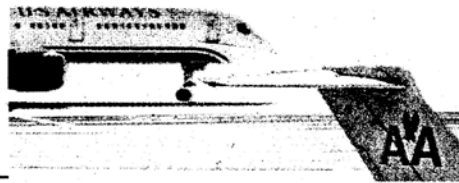




Thursday
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Partly Cloudy
41°/31°



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Wilderness Graffiti

FAW leader says vandalism on rise in national forest

By **BRIAN COLLINS**

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A developing trend of vandalism within the Allegheny National Forest has the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW) on the lookout.

"There appears to be a growing trend of flagrant desecration of our sacred nature reserves by using spray paint within both the Hickory Creek Wilderness and Allegheny Islands Wilderness in recent years," reported FAW Executive Director Kirk Johnson. "This has been occurring for a number of years. Even as you get out further into the wilderness, there have been occurrences. The most pronounced and egregious incident is the most recent one in the Hickory Creek Wilderness area."

The extent and area that the vandalism has affected is severe enough that Johnson hopes the US Forest Service will get involved.

The markings appear to have occurred last summer or early last fall, according to Johnson, who first noticed them during a trail clean-up during the last week of September 2012.

Along a one-mile segment of the Hickory Creek Wilderness Trail alone, around 100 trees were marked with bright pink spray paint. The size of the markings ranged from four-inch-long slashes to markings that spanned more than halfway around



Times Observer photo by Brian Collins

Illegal markings

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness Executive Director Kirk Johnson points out an instance in which a tree was 'slashed' by spray paint despite the presence of an existing trail marker.

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Graffiti...

the circumference of the larger trees along the trails - some of which reach nearly five-feet around.

"Our message is that we want the public to know that they shouldn't paint any 'blazes' along any hiking trail," said Johnson of the damage. "In the wilderness, people should practice Leave No Trace principles."

The spray paint seems to be an apparent attempt by amateurs to 'blaze' or mark the trail despite the presence of the original trail markers. "The trail is already blazed with white paint," Johnson explained as he pointed to a white mark on a tree nearby. "The white paint will wear off eventually and won't be re-painted. By the time that happens, the trail will be obvious enough, but it's still a fairly new trail right now."

According to Johnson, separate incidents at Crulls Island in the Allegheny Islands Wilderness were just as severe. "This is a federally designated wilderness," he said, "a sacred nature reserve is where the preserva-

tion of wilderness values is paramount over all other conceivable concerns for all time to come."

According to Kathryn Mohny of the US Forest Service, offenses associated with damaging any natural resource or property of the federal government, including timber. Title 18 of the United States Code, Section 1361, is the most common statute used to prosecute violators. The penalties for violations of this Section are tied to the extent of the property damage. If the damage exceeds \$100, the defendant is subject to a fine of up to \$250,000, ten years imprisonment, or both. When property damage does not exceed \$100, the offense is a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$100,000, one year imprisonment, or both.

At this time, the USFS is not involved in the investigation, but Special Agent Bill Mickle did stress the importance of timeliness in the reporting of such acts.