



Outdoor News

5 Susquehanna Tributary Project Funded by PF&BC Special Buttons

8 Top CWD Researcher Reveals No Good News About Disease

10 Venesky: No Excuse for Keeping Doe License Sales Process

19 Best New Fishing Stuff Shown at ICAST Show this Summer

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Feds flip-flop on Tracy Ridge wilds area

Pennsylvania is undeniably an "outdoor state." But our hunters, fishermen, hikers, cyclists, skiers, boaters, campers and more don't have much experience with wilderness. That's because we don't have much of it. True, some places here are farther from town than others but precious little wilderness exists in the Keystone State.

As defined by the Federal Wilderness Act of 1964 (written, by the way, by Pennsylvanian and Tionesta native Howard Zahniser), wilderness is "an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions."

From an official perspective, Pennsylvania has two recognized wilderness tracts. Both are on the Allegheny National Forest. The Allegheny Islands Wilderness (seven islands in the Allegheny River near Tidioute) contains 368 acres, and the Hickory Creek Wilderness holds 8,700 acres.

That means that about 1.5 percent of the 513,000-acre Allegheny National Forest is recognized as wilderness, far less, percentage-wise, than the national forest system as a whole and even far less than in bordering states such as West Virginia.

RIDGELINES



BY BEN MOYER

There do exist, however, a scant few other places within the Allegheny that could qualify as wilderness, or, failing Congressional sanction, at least be managed by the U.S. Forest Service to protect their wild character as it currently exists.

One of these is the Tracy Ridge National Recreation Area, a remote 9,700-acre tract perched on a plateau above the eastern shores of the Allegheny Reservoir.

Not that long ago, the U.S. Forest Service expressed enthusiasm for the wild nature of Tracy Ridge and championed the low-impact, low-density recreation it offered to those people who valued such experiences.

In 2004 during its Forest Plan revision process, forest service advocated congressional wilderness designation for Tracy Ridge and made the following statements regarding the tract:

"There are few places on the [Allegheny] Forest that offer as high quality scenery, natural integrity and wide scale ecosystem function as Tracy Ridge. The presence of a significant old tree component enhances the scenic quality of the area for potential wilderness."

"Tracy Ridge has high potential to provide the wilderness attributes and values appropriate for wilderness designation."

"The most significant characteristic of the Tracy Ridge area lies in the predominance of mature forest conditions, combined with the remote, undisturbed nature of the area."

"Designation as wilderness would benefit those species seeking remote, undisturbed habitats and those that benefit from a mature, continuous forest."

"There is a mix of opportunity for solitude and serenity, self-reliance, adventure, challenging experiences, and primitive recreation in Tracy Ridge."

Even a decade earlier, in 1994, though Congress had not officially dubbed Tracy Ridge as wilderness, the U.S. Forest Service noted the area's wild character and managed it for those recreational uses appropriate for a wilderness place — which amount to wildlife viewing, hiking, primitive camping, hunting and fishing.

At that time, the Forest Service specifically forbade trail use at Tracy Ridge by horse or mountain bike, stating: "The soils at and topographic conditions of the area will not support equestrian and mountain bike use. The channeling effect of tire tracks would create additional erosion problems. ... adding equestrian and mountain bike use to the existing trail system would increase the number of user contacts, which in turn, would adversely affect the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum, class of semi-primitive non-motorized. Such changes would not be acceptable."

So, since 1994, even though Congress has not chosen to include Tracy Ridge in the National Wilderness Preservation System, the Forest Service, recognizing its unique wild character, has managed it as if Congress had done so.

Now, though, the U.S. Forest Service is initiating a "flip-flop" at Tracy Ridge. Justified by what it calls "changing social needs and demands" and "in light of recent recreation trends," as stated last month by the service in its

(See Moyer Page 31)

Moyer

proposal: "Tracy Ridge Shared Use Trails and Plan Amendment Project," the Forest Service is considering opening Tracy Ridge to mountain biking.

The Forest Service also justifies this proposal by saying that currently Tracy Ridge is "underutilized."

"Underutilization," though – as Howard Zahniser might point out if he were living and in northwestern Pennsylvania today – is kind of the idea of wilderness designation.

The Forest Service acknowledges that it has been contacted by mountain biking groups to initiate this change. That suggests that as early as this fall, when the Forest Service could render its decision, a visit to Tracy Ridge might be a very different kind of experience.

This issue can be considered in the form of a question: What is the best and highest use for a place with very rare and unique natural values, such as Tracy Ridge?

Mountain biking can be done in any number of locations. For mountain bikers, the essence of the experience is not to affiliate with the rare and wild nature of a place, but rather to traverse that place, dominating its grades and negotiating its turns.

The object is to test one's physical abilities against topography, a test that can be made as well in urban Pittsburgh as it can be executed at

Tracy Ridge. There are already other mountain biking options on the Allegheny National Forest, with more under construction at this writing.

Experiencing wilderness is a very different enterprise. It seeks not to dominate, but only to sense and know those settings, forces, elements, and truths that remain available to Americans in only a very few and diminishing range of places. You can experience wilderness only in wilderness.

In its justification for the change, the U.S. Forest Service writes that the trails at Tracy Ridge provide mountain-bikers with a "rooty / rocky uneven tread."

Riding over roots and rocks? Does that justify sacrificing the values of wilderness experience – available only in a handful of places – by those who value it?

The Forest Service should continue its policy of managing Tracy Ridge for low-impact, low-density outdoor recreation, compatible with a wilderness place. That does not mean that mountain bike riders can't go there, only that they cannot take their mechanical aids.

If you agree, and as a hunter and angler you should, send your electronic comments by Aug. 15 to: comments-eastern-allegheny-bradford@fs.fed.us.

Written comments can be sent to: Tracy Ridge Shared Use Trails, District Ranger Rich Hatfield, Bradford Ranger District, 29 Forest Service Drive, Bradford, PA 16701.