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M E T R O E D I T I O N

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PRESERVATION

Allegheny group working to save wilderness

A new management plan is being drafted for Allegheny National Forest, and the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness hope the federal government heeds its call to establish new wilderness areas inside the 513,000-plus acre enclave.

These are not purist tree huggers, totally against everything people do in the forest. Their "Citizens Wilderness Proposal" is one of the best primers on what wilderness is and why it's important. It also explains how the Forest Service operates and how the National Forest are supposed to work, as well as giving an overview of the history, ecology and geology of the Allegheny Plateau, over which the ANF spreads.

For a copy, contact the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness at 220 Center St. Warren Pa., 16365 or call 814-723-0620 or e-mail alleghenyfriends@earthlink.net.

This booklet also explains how the 40-year-old federal Wilderness Act works. And it makes a compelling case for expanding areas "untrammelled by man" in this sprawling patchwork that stretches across northern Pennsylvania in Elk, Forest, McKean and Warren counties.

The ANF was established in 1923 with a set of boundaries. Today about 69 percent of the possible total is federal, multi-use land. Pennsylvania owns tracts inside the boundaries, and a lot of private land is held as well.

Western New Yorkers also fish, hunt, camp, snowmobile and cross-country ski here. And yet, while 18 percent of National Forest land is designated wilderness (most of that in the west) and while 11 percent

of the eastern National Forest lands are so set aside, less than 2 percent is designated here.

Wilderness need not be "virgin" forest. Indeed, most of this forest was either farmed or heavily logged by the 1920s — but as the woods come back, natural succession eventually makes them old. And if an area does not have roads, buildings or other visible signs of man's presence — and is either large enough (5,000 acres), unique enough or has habitat needed for the sheltering of endangered species — Congress can make it "wilderness" regardless of what the forest management plan says. That plan must be updated every decade or so under Forest Service rules.

While biodiversity and natural processes are important, the prime need for wilderness — especially in the densely populated sections of America is the chance for someone to get away from the sights and sounds of civilization for the quiet in a wilder world.

If you have never sat in a prairie with not a single motor sound, hearing wind rustle the sagebrush; if you have never been in an old forest with Douglas firs so big that 15 people holding hands cannot circle the trunk; if you have never been on a islet in the North Woods seeing a moose drink and hearing loons call — you *can* do all that, and more, thanks to the Wilderness Act.

You may not have the opportunity to visit the Boundary Waters of Minnesota or the rain forests of



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the Pacific Slope or the buffalo plains of the Dakotas in the near future — or even hike the remote areas of our own pioneering Adirondack Forest Preserve — but most of us can find a way to drive two hours to enjoy this nearby, multi-use forest.

You might only spend an afternoon on an Allegheny ridge top, watching turkey buzzards loop overhead, or a weekend drifting down the Clarion River in a canoe, but you will come back refreshed. This is, after all what outdoor recreation is about. And, say people from Friends, we can do that without stopping timber harvest, hunting, or snowmobiling.

The group spent two years to pinpoint eight areas, (54,000 acres, or about 10 percent of the ANF) they believe should be designated "wilderness." They suggest another three sections should be named "national recreation areas" where developed camp sites and roads could be established. They realize that Forest Service planners are not likely to agree with them. Congress may not agree to all of their proposals either — if they choose to consider them at all.

Several sites in their proposals will leap out to you depending on your knowledge of the areas. I was immediately caught by the 6009-acre Clarion River Wilderness, west and north of Ridgeway, Pa., and the Tionesta Wilderness area of nearly 15,000 acres.

The latter carries emotional freight. Howard Zahnheiser a Tionesta native and for years the exec-

utive director of the Wilderness Society, was the chief proponent (or lobbyist) of a Wilderness Act, and in fact helped write some of its language.

I liked the Friends' proposals and think their booklet is a great primer on both wilderness and the multi-use nature of Allegheny (as well as all other) national forests. Yes, they are timber sources and may allow mineral extraction and drilling. But not all of the forest need be exploited. Moreover, in this forest, with almost half the U.S. population within two days of travel, people may need a bit more wilderness here than is currently set aside.

Check out the forest's web site at www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/allegheny. The links to the forest plan right now seem more involved with process than substance, but it is a good place to start. And the site leads to incredible breath of recreational opportunities in the forest.

Once you digest all the information available, you might have a suggestion or an opinion, and those can be filed first with Michael Hampton, planning officer, ANF 222 Liberty Street, Warren Pa., 16365.

After that you might also contact your congressman or your U.S. Senators. Any designation of wilderness must go through them.

And since the management plan will not be completed for at least two years, there is ample time to visit Allegheny National Forest.

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