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NWPAOUTDOORS

National Wilderness Month deserves consideration

Some feelings and thoughts can surface only after a period of time away from civilization, away from artificial stimulation such as television, telephone, radio or tape players.

From the moment a person leaves civilization, things change. Sitting by the first evening campfire, surrounded by darkness, one of the first feelings is fear. Not terror, but a primitive fear that urges us to sit closer to the small fire. Then, staring into the constantly changing hues of the hot coals, the fact that you are all alone sinks in.

I believe that artificial stimulation is perhaps the most powerful thing separating modern humans from our natural selves.

I have lived through the changes from radio to black-and-white television, to color television, then computer imaging. With each of these changes, the necessity of using our imaginations decreased. This is why I feel that everyone in this country should be reasonably close to a wild area, or better, wilderness, so that, from time to time, we can go there to remember what we really are.

We are very fortunate to have had Theodore Roosevelt as president, and the timing of a few other individuals who had the ability, perseverance and energy to establish our National Park System, and several areas designated as wilderness forever.

We commemorate this with National Wilderness Month, proclaimed by President Obama.

National Wilderness Month stands out this year as the precursor to the 50th anniversary of the National Wilderness Act. The act was signed into law



Mike Bleech

September 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson.

Almost 30 years ago, President Reagan signed the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act of 1984. This established for perpetuity the Allegheny Islands Wilderness, the smallest of our National Wilderness areas, and the Hickory Creek Wilderness. Both are on the Allegheny National Forest.

Northwestern Pennsylvania played a vital role in the wilderness that remains in America today. Tionesta native Howard Zahniser, one of those individuals who played key roles in preserving wilderness in the United States, wrote the Wilderness Act of 1964.

On Sept. 3, we passed the 49th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, and now we are counting down the days until the 50th anniversary.

Throughout this coming year, there will be close to 500 events across the country to look at the many ways Americans value wilderness. A calendar of these events is available at www.wilderness50th.org.

Two events are scheduled in Northwest Pennsylvania, and there still is time to add more events.

From Aug. 1, 2014, until Sep. 30, 2014, the Erie Art Museum will host an Environmental Impact exhibit. For information, visit www.lakeeriegroup.webs.com.

The Crary Art Gallery, in Warren, along with Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, will host an exhibition of wilderness images that will feature many high-profile photographers. The exhibition will begin Aug. 30, 2014, and continue until Sept. 27, 2014. For information, visit www.crarygallery.org.

It seems disrespectful that so little of the National Forest near Zahniser's home has achieved the status of National Wilderness Area.

Less than 2 percent of the Allegheny National Forest is designated wilderness, a total of about 9,000 acres from the 513,000 acres of public land. Compare this with 18 percent of all U.S. Forest Service land nationwide which has been designated as wilderness. About 11 percent of the Forest Service Eastern Region which is wilderness.

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness is a non-profit group formed to promote wilderness designation to specific areas of the Allegheny National Forest. They pointedly are not opposed to the multi-use principles by which management of the national forest is guided. Their goal is including more wilderness as part of the multi-use.

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness has identified 54,460 acres of the Allegheny National Forest which could be designated wilderness.

However, there is nowhere in the Allegheny National Forest that can be called wilderness such as the term has been used elsewhere.

For information on Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, visit www.pawild.org.

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