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West Virginia
Highlands
Conservancy

West Virginia Wilderness Coalition

Wilderness: Keeping the 'Wild' in Wonderful West Virginia!

A Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for the Monongahela National Forest

DRAFT



Seneca Creek Falls © Jonathan Jessup 2003

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Introduction

Dolly Sods. Otter Creek. Cranberry. Laurel Fork. These names conjure up a sense of place in West Virginia – visions, sounds, feelings of wild Appalachian forest where the forces of nature rule, and where it is estimated by the U.S. Forest Service that 50-70 thousand visitors a year go to recreate, both from in and outside the state. Situated within the Monongahela National Forest, these areas, along with a portion of the Mountain Lake Wilderness from the Jefferson NF, are West Virginia lands that have been designated by Congress as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The National Wilderness Preservation System: East vs. West

In 2004, we celebrate the 40th Anniversary of passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act (Appendix E) by Congress which established this wilderness system, declaring that “Wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

The National Wilderness Preservation System in the lower 48 states is made up of less than 5% of the U.S. land base (Appendix A). East of the Mississippi River, very little Wilderness has been designated since the Wilderness Act was passed. Despite the fact that over 60% of the U.S. population is located here, only 4% of the National Wilderness Preservation System is found. (Appendix B). This scarcity of Eastern Wilderness is due largely to the lower amount of federally-owned public land in the East (3.5% of total land) from which to draw Wilderness acres. Also contributing is the more extensive and ongoing human development in the East, along with many more population centers, rendering much land currently unsuitable for designation. West Virginia is no exception. Only 6% of the state is public land, most within the federally-owned Monongahela National Forest (MNF) managed by the U.S. Forest Service (Appendix C). Our current MNF Wilderness acreage (78,131) occupies less than 9% of MNF land, and only 0.5% of the state’s land base (Appendix D). Therefore, much room exists to add Wilderness acres to the MNF without significantly impacting other uses of the MNF or additional WV lands.

History of West Virginia Wilderness

Over twenty years have passed since any West Virginia lands were added to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Wilderness suitability of National Forest land was first studied system-wide by the U.S. Forest Service in the early 1970’s. Known as RARE (Roadless Area Review and Evaluation), it recommended NO wilderness in the East based upon the “purity” argument that no primeval public lands of significant size still existed here. After much controversy, this position was overturned when Congress passed the 1975 Eastern Wilderness Act (Appendix F) as a result of efforts led by The Wilderness Society. Due to the involvement of the newly-formed West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, Dolly Sods and Otter Creek were designated as West Virginia’s first Wilderness Areas as part of this Act. In a campaign also led by the Highlands Conservancy, Cranberry and Laurel Fork Wilderness Areas were designated Wilderness in 1983, after the Forest Service RARE II study of the late 1970’s. As part of this Wilderness bill, those roadless areas that were not designated Wilderness were exempted from further wilderness study in the upcoming forest planning process directed by the 1976 National Forest Management Act (NFMA). Furthermore, the language also specified that these lands need not be managed in the future to maintain their wilderness suitability.

Interim Management of MNF Non-Wilderness Roadless Areas

It was with this wilderness guidance, then, that the Monongahela National Forest (MNF) went through its first major planning process in the early 1980's. The same year that the MNF Draft Forest Plan was released for public comment (1984), the West Virginia Chapter of Sierra Club was formed. Working with other conservation groups and the WV Department of Natural Resources, the Club took a lead role in changing this Draft Plan, which emphasized timber production and associated road building.

In 1986, the Final Monongahela NF Land and Resource Management Plan emerged from one of the largest public involvement campaigns of the 155 NF's in the country. As a result of overwhelming public sentiment to greatly limit commercial use and development of the MNF, some of the most wild lands remaining in the Eastern U.S. (including many former RARE II lands) were protected from road-building, timbering, and other human disturbance under a new semi-primitive, non-motorized management prescription known as "6.2," which the WV Sierra Club helped develop. Approximately 15% of the MNF was placed under this temporary protection.

Threats to Unprotected MNF Wild Lands

Only about ¼ of the 918,368 acres of federal land comprising the MNF is currently inventoried as roadless and wild. Of this, only 78,800 acres (8.7%) are protected as Wilderness. Approximately 125,000 acres are assigned to 6.2 management. Such designation, however, does not offer permanent protection for these special lands. Forces are at work to change the Forest Plan to allow timbering and road building within 6.2 areas. In 2003, the closed road that passes within the Cranberry Backcountry 6.2 Area was opened two fall weekends to over 1,000 vehicles of sightseers by the U.S. Forest Service, directly against the rules governing 6.2 management. The message to be taken from this is that 6.2 management not only does not protect the MNF's wild lands as it is currently written, but also its language can be changed during any forest plan review cycle. The other roadless acres of the MNF are subject to timbering, roading, and other development that would destroy their wilderness potential for many years. Our state has lost nearly a half million acres of some of the most diverse forest on earth to mountaintop removal of coal. Thousands of miles of streams have been buried under the massive valley fills associated with these operations. Additionally, because of our close proximity to many of the populous mid-Atlantic urban centers, West Virginia now leads the nation in urban sprawl! Development and commercial exploitation in the form of logging, mining, drilling for oil and gas, and road-building are constant threats to wild places on the Mon. Only through formal Congressional Wilderness designation can some of the wildest lands remaining in the East, located on the Mon, be kept forever wild.

Current West Virginia Wilderness Movement

With the start in 2002 of the 1st periodic review of the MNF Management Plan required by the NFMA law, MNF lands can again be evaluated for potential Wilderness designation. The three conservation organizations that have been deeply involved in MNF wildland protection in the past have now come together to form the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition whose goal is to add appropriate West Virginia federal land to the National Wilderness Preservation System. The Wilderness Society, WV Highlands Conservancy and WV Chapter of Sierra Club, working closely with the U.S. Forest Service, have completed a careful review of roadless areas within the MNF. Many of these areas (especially those under "6.2" management) have been out of the timber base for over 18 years now, and thus, are more wild today than they were when the Forest Plan was put in place. It is from these exceptional wild lands that the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition has formulated its list of recommended Wilderness candidates.