

The Philadelphia Inquirer

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TUESDAY OCTOBER 11, 2016 | PHILLYINQUIRER | CITY & SUBURBS | C* | \$1.50

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No need to add bike trails to protected wilderness areas

By Kirk Johnson

Many do not know that Pennsylvania has two federally designated wilderness areas, both part of the Allegheny National Forest northeast of Pittsburgh.

Wilderness! The word itself entices Americans, as it speaks to our living connection with our pioneers. Wilderness areas differ from the rest of the national forests, where you can car-camp and take scenic rides. In these samples of our original landscape, nature reigns. No machines are allowed. These are — by law — places “where the Earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man.”

This historic conservation law was championed by conservative U.S. Rep. John P. Saylor (R., Pa.), who tirelessly advocated protecting national parks, wild and scenic rivers, and wilderness areas. Saylor was the lead sponsor of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 and a fierce champion the Wilderness Act of 1964 through the eight years it took to reach the president's desk.

Introducing the first House version of the wilderness protection bill in July 1956, he explained to his colleagues, “the stress and strain of our crowded, fast-moving, highly-mechanized and raucously noisy civilization create another great need for wilderness — a deep need for areas of solitude and quiet, for areas of wilderness where life has not yet given way to machinery.”

How much more we need the contrast of quiet wild reserves now, for our world has only grown more stressful in these five decades.

The Wilderness Act tells us that Congress made it law “in order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”

Here's a quick tour of Pennsylvania's wilderness, but you really should visit for yourself.

The 372-acre Allegheny Islands Wilderness Area is made up of seven islands scattered along 56 miles of the Allegheny River just upstream from Tionesta. The islands are fun places to canoe, kayak, or boat to for a picnic or camping. Some support groves of old-growth bottomland forest. Keep an eye peeled for great blue herons, kingfishers, bald eagles, and numerous varieties of waterfowl.

Onshore, the 8,633-acre Hickory Creek Wilderness Area, offers a true escape from hot days. Cloaked by a remarkable unbroken maturing forest of northern hardwoods and hemlock, this is a wild paradise. Quiet! You may encounter bear, deer, turkey, or perhaps even a reclusive fisher. The 13-mile Hickory Creek Trail is a loop well suited for moderate-difficulty day hikes or overnight backpacking. It's flat to modestly steep. Access to the trail is from a dedicated parking area located along Hearts Content Road.

The trail is a chance to get

away from the machinery of modern life — the grinding and clanking that is our soundtrack most days and nights. Well, it should be. Machines like bicycles are not allowed in any wilderness area. The law says there shall be no motor vehicles or “other form of mechanical transport.”

But Congress now has before it Senate Bill 3205, which would direct U.S. Forest Service rangers, who administer our wilderness areas, and others to identify trails to be opened for bikes. Saylor would be on the barricades, outraged as the sponsors of this assault are the two Republican senators from Utah.

Local rangers would have just two years to identify trails to be opened to bikes. That may well be an impossible task if you and the rest of the public are to be heard in the usual open process. If the deadline is not met, the trail will be opened to bikes.

As the executive director of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, I can promise that we will join friends of all of America's wilderness areas to fight this bill. Should it pass, and given the current control of Congress that is not at all impossible, our groups would be in court in a flash.

But that shouldn't be necessary. Bicyclers already have far more of the Allegheny National Forest and other federal lands in which to enjoy their sport. Why target the tiny portion that is protected as a quiet, machineless treasure for you, your kids, and all generations to come?

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