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New group wants to turn clock back on parts of Allegheny National Forest

By JOHN BARTLETT
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WARREN — If Kirk Johnson had it his way, the Allegheny National Forest would have 20,000 to 30,000 acres designated as forever wild — areas restricted to man and shaped only by the forces of nature.

As the executive director of the Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness, a new environmental organization that will soon be based in Warren, he recently pledged to do everything he can to see that that happens.

Less than 2 percent of the Allegheny National Forest now carries Wilderness Act designation — the 8,500-acre Hickory Creek Wilderness near Hearts Content and the seven islands that make up the Allegheny Islands Wilderness. The average for all national forests is about 18 percent, he said.

"Clearly there is a need for more wilderness," said Johnson, 32. "I would almost call it urgent. It is something that will benefit the forest ecology, it will be a recreational benefit and as a result it will benefit local communities and the economy."

A good first step, he said, may be adding the 4,100-acre Tionesta Scenic and Research Natural Area — a hemlock and beech old-growth forest — to those already designated as forever wild.

The area, located about 5.5 miles due west of Kane, is believed to be the largest and most intact old-growth forest remaining between the Adirondacks in New York and the Great Smokey Mountains in Tennessee and North Carolina.

"The Tionesta Natural Area is a very significant vestige of our ecological heritage on the Allegheny Plateau," said Clarion University professor Charles

Williams, a forest ecologist and conservation biologist.

Johnson laid out his idea for the Tionesta Wilderness in an article in this month's edition of Natural Areas Journal, a publication for conservation planners.

The plan calls for designating as wilderness an area within the boundary of U.S. Route 6 and state Routes 66 and 948. Existing Forest Service roads would be removed, mineral rights and private property within that area would be purchased over time on a willing-seller

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basis, and the entire area would be restored to a natural state.

To achieve this, however, will require a great deal of work. The process of wilderness designation starts with getting it included in an update of the Allegheny National Forest Management Plan.

Fortunately, the plan is scheduled to be updated beginning in October 2002.

Beyond that, it would have to make its way through regional reviews, be accepted by the chief of the Forest Service and eventually gain the approval of Congress, Allegheny National Forest spokeswoman Nadine Pollock said.

"There also needs to be public support," Pollock said.

That's the job of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, Johnson

said. "So far I think we've had a pretty good reception."

However, Johnson said he has not heard from the timber industry or others who could be expected to have concerns.

Johnson, who said his organization is not a part of the effort to end commercial logging on the forest, explained that the impact on the timber industry would be limited, with only a small amount of additional land taken out of timber production.

"Friends of Allegheny Wilderness is focused solely on the addition of new federal wilderness in the Allegheny," Johnson said. "I look forward to conversations with the timber industry and hopefully there is some common ground."

He noted that the Wilderness Act of 1964 established 54

wilderness areas — all but three in western states — that totaled 9.1 million acres. In addition, it called on the Forest Service to evaluate and identify suitable areas within national forests for future wilderness designation.

In the years that followed, officials and environmentalists struggled to determine what areas would qualify.

The fact that there were few large, unbroken tracts within national forests in the eastern United States and fewer still left "untrammelled by man" greatly complicated matters and reduced the likelihood for vast stretches to be designated as wilderness areas.

Adding to the difficulties for lands in the Allegheny National Forest is the fact that the federal government owned the oil

and gas rights for only a tiny fraction of its 500,000 acres.

The idea of wilderness areas within the Allegheny National Forest had widespread support among conservation organizations at the time, but the effort ran into opposition from some timber and oil and gas interests and motorized vehicle recreational users.

In 1975 Congress passed the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act that designated new wilderness areas in the eastern United States from Florida to Vermont. Early versions of the legislation included areas within the Allegheny National Forest, but the final act did not.

The debate over wilderness within the Allegheny National Forest continued. Eventually, interest focussed on the 8,500-acre Hickory Creek.

To resolve the oil and gas issue and clear the way for wilderness designation, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy arranged to purchase the mineral rights and eventually turn them over to the Forest Service.

In 1984 the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act, establishing the Hickory Creek Wilderness and the Allegheny Islands Wilderness.

"Hickory Creek was just a small part of what we should have had in 1975," Johnson said.

Now it's time to begin thinking about more.

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