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Tracy Ridge is wilderness

This part of Allegheny National Forest, a perfect example of eastern U.S. wilderness, must be protected, argues conservationist

RUPERT CUTLER

I am a disciple of the late Howard Zahniser — primary author of the Wilderness Act of 1964 and a native of the small Allegheny National Forest town of Tionesta, not far from the rare and special Keystone State wildland known as Tracy Ridge. Tracy Ridge, an untrammeled, de facto wilderness, is facing a serious threat today.

I held positions with The Wilderness Society in the 1960s and with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the 1970s and regarded them as opportunities to implement Howard Zahniser's vision, to translate it into action on the ground. My philosophy of wilderness is simple: the more, the better.

The task was, and still is, to create a continental wilderness system that protects multiple good examples of our nation's geological and biological diversity for future generations. The means to this end is passage by Congress of additional wilderness area-designation laws to form a more complete National Wilderness Preservation System.

The Wilderness Act required that every area devoid of roads on federal lands be reviewed for its wilderness suitability — everywhere in the country. This far-sighted requirement, and initiatives taken by grassroots citizen groups to push for wilderness protection, have contributed to the quality of life for eastern outdoor folks and to the protection of wildlife, watersheds and viewsheds throughout the East.

Zahniser, longtime executive secretary of The Wilderness Society, died on May 5, 1964, just a few months before his Wilderness Act became law. I had met him when I was with the National Wildlife Federation and immediately took a liking to this gentle soul with an unrestrained passion for books. Upon Zahniser's death, Stewart Brandborg became executive director of The Wilderness Society.

Passage of the Wilderness Act came in the nick of time, because wilderness was the last thing on the minds of administrators back then in eastern national forests. The Wilderness Act had been signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, but the hard work of fleshing out the wilderness system lay ahead.

During the five years I worked

SEE **PROTECT**, PAGE D-4

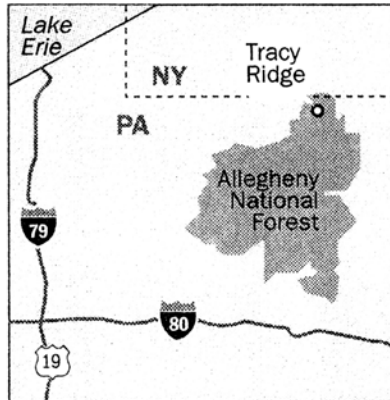
Tracy Ridge is wilderness

PROTECT, FROM D-1

for The Wilderness Society, I organized citizen committees to choose candidate wilderness areas all over the East: from northern Maine, to Michigan's Upper Peninsula, to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia and rugged roadless tracts in Missouri. Pennsylvania and the Allegheny were also of strong interest.

Under Mr. Brandborg's supervision and as foot soldiers in the campaign inspired by Howard Zahniser, we carried the day on two fronts. We won enthusiastic local citizen interest in saving as statutory wilderness their nearby, unprotected backcountry. And, with the help of those local people, we also won the support of Congress for our citizens' proposals to designate as wilderness a vast diversity of tracts never before identified as qualifying for inclusion in the wilderness system.

My later doctoral research looked into the phenomenon of the Forest Service losing one lawsuit after another in federal court. What I found was the Forest Service had turned a blind eye to the Wilderness Act. In one instance after another, forest officers had ignored the clear message in the act that roadless areas had to be regarded as potential statu-



tory wilderness areas and treated as such.

As assistant secretary of agriculture under President Jimmy Carter, I had several opportunities to influence American wilderness history. One was my initiation of RARE II, a comprehensive roadless inventory process which ultimately more than doubled the contribution of the national forests to the wilderness system.

We all know of areas that qualify for inclusion in the wilderness system that still need to be added. In Pennsylvania, a prime example is the Allegheny National Forest roadless area known as Tracy Ridge. At more than 9,000 wild and stunning untrammelled acres, Tracy Ridge has had the strong backing of local citizen groups, such as the Sierra Club, during the 1970s, and for the last 16 years the tenacious Warren-based Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (www.pawild.org).

I strongly believe that Tracy Ridge belongs in the wilderness system. Allegheny National Forest staff sought wilderness status for the area a decade ago. But now, I'm disappointed to report, the agency is reverting to its old ways of cavalierly ignoring citizens and the spirit and intent of the Wilderness Act by threatening Tracy Ridge with a new development scheme — an unnecessary mountain-biking proposal that would degrade the untrammelled wilderness character of the area.

Let's see to it that more such beautiful roadless areas continue to be given wilderness protection. Allegheny National Forest staff should do what was intended by Howard Zahniser and the Wilderness Act and amend their Forest Plan to designate the entire Tracy Ridge area, the largest inventoried roadless area in Pennsylvania, a "Wilderness Study Area" so that Congress can take a close look ... and, I hope, act to protect as wilderness this rare example of primitive eastern American backcountry.

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