

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness seeks to foster an appreciation of wilderness values and benefits, and to work with local communities to ensure that increased wilderness protection is a priority of the stewardship of the Allegheny National Forest.

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Friday Forum: Balanced future requires intelligent, bipartisan decisions

By Jay Turner

Northwest Pennsylvania is blessed with a beautiful landscape. Tall forests, carpets of ferns, and the blaze of autumn foliage have long shaped the region's identity. Much of these forests have been managed by the U.S. Forest Service since 1923. Right now, the Forest Service is revising their plan for the future management of the Allegheny National Forest. As that process gains momentum, it offers a reminder of the important place of northwest Pennsylvania in the nation's conservation tradition.

Two Western Pennsylvanians -- U.S. Congressman John P. Saylor and Howard Zahniser of the Wilderness Society -- were the architects of the Wilderness Act of 1964, a landmark conservation law. Saylor, a strong Republican committed to economic growth and responsible government, also prized the lands that make America unique. In his words, "We Americans are the people we are largely because we have had the influence of the wilderness on our lives."

Representative Saylor was the Wilderness Act's champion in the House of Representatives. Zahniser, a native of Tionesta, grew up exploring the forests and rivers of the Allegheny valley. He dedicated the last decade of his life to the passage of the Wilderness Act in Congress. He died in

May 1964, just four months before the Wilderness Act became law.

These two men and their vision offer us a reminder of a lost moment in American politics. These days, environmental politics is rife with partisan debate that pits Democrats against Republicans in an unproductive stalemate. Witness the national debates over the future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, logging on the national forests, and snowmobiles in Yellowstone National Park. Yet, when the Wilderness Act became law, it was a product of compromise and it enjoyed the support of Republicans and Democrats alike. In large part, this was because of the leadership of people like Saylor and Zahniser, who wished to protect a reasonable portion of the nation's public lands for future generations, while leaving the rest open for development. Then, as today, that balanced approach to managing our national forests was a political winner for everyone.

The Wilderness Act created a new category of protection for our federal lands: wilderness areas. In designated wilderness areas hunting, fishing, and other forms of non-mechanized recreation are permitted, while logging, mining, and mechanized recreation are prohibited. The wilderness system has been a tremendous success nationwide. Today, 15 percent of our federal land across the country enjoys wilderness protection. Those wilderness areas draw tens of millions of visitors per year. More telling, economic research shows that in rural counties wilderness

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designations are an engine of economic growth. That makes good sense. Tourists like to vacation in areas where the natural beauty and recreational opportunities are protected.

Now it is time to consider the future of wilderness on the Allegheny National Forest.

Here in Pennsylvania, only two percent of the national forest enjoys wilderness protection -- Hickory Creek southwest of Warren and a string of islands in the Allegheny River. On a national forest measuring one-half million acres, however, there is ample room for both wilderness protection and resource management. Indeed, a balanced approach to managing the national forests promises to strengthen both the region's tourist economy and its natural resource industries. For that reason, one of the most important issues being considered in the current forest planning process is the future of wilderness on the Allegheny National Forest.

A group of local citizens has renewed Saylor's and Zahniser's moderate approach to conservation. Over the past three years, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, local recreationists, timber interests, and public officials have undertaken discussions over the future of wilderness on the Allegheny National Forest.

A citizens' proposal, developed locally by Friends of Allegheny Wilderness volunteers, identifies eight areas encompassing 54,460 acres of public land for potential wilderness protection on the Allegheny National Forest.

That marks a reasonable starting point for discussions about the future of the region's national forest.

The next step is to hammer out congressional legislation that will protect those lands for today and tomorrow.

These discussions, like the work of Saylor and Zahniser, offer us a reminder of the compromise essential to balanced conservation. It may be easy to oppose all wilderness designations -- as does some local industry -- or to oppose all logging on the national forests -- as do some local environmentalists.

But such one-sided views do not reflect the public interest. Indeed, it is such extreme positions that have plunged environmental issues into a storm of debate at the national level. What is happening on the Allegheny National Forest shows us that there is a middle way.

With the support of Congressman John Peterson and Congressman Phil English, there is the promise of a compromise that protects our region's natural heritage and its economy.

That is a tradition with deep roots in Western Pennsylvania.

Jay Turner is an adjunct assistant professor in environmental studies and history at Gettysburg College. His research focuses on the history of the national wilderness movement.

TWS Urges Action on FAW Citizens' Proposal & ANF Forest Plan Revision!

Wilderness at Stake in New Forest Plan

The Allegheny is Pennsylvania's only National Forest. Just two areas within the forest, about 9,000 acres, are now protected as wilderness. That's not even 2 percent of the forest's approximately 500,000 acres. Across the country, 18 percent of national forest lands are protected as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System and other eastern forests average around 10 percent.

The Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW), with the support of The Wilderness

Society, has identified eight special areas in the Allegheny National Forest (ANF) that deserve wilderness designation. That work is encompassed in the "Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest," which describes another 54,000 acres of this otherwise highly industrialized forest as still deserving permanent wilderness protection and very much needing it. For a copy of the proposal and more information on Allegheny wilderness, go to: www.pawild.org

The Citizens' Wilderness Proposal was compiled to help the Forest Service identify potential new wilderness as they begin their wilderness evaluation for the ANF. The Forest Service is required to identify roadless areas and evaluate their wilderness qualities as a required part of the forest plan revision.

As the first step in the ANF wilderness evaluation, the Forest Service must conduct a "roadless inventory." Only those areas identified as "roadless" in this early stage in the process will be further studied during the forest planning process by the Forest Service and possibly recommended for full wilderness protection by Congress as part of the final forest plan.

The Forest Service has released its initial roadless inventory results and, to date, they have identified only three roadless areas throughout the entire National Forest. These are the Tracy Ridge, Chestnut Ridge, and Minister Valley areas. While we applaud the Forest Service for recognizing the values of these areas, there are a number of other deserving areas that the agency has unfairly overlooked in this early inventory stage in the process. FAW has identified eight potential wilderness additions in the ANF that all deserve full consideration for wilderness designation. View the maps at:

www.pawild.org/exec_summary.html

By using new and unnecessarily restrictive criteria to define what areas are "roadless" in their initial roadless inventory, the Forest Service has inappropriately excluded three areas that were previously formally identified by the agency as roadless

(Cornplanter, Allegheny Front and Clarion River) as well as other areas carefully studied in the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal such as Tionesta and Morrison Run. By not recognizing these areas at this early stage in the forest plan the Forest Service is precluding further study of these areas.

We need your help to let the Forest Service know that they should be recognizing ALL the roadless areas on the National Forest at this early stage in the forest plan so they can be further studied for their wilderness character and some of them, eventually recommended for Wilderness protection.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: WRITE THE FOREST SERVICE TODAY!

As the Forest Service develops its new plan to govern management of the Allegheny for the next 15 years, it will consider wilderness values on still-wild areas of the forest and can recommend them for permanent wilderness protection. The recommendation is important for two reasons: While only the Congress can designate wilderness, the agency's finding that an area qualifies for designation carries considerable weight with the Congress. And once the agency makes such a recommendation, it is bound to manage the candidate area in a way that protects its wilderness values.

Your comments can make a big difference. Please let the Forest Service know that you want them to recognize ALL the roadless areas on the National Forest at this early stage in the forest plan so they can be further studied for their wilderness character, and some of them, eventually recommended for Wilderness protection. Write to:

Mr. William J. Connelly, Forest Planner
Allegheny National Forest
Forest Plan Revision
PO Box 36
Warren, PA 16365

Or, to take action directly from The Wilderness Society's website, go to:

<http://ga1.org/campaign/alleghenyrdless>

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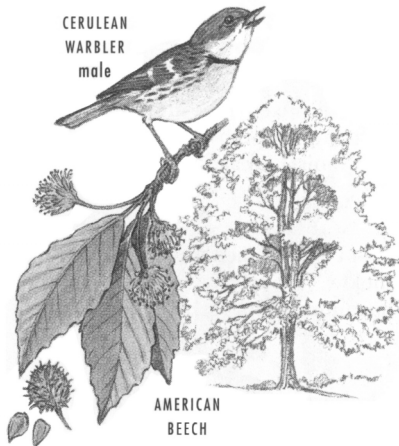


Illustration from: Peterson's Field
Guide to Eastern Forests (1998)

Your Contribution to Friends of Allegheny Wilderness Goes Directly to Saving Wilderness!

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