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Allegheny Wilderness Is Worth Protecting

As PBS puts it, Ken Burns' series on the National Parks tells the story of an idea as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence and just as radical: that the most special places in the nation should be preserved, not for royalty or the rich, but for everyone.

And we learned from Burns' detailed look at the history of the National Parks a few years ago that each succeeding generation needs leaders to emerge who push, prod and pull the country to renew the commitment to what Burns' titled America's Best Idea.

The need continues. Today we call on New York Sens. Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, as well as U.S. Rep. Tom Reed to join forces with their counterparts in Pennsylvania to push for the preservation of the remaining special places within the Allegheny National Forest.

In particular, the non-profit citizens group Friends of Allegheny Wilderness has proposed eight parcels within the national forest for wilderness designation — making them forever wild, forever preserved for everyone.

As we noted a few months back, 9,000 acres of the national forest's 517,000 acres have already been placed under the protection of the wilderness designation by Congress. For perspective, by the way, that is less than 2 percent of the national forest. The eight parcels the Friends of Allegheny Forest are proposing cover 54,460 acres, which would bring the total to about 11 percent — the average in other national forests in the East.

The Allegheny National Forest was established on lands in Elk, Forest, McKean and Warren counties 89 years ago to enable the Forest Service to promote reforestation to benefit the wood products industry after overcutting in earlier years and to protect the Allegheny River watershed.

As Kirk Johnson, executive director of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, notes, the wood-products industry is still an important beneficiary of the Forest Service's management and should remain so.

Timbering and forever-wild designations do not exclude each other. Nor do forever-wild and, for example, snowmobiling. It is just that they do not occur at the same place within the vast Allegheny National Forest.

"Forty-five years ago, a bipartisan group of lawmakers agreed to legislation that would have a lasting impact on our nation's public lands — not by changing them, but by making sure some portion of these magnificent wild places would remain undeveloped in perpetuity," Johnson wrote a few years ago.

He was referring to the federal Wilderness Act of 1964, a law acknowledging that "America's wild landscapes helped shape us as a people and that there is significant value in ensuring future generations will always have the opportunity to experience some part of the original America."

We need only look at the tiny Hearts Content National Scenic Area in southern Warren County — one of the few truly old-growth white pine forests left in all of the northeastern United States — to understand the imperative of setting aside tracts where forests have grown to maturity undisturbed.

Earlier this year, Elk Township Historical Society voted unanimously to endorse the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness proposal to give those eight tracts the protection of wilderness designation.

Dr. Julie Lindblom Boozer told Times Observer in Warren earlier this year that the areas proposed for wilderness designation have historic value in that they are representative of what the Swedish immigrants found here. It looked like Sweden to them, she said.

And the Hearts Content area resembles the vast stands of huge white pines — some seven feet in diameter — that the first settlers encountered in the town of Carroll here in Chautauqua County.

For whatever reason individuals might have for valuing the few areas being proposed for special protection in the Allegheny National Forest, we agree wholeheartedly that the wilderness designation would result, as it should, in the most benefit for the most people for the longest time.