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Groups Fight to Keep the Wilderness Wild

By ANDREA SALINA, Staff Writer

A rare opportunity exists to protect some of West Virginia's last remaining wild places. These special areas are located in the Monongahela National Forest. National forest lands are managed for a wide variety of uses, including logging, mining, recreation, watershed protection and wilderness. Designating a few areas of the forest as wilderness keeps the wildest, most natural forests just as they are.

West Virginia's current wilderness areas — Dolly Sods, Cranberry, Laurel Fork and Otter Creek — remain some of the most spectacular places in the state because of this protection. The majority of the Mon is open to extractive and motorized use, but there still remain a handful of unique areas that qualify for wilderness designation. As the world becomes more populated and developed, future generations face ecological threats. Preserving what's left of West Virginia's wilderness may be the key to a successful future.

The West Virginia Wilderness Coalition has been working in conjunction with the Mountaineer Chapter of Trout Unlimited since 2001 to develop a proposal for additional wilderness areas in the Mon. Thousands of West Virginians have expressed their desire to Congress and the U.S. Forest Service to expand wilderness protections in the Mon. Despite this, Congress has not added any deserving areas within the Mon into the National Wilderness Preservation System since 1983.

Matt Keller, steering committee member and former coordinator of the coalition, notes that special places such as Big Draft, East Fork of Greenbrier, Spice Run, the Dolly Sods Expansion and Seneca Creek are at risk of development from outside interests. Keller added that the Mon is under close scrutiny for interstate power transmission lines and industrial energy development. "Without the protection afforded by wilderness designation, the Forest Service will be powerless to stop the potential destruction of these last wild places," he said.

Keller says that the Mon forms the backbone of the state's natural resource-based

tourism economy. "From an economic standpoint, consider this: In 2003, the Outdoor Industry Foundation estimated 26 million people participated in wilderness-related activities in West Virginia and the states adjacent to it. Tourism spending continues to increase, bringing millions of dollars to the state while sustaining hundreds of businesses," Keller said.

According to Keller, more than 120 businesses across the state have formally endorsed additional wilderness in the Mon, as have municipalities such as Lewisburg and Renick, the Pocahontas and Greenbrier County Convention and Visitors Bureaus, as well as several of the state's Trout Unlimited chapters. The West Virginia Council of Churches and Christians for the Mountains support the proposal for additional wilderness, and have developed a statement outlining the Christian values of wilderness called "God's Gift of a Wild and Wonderful Land." This document is being circulated and endorsed by faith-based groups across the state.

On Thursday, members of the media were invited to attend a wilderness tour and hike to view the proposed Seneca Creek Wilderness Area. Bob Bittner, Bob Bittner Jr. and Carla Kessler of the Mountaineer Chapter of Trout Unlimited hiked along as well. Bittner Jr. asserted that "the Seneca Creek area is one of the finest brook trout watersheds in West Virginia, and is just now healing itself from turn of the century logging."

Dave Saville, campaign coordinator for the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition, opened up the event with some facts about wilderness. "Only 4 percent of the National Wilderness Preservation System lies east of the Mississippi River, where more than 60 percent of the U.S. population resides, Saville said. "Wilderness provides West Virginians with a higher quality of life, clean air and clean water that are increasingly priceless and it protects forested watersheds, controlling water runoff and potential flooding," he said.

Many species of wildlife, both game and nongame, depend on the undisturbed habitat that wilderness provides for their very existence. Areas proposed in the Mon also provide an important source of drinking water and recreation for many West Virginians, according to Saville.

Over two decades have passed since any wilderness has been designated. In 1983, the Cranberry area was slated for wilderness designation, however, former U.S. Rep. Cleve Benedict of West Virginia's 2nd Congressional District from 1981-82, designated the Laurel Fork area instead. At that time, Saville said,

landowners were still leary of wilderness.

The West Virginia Wilderness Coalition differs from other environmental advocates in that they are “proactive” and “defensive” in nature. According to Saville, “We are not opposing anything, we are trying to build support and educate the public as to the benefits of wilderness.”

The coalition collectively agrees that the ultimate decision to protect wilderness lies in the hands of Congress. And like no time before, members of West Virginia’s congressional delegation hold significant leadership roles. Wilderness designation would guarantee access in perpetuity to these places so that generations to come will be able to hike, hunt, fish, camp, ski, climb, paddle, picnic, horseback ride, snowshoe and view wildlife.

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