

WILD EARTH



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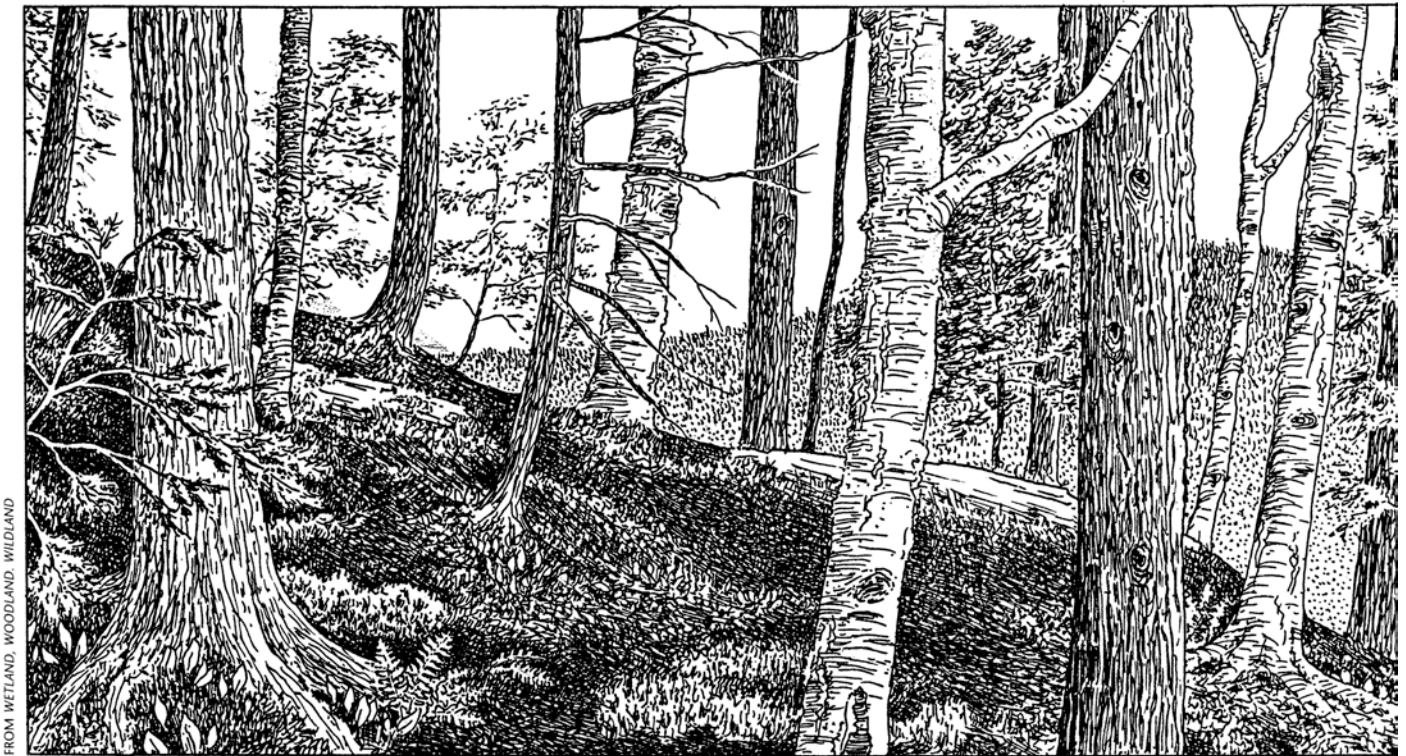


American cheetah:
Yesterday...and tomorrow?

HONORING A WILDERNESS VISION

A Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest

by Newkirk L. Johnson



FROM WETLAND, WOODLAND, WILDLAND

It must be concluded that the demand for wilderness experience on the Allegheny National Forest is very high, given that half the nation's population lies within a day's drive of the Forest.

ALLEGHENY NATIONAL FOREST LAND AND
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN, 1986

PENNSYLVANIA'S ONLY national forest, the Allegheny, is a significant but often overlooked natural area. Located on the Allegheny Plateau in the northwestern part of the state, the region is home to five threatened and endangered species—the bald eagle, clubshell mussel, Indiana bat, northern riffleshell mussel, and the small-whorled pogonia. Before the arrival of European settlers, Allegheny Plateau forests were sparsely populated by humans and heavily wooded. Old-growth stands of eastern hemlock, American beech, eastern white pine, American chestnut, and other species covered most of the Plateau (Lutz 1930; Whitney 1990).

However, intensive resource extraction has made the Allegheny one of the United States's most heavily exploited forests, both before and after its designation as public land. Less than 5,000 acres of old growth remain here following a period of massive clearcut logging from approximately 1890–1920. In the aftermath of this cutting, the Allegheny National Forest was established in 1923, with the first land purchases made by the Forest Service (under the authority of the 1911 Weeks Act) to promote the reforestation and protection of the Allegheny River watershed (Bishop 1925; Henretta 1929).

Today, despite this origin in forest and water protection, the Allegheny National Forest has a disproportionately small amount of land designated as wilderness under the 1964 Wilderness Act when compared with national forest land in other states (U.S. Forest Service 1998)—even eastern states where wilderness designation is meager (Klyza 2001). The Allegheny is currently the only federal land suitable for significant expanded wilderness protection in Pennsylvania. Over the next several years, Forest Service managers will be revising the Allegheny's Land and Resource Management Plan (known as the Forest Plan), which dictates management direction for the entire forest—just over 513,000 acres (U.S. Forest Service 1998)—making now the most opportune juncture to advocate additional wilderness designation in Pennsylvania.

In the original forests of this region, black cherry comprised less than one percent of all trees (Lutz 1930; Whitney 1990). However, after the clearcutting era, non-climax shade-

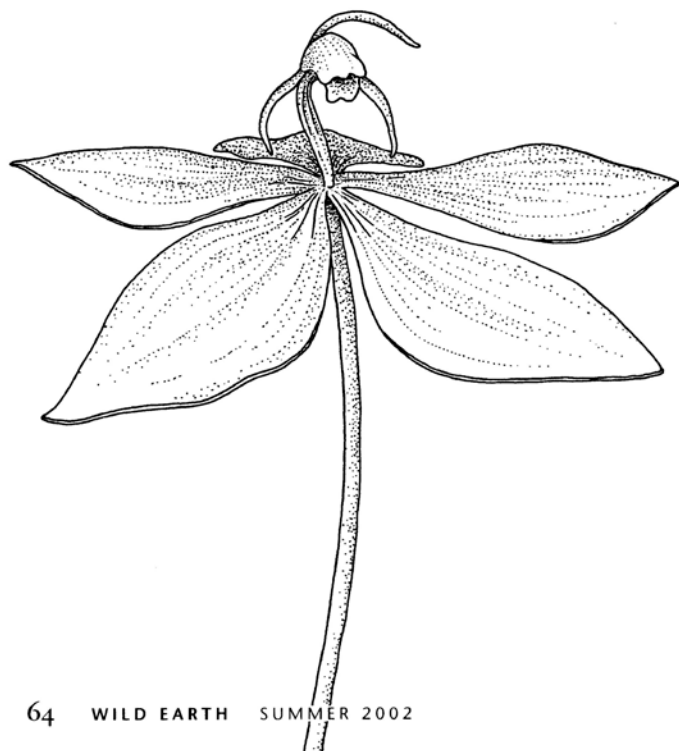
intolerant species such as black cherry increased in frequency during reforestation. As it became clear that this tree was particularly profitable as commercial timber to produce expensive veneer, paneling, furniture, and other luxury items (Marquis 1975; Butt 1984), management practices in the late twentieth century turned deliberately toward retarding natural succession to native forest types in order to maintain the elevated presence of black cherry (Marquis 1975; U.S. Forest Service 1986). As former Allegheny Forest Supervisor John Butt wrote in the *Journal of Forestry* in 1984, "To perpetuate the valuable hardwoods, the USDA Forest Service adopted an even-aged silvicultural system favoring the shade-intolerant black cherry...During the 1960s and '70s...foresters began to prescribe clearcutting to regenerate the stands." Today, black cherry makes up 25% or more of the canopy trees in most stands of the Allegheny.

Some small areas of original forest did survive the turn of the century clearcutting, due largely to property disputes. The Tionesta Scenic and Research Natural Areas, a 4,100-acre parcel of old growth, is one such place; located on the east side of the national forest, it was designated a National Natural Landmark in 1973. The Forest Service has recently characterized the Tionesta Research Natural Area as "one of the most valuable old-growth remnants in the eastern U.S....evidenced by the 10-fold increase in research activity on the area over the past decade" (Nowak and Nelson 1997).

Some areas of the forest have recovered from the clearcutting and even-aged management, albeit with a remarkably different forest structure and composition. Efforts by Pennsylvania's two former Republican Senators, Hugh Scott and Richard Schweiker, to include several of these portions of the Allegheny in the 1975 Eastern Wilderness Areas Act legislation were thwarted in the House by the local Congressman. Eventually, the 8,600-acre Hickory Creek Wilderness, along with seven islands in the Allegheny River known as the Allegheny Islands Wilderness, were designated through the passage of the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act in October of 1984. Other areas of the Allegheny that have been considered for wilderness over the years include the Tracy Ridge (9,000 acres), Allegheny Front (8,000 acres), and Clarion River (3,700 acres) tracts (Shafer 1979).

Pennsylvania's legacy

Howard Zahniser, author of the 1964 Wilderness Act, was from the town of Tionesta (which lies along the Allegheny River on the southwest boundary of the national forest) and



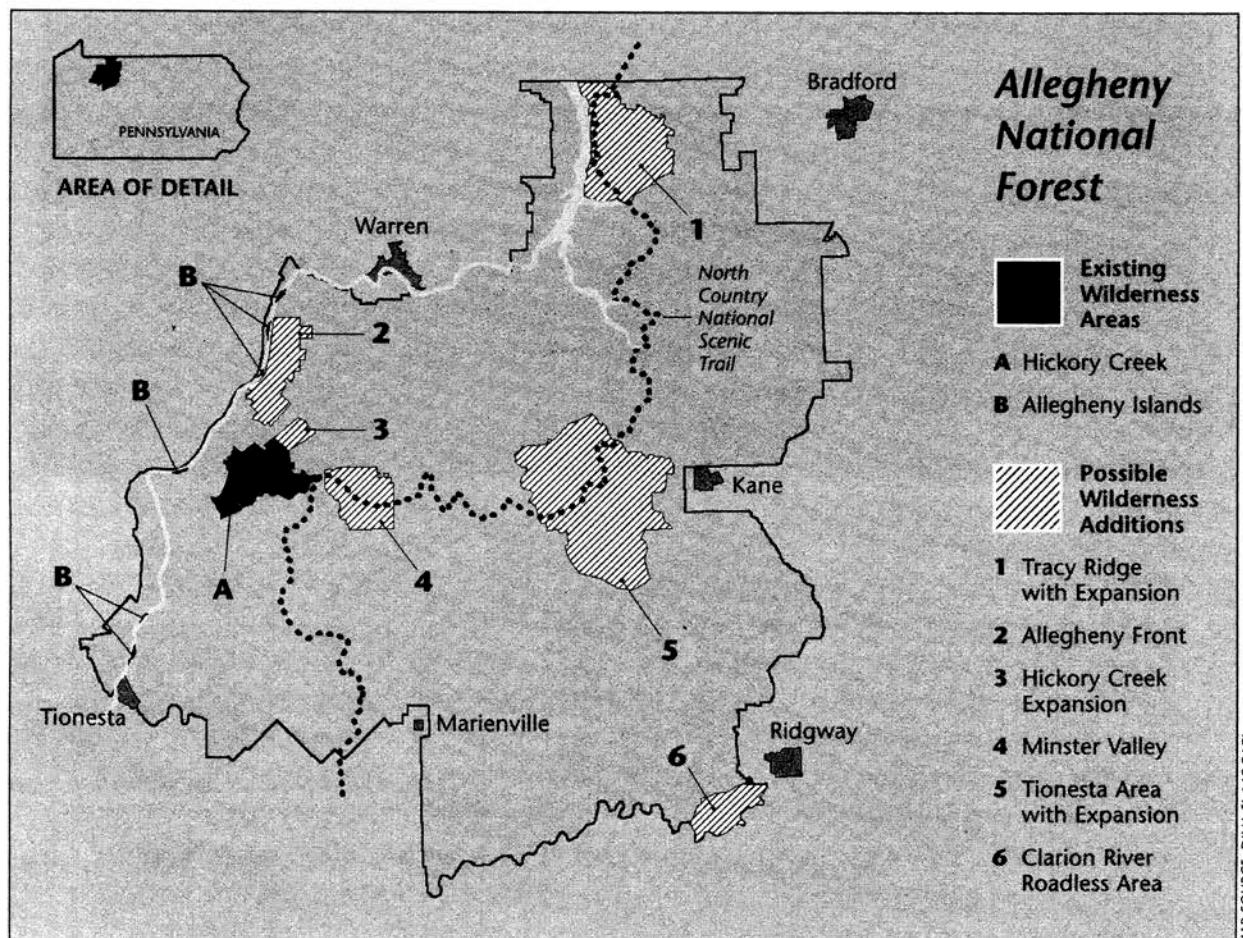
learned to love the Allegheny landscape early in life. Though he moved away as an adult, it was Tionesta that Zahniser considered home. Alice Zahniser, Howard's wife, recently recalled that "When Howard died, we buried him in a spot in the cemetery that is only about thirty feet from the [Allegheny] river bank. We found a natural stone from the forest for his gravestone. It faces the river....I think he would have been pleased" (Zahniser 2000).

With Howard Zahniser's vision of a growing repository of wilderness in mind, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness has proposed the region of the Allegheny demarcated by U.S. highway 6 and state highways 66 and 948, with the 4,100-acre Tionesta old growth as its core (Johnson 1999; Johnson 2001), as a candidate for wilderness designation. The Tionesta tract provides high quality habitat for many native species, including bobcats, black bears, Blackburnian warblers, and the recently reintroduced fisher. It is also one of the few confirmed breeding locations of the yellow-bellied flycatcher in Pennsylvania (Crossley 1999). Nevertheless, timber sales approaching the boundary of this native forest

tract continue to be planned and implemented, and boundary markings have become unclear over the years, resulting in actual timber harvest within the remnant old growth (Nowak and Nelson 1997).

Without additional protection, the forest surrounding the Tionesta old growth may continue to be fragmented by logging, oil and gas drilling, and road-building (U.S. Forest Service 1986). With 95% of subsurface rights privately owned on the Allegheny, oil and gas drilling is still prominent. Even within the Tionesta area (Bjorkbom and Larson 1977; U.S. Forest Service 1980) an estimated 120 wells still exist (Jacobs 2000), though many of these are no longer producing. These activities would be curtailed and eventually eliminated under a Tionesta Wilderness Area designation through the purchase of subsurface mineral rights, as was done with the Hickory Creek Wilderness designation in 1984.

The proposed Tionesta Wilderness Area would designate as much as 20,000 acres as wilderness, thus completely surrounding the 4,100 acres of old growth with a pro-

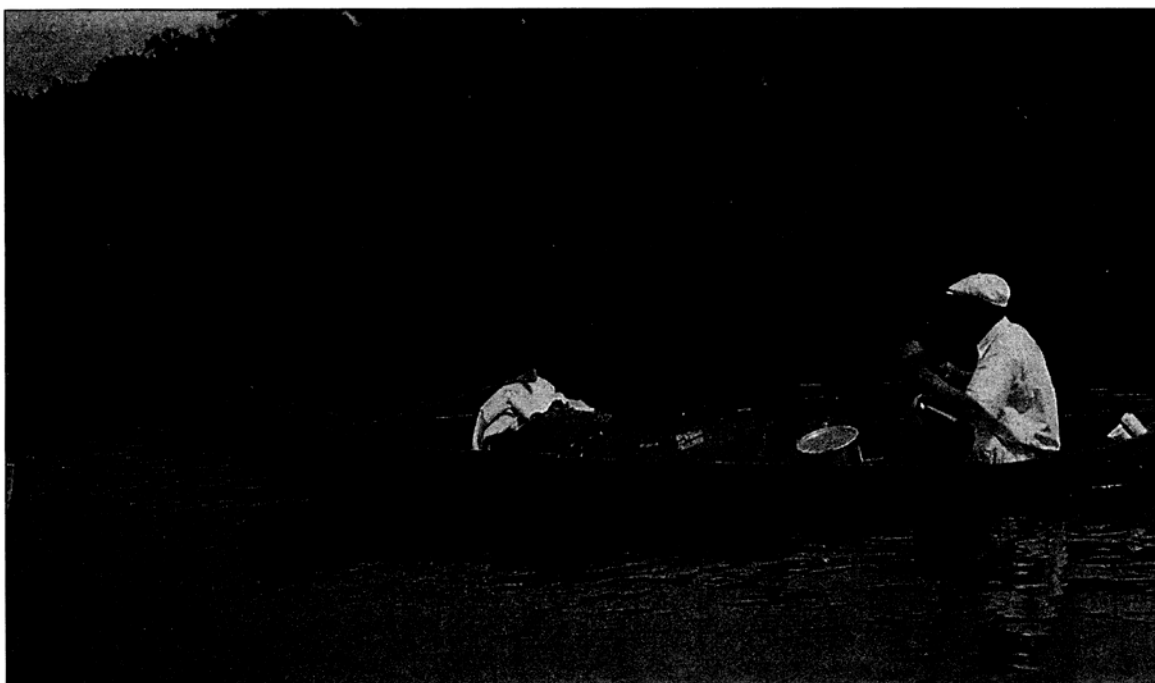


protective wilderness buffer. In time, the entire wilderness area would come to resemble the native forest at its core. Bjorkbom and Larson (1977) describe the likely path to recovery: "Most of the Allegheny Plateau outside the Tionesta Scenic and Natural Areas is now dominated by second-growth stands of intolerant species resulting from the commercial logging operations of the 1890–1930 era. These second-growth stands will eventually revert to hemlock/beech/sugar maple types like those in the Tionesta tract if left undisturbed long enough."

It is an unfortunate legacy to Howard Zahniser, a key architect of our National Wilderness Preservation System, that the land he loved as a youth has a less-than-spectacular record for wilderness designation. This is acutely troubling considering the numerous opportunities for wilderness

throughout the Allegheny National Forest in addition to the Tionesta area. Several roadless areas deserve protection, and the existing Hickory Creek Wilderness Area should be expanded northward to include the headwaters of East Hickory Creek.

Zahniser deserves a greater tribute than just the Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands Wilderness in his home national forest. While these are wonderful natural areas, they total less than 9,000 acres, or just 1.74% of the Allegheny National Forest (U.S. Forest Service 1998). The continued overwhelming bias for timber, oil, and gas production is a poor legacy to Zahniser's ties to the region and a poor use of our public lands. An additional 30,000 or more acres of wilderness in the Allegheny would not only be a fitting tribute to Howard Zahniser, but would also help ensure the well-



COURTESY OF ALICE ZAHNISER

IN JUNE OF 1937, Mr. and Mrs. Zahniser paddled down the Allegheny River in their canoe, the *Alisonoward*. In the second to last entry of the journal that Zahniser kept during their trip, he observed his surroundings as they approached the town of Tionesta:

It was a clear blue June day. The sky was especially beautiful, with cumulus, cirrus, and stratus clouds all day. As we went under a bridge at West Hickory...we saw two eagles flying high over the "narrows."...The canoeing from Hickory on had the added interest of the faint recollection of familiar things. We were much interested in fish jumping and in the green herons, standing on an anchored boat. A duck flew up from the river as we neared Tubbs Run's mouth and circled high in the air in ascending spirals and up Tubbs Run Valley...As we came near Tionesta we followed small currents close to the left bank, despite the shallow water, as we hoped to land at the cemetery....

being of native Allegheny Plateau flora and fauna. Such additions of eastern wilderness, where the majority of the nation's population resides, are sorely needed (U.S. Forest Service 1986; Klyza 2001); current and future generations would surely benefit from the protection of these wild places. If we recognize the opportunity to influence policy during the upcoming Forest Plan revision process, raise public awareness about the need for more wilderness in Pennsylvania, and make the recovery of wildlands in the East a priority, more wilderness on the Allegheny can become a reality. ☾

Kirk Johnson is the executive director of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness. He has family ties in the Allegheny region dating to the late 1700s. ☞ To support the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness proposal for a Tionesta Wilderness Area, and to advocate that it should be given due consideration during the Forest Plan revision process, write to Kevin Elliott, Forest Supervisor, Allegheny National Forest, P.O. Box 847, Warren, PA 16365. For additional information on the campaign, contact the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, 220 Center Street, Warren, PA 16365; 814-723-0620; alleghenyfriends@earthlink.net; www.pawild.org.

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Pennsylvania *Wild*

Less than 2% of Pennsylvania's 500,000-acre Allegheny National Forest is designated wilderness. The Allegheny's current Forest Plan concedes that "it seems obvious that the demand for wilderness designation on the Forest is high, and the available supply in the regional area is low."



BOB STOUDET

CLARION RIVER ROADLESS AREA, ANF

Wilderness Act author Howard Zahniser learned to love Nature in the Allegheny. With Zahniser's vision in mind, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness fosters an appreciation of wilderness benefits and works to expand wilderness on the national forest.



KIRK JOHNSON

RED SPOTTED NEWT, ALLEGHENY FRONT ROADLESS AREA, ANF

The 4,100-acre Tionesta old growth is the largest tract of primeval forest in the East between the Great Smoky Mountains and the Adirondacks. Help us secure wilderness protection for this and other beautiful wild areas.

FRIENDS OF ALLEGHENY WILDERNESS
220 Center Street, Warren, PA 16365 • 814-723-0620
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As the fiscal sponsor of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, the Wildlands Project is proud to have helped launch this and many other grassroots conservation organizations.

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