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The flatlander and the backhoe

In the still beauty of
the Allegheny National
Forest, I heard banging
... so I got busy trying to
save the land I love, says
R. ALAN KLENOVICH

Folks in the Allegheny
National Forest region
could accurately term
me a "flatlander." Some
might refer to me as a "mup-
ear."

Well, I am a mup-ear. And
I have been coming up here
since I was 12 years old. In the
past 50 years I have made over
550 trips to the forest from
Mercer County at around 250
miles per round trip. That
comes to 137,500 miles or the
same as circling Earth 5.5
times. So, yes, I guess you
could say this flatlander is a
true mup-ear.

Our family owns a home
within the forest, about a mile
back in the woods on a private
road. I have spent weekends,
holidays and vacations there
with friends and family most
of my adult life.

Now that I am retired I
spend much more time in
McKean County than I do in
Mercer County. My wife is not
necessarily what you would
call an outdoors person, but
she has never begrudged me a
moment of time in the moun-
tains. And even though she
does not share my passion for
the hills she understands the
lure which the area has
always had for me. We even
spent our honeymoon at Dew-
drop Campground on the
Allegheny Reservoir.

My family, friends and I
have hunted, hiked, picnicked,
cross-country skied, bicycled,
ATV'd, snowmobiled, motor-
cycled, swam, fished, canoed,
boated, water-skied, photo-
graphed and visited historical
sites throughout the Allegh-
eny National Forest and its
environs. I used to tell my
father I would like to live up
here full time. Pap always said
I would get tired of it. Well,
my Pap was right about a lot
of things, but he was wrong
about that. I have never tired
of the area and seriously doubt
I ever will.

A couple of years ago on a
cold, snowy day in February,
I decided to hike the Morrison
Run trail along Route 59 near
Rimrock Overlook. It was a
still, ideal winter day, and
there were no footprints lead-
ing into the woods.

About a half hour into my
hike I was brought up short
by a loud noise which at first I
thought to be gunfire. I contin-
ued on and several moments
later I heard the same sound

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The flatlander and the backhoe

FOREST, FROM PAGE B-1

again. This time I correctly identified the noise. There was a backhoe being operated nearby and the loud reports were the result of the operator shaking sticky mud out of the backhoe bucket.

Although the sound was annoying in the otherwise stillness of the forest, I continued on for three or four hours, completing the trail loop. The backhoe bucket continued to bang the whole time, somewhat as a bell would toll. I won't say that the noise ruined my hike, but it did get me to thinking in a new direction.

Up until that point in my life I had never considered myself to be any sort of environmental activist. And for many years my wife has accused me of being, politically, slightly to the right of Attila the Hun. I grew up around the excavating business and have shoveled over a good number of trees with a bulldozer and burned a lot of brush piles. I even spent a short stint after Vietnam as an oiler on a dragline in a strip mine and as a driller's helper on a drilling rig. Mother Nature would never proclaim me as being innocent of ravaging some of her lands.

However, I began to reflect on what had changed in the 50 years since I began visiting the area. Years ago I could hike from my home to the village of Westline, a distance of about three miles and cross one or two forest roads.

Today there are probably 14 or 15 roads crisscrossing that same area.

Not long before my father passed away I took him for a ride along some of the new roads. My father had been intimately familiar with the area, but in less than 10 minutes he was completely lost. Pap had not been in the area for five or six years. He was bewildered that so many roads had been built in so short a time. He became quiet and I could feel his disapproval.

I guess it had never really occurred to me that the oil and gas drilling could get as close to Morrison Run and Rimrock as they are. I was shocked and more than a little disappointed. I began to visualize what the area might soon look like. I also imagined how proposed wilderness areas like Tracy Ridge and Chestnut Ridge could change.

It finally came crashing down upon me that a lot of the Allegheny National Forest has been drilled, and the pristine and scenic recreation areas have been left for last. I now realize that these areas can be roaded and drilled as well. I realized how close those activities were as I continued to hear the backhoe bucket banging. To me it was like a wake-up call.

I will not tell you that I became a born-again environmentalist that day. I will say, however, that the experience changed my mind set. From that point on I subcon-

sciously began looking for ways that we may be able to save pristine areas of the forest.

Shortly thereafter I became aware of the efforts of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness and their Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest. At that time I could not have given you a good definition of the word wilderness. Now I do know what a wilderness is and I also have learned that lands can be designated as wilderness by an act of Congress. That designation protects land in perpetuity... forever.

The Allegheny National Forest has changed dramatically since its inception. When it was established in 1923, there was no Kinzua Dam, no Jakes Rocks, no Rimrock Overlook. There was no Red Bridge, Kiasutha or Dewdrop Campgrounds. There was no provision made to protect these areas because they were not yet envisioned. Had members of Congress in those days had a crystal ball I feel almost certain that they would have purchased the mineral rights in these areas so that the U.S. Forest Service could have total control over their destiny.

However, that did not happen. So, now these areas are threatened and there does not seem to be a whole lot we can do about it unless the mineral rights are purchased.

This type of thing has been done before. As Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness has

repeatedly pointed out, mineral rights acquisition was done with the Hickory Creek Wilderness designation in 1984 and it can be done again.

I would challenge anyone reading this to look to the future. Try to imagine what these proposed wilderness areas will look like after they have been roaded, drilled and logged. Your imaginations may startle you. If so, you may want to consider doing something about it.

The Allegheny National Forest is a "multiple-use" forest. The Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 recognizes that "the establishment and maintenance of areas of wilderness are consistent with the purpose of the provisions of this act."

I am sure many of you reading this share my passion for the beauty and pristine nature of these special areas. If you would like to help save them, please visit the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness at www.pawild.org and get involved.

There are 28,682,880 acres in the state of Pennsylvania. The Friends of Allegheny Wilderness proposes designating only 54,460 acres as wilderness. That is slightly less than 2/10ths of 1 percent of the state. You be the judge. Is that asking too much?

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