photographers and just plain hikers, and by one study's estimate wilderness areas generate \$44 per acre per visitor and an additional \$44 per acre in spending in nearby communities.

These are hardly the only benefits derived from wilderness areas, but how do you put a price on protecting watersheds and the quality of water that

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comes out the tap, let alone the quality of fishing pristine waters? How do you measure in dollars the benefits of clean air, preservation of wildlife and wild plants or storage of carbon on a

planet growing warmer from too many carbon emissions?

How do you quantify the economics of the sheer joy of experiencing nature as its Creator intended?

The virtues of wilderness — coupled with its vastly diminished existence — are such that it almost begs belief that Congress has not yet moved to protect permanently the few remaining truly wild areas in Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest. No other national forest has been more exploited, reflected in the fact that less than 2 percent of the Allegheny's 9,031 acres has been set aside as wilderness, compared

to 18 percent of all national forests.

The U.S. Forest Service last year proposed expanding protected wilderness areas in Allegheny by 13,000 acres. But the new management plan failed to include Tracy Ridge, the largest unprotected roadless area in the forest, as well as other roadless areas. When that plan was drafted in 2006, more than 6,800 comments — reflecting more than 80 percent of those received — called for much broader protection.

Such a plan, a Citizens' Wilderness Proposal — based on years of study and field work by volunteers of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness — calls for eight areas to be added to the current two, for a total of 54,460 protected acres, or 12 percent of the national forest. If approved, it would have little impact on the local timber industry and no impact on local schools, which receive Forest Service subsidies.

Pennsylvanians have played a huge role in the wilderness movement. Howard Zahniser, who grew up in nearby Tionesta, wrote most of the 1964 Wilderness Act. It was introduced by a Pennsylvanian, U.S. Rep. John P. Saylor, a Johnstown Republican. The state's U.S. senators, from Hugh Scott to Arlen Specter, have played pivotal roles in establishing the Allegheny wilderness areas.

Here's an opportunity for retiring U.S. Rep. John Peterson, R-State College, whose district encompasses most of the Allegheny National Forest, to secure his place in posterity and in the hearts of future generations by introducing and pushing legislation that preserves the last remaining roadless areas in the state's only national forest.

Future generations can change the law if they wish. They cannot, however, recover a wilderness that wasn't protected while it was still possible.