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In celebrating Wilderness Act, work to expand its legacy

By Kirk Johnson
and Doug Scott

We are winding down the trail to the end of the year — and the end of the yearlong celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Under this historic statute, Congress extended the strongest possible protection to the wildest and most natural of our national forests and other federal conservation lands.

These are not just sanctuaries for wildlife, but sanctuaries for us, too. Here you can take your kids to hear a bird and the wind in the trees and the crunch of the snow under your boots without the discordance of motors or machinery. These are places to remember that we, too, came from the Earth and are wise to remember our dependence on it.

Pennsylvania has a special place in this history and the celebrations, for it was a native of the Keystone State who conceived, wrote, and lobbied the Wilderness Act into law.

Howard Zahniser was born in Franklin and raised in Tionesta, on the banks of the Allegheny River northeast of Pittsburgh. He played in the Allegheny National Forest and honeymooned while canoeing down the river, camping on an island that today is part of the Allegheny Islands Wilderness Area.

In the celebrations of the Wilderness Act, including the national wilderness conference in Albuquerque, N.M., in October, where more than 1,000 leaders, elected officials, and federal wilderness stewards gathered, all eyes turned metaphorically to the north and east to pay tribute to "Zahnie," as everyone knew him. He was the perfect leader of the Wilderness Society at mid-

century — quiet, scholarly, pragmatic, and always happiest when others got the credit.

Zahnie is buried in Tionesta under a spreading oak tree along the Allegheny. He so loved that river and admired the words of a steamboat captain:

"It is a mysterious sort of place, and vague tales come wafting down from explorers who have been up there ... wild country — adventurous country! ... strange and untamed and little explored. Curious that such a place should exist so close to civilization and still be untouched. Miles and miles of pioneer river with absolutely no sign of human handiwork."

A wilderness river — the kind of river Congress protected under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968. For this and the Wilderness Act and many new national parks, the leader in the U.S. House was Rep. John P. Saylor, a Republican from Johnstown. He joined with Democrats in a nonpartisan commitment to the wilderness that continues to this day.

The Wilderness Act originally covered 9.1 million acres in statutorily protected wilderness. Today, America's National Wilderness Preservation System embraces 110 million acres. And more is coming, fueled by local people who love a wild part of nearby federal lands and know that wilderness designation offers the strongest possible protection. These lands remain part of a national forest or other classification; wilderness provides an extra layer of legal protection.

This protection is needed for more areas in the Allegheny National Forest. In addition to the islands, we have only the Hickory Creek Wilderness — a total of just 9,000 acres out of about half a million — less

than 2 percent of Pennsylvania's only national forest. For comparison, 18 percent of all national forest land is protected under Zahnie's Wilderness Act.

The Warren-based Friends of Allegheny Wilderness has been working for 15 years to rectify this paucity. Our Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest identifies more than 50,000 acres that should be added to the wilderness system. Dozens of local, statewide, and national organizations representing hundreds of thousands of Americans have endorsed the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal, and during the U.S. Forest Service's most recent revamping of its long-term management plan, more than 6,800 out of 8,200 public commenters wrote specifically in support of it.

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness leads frequent hikes into the wilds of the Allegheny. It may be a snowshoe hike or a foray into the valley bottoms of our proposed Tionesta Wilderness Area, where ancient hemlock trees can be 130 feet tall and 500 years old. Volunteers are needed to help with grassroots organizing, so Pennsylvanians are encouraged to check out pawild.org to see what they can do to help.

Wild.

Beautiful at every season.

Historic.

And needing your help.

This is your wild Allegheny country.

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