

THE BUFFALO NEWS

WESTERN NEW YORK EDITION

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FRIDAY, APRIL 6, 2007

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84 PAGES • 50 CENTS

EDITORIALS

Preserve more wilderness

New plan for a nearby national forest misses a chance for more protection

A quick show of hands: How many people think western Pennsylvania has too many trees and not enough hotels?

Thought so. The area is renowned for its forest — so much so, that part of it is a legacy for the American people. That's why a seemingly small bit of a new and generally well-balanced plan for the future of the Allegheny National Forest, a 513,000-acre preserve that just touches the New York border, stands out like a dead pine tree in the midst of a healthy stand of birch.

That bit is the refusal of National Forest Service managers to recommend more than a paltry 14,800 acres to be set aside as wilderness — the highest level of federal protection.

With that refusal comes renewed, if still vaguely grounded, fears that the uniquely undisturbed shoreline of the Allegheny Reservoir might fall victim to a developer's shovel. The American people, especially those who live in the densely populated East, should demand more. And Congress, which alone has the power to grant wilderness protection, should give it.

Even adding the two tracts identified in the new ANF management plan to the inventory of national wilderness areas would preserve only slivers of what used to be a giant and ecologically vast woodland. The Allegheny Forest, within a day's drive of half the U.S. population, is a prime spot to preserve more of our homeland's natural beauty. The 9,000-odd acres of the Allegheny National Forest that, since 1964, have been designated as wilderness amount to less than 2 percent of the forest. The rest resides in various categories ranging from logging to snowmobiling to on-foot-only recreation.

Conservationists had hoped that the ANF master plan update due this year would increase the percentage of land set aside as wilderness, the category that not only is the strictest in terms of use but also the one that cannot be withdrawn or weakened by anything less than an act of Congress. One specific proposal came from the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, which painstakingly cataloged eight tracts totaling more than 54,000 acres that, in its educated view, rate wilderness status.

Even if the Friends plan could be quibbled with, it set an achievable goal for a part of the world woefully lacking in preserved beauty and silence. And the stated rationale for

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excluding from wilderness recommendation one parcel that both the Friends and an earlier version of the official plan had identified — 9,700 acres on the eastern shore of the Allegheny Reser-

voir — is frightening in its vagueness.

The note in the forest plan that the so-called Tracy Ridge area should not be proposed as wilderness is justified by a fuzzy idea that that area might at least be considered for some kind of "overnight facilities," which are not allowed in wilderness areas. That could be nothing more obnoxious than some basic camp sites. Or it could be a high-end fishing lodge that would ruin the very beauty that attracts serious — and high-spending — anglers from great distances.

The forest plan is far from the rape of the Allegheny Plateau. But it doesn't go nearly far enough toward the goal of giving the forest a national, if not global, reputation as a uniquely beautiful, and uniquely American, natural wonder.