CONSERVE

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CONSERVANCY RISKS $2 MILLION
TO PAVE THE WAY

HICKORY CREEK DESIGNATED
FEDERAL WILDERNESS AREA
IN ALLEGHENY NATIONAL FOREST

FIRST IN PENNSYLVANIA AND
FIVE NEIGHBORING STATES

J ust east of Tidioute (Warren County), 100
miles northeast of Pittsburgh, there is a
very special place—a true, unspoiled
wilderness known as Hickory Creek.

This exceptional wild area lies along the west-
ern edge of Allegheny National Forest. No
highway cleaves the gentle, rolling hills
around the Hickory Creek wilderness. Deer, wild
turkey, beaver, black bear, and other wildlife go their
own way through 9,425 acres of hardwood forest,
open meadows, bogs, and beaver ponds. And in
East Hickory Creek itself, the water is so pure
that native brook trout abound without help
from the hatcheries.

Now, thanks to the cooperation of conserva-
tionists and government and business leaders,
Hickory Creek has been designated as wilder-
ness—culminating a 10-year struggle for fed-
eral protection.

Why Hickory Creek?
In addition to its many pristine natural quali-
ties, four factors contributed to the value of
this area as an eastern wilderness:

1. Accessibility
Hickory Creek is within easy reach of over
13 million people residing in five states.

2. Road locations
No vehicular roads bisect the land. All
access is peripheral and the boundary roads
have minimal traffic.

3. Surface ownership
All land within the boundary is owned by the
U.S. Forest Service, so no additional acqui-
sitions and displacements of private owners
were necessary.

4. Need and demand for wilderness
Prior to Hickory Creek, there was no fed-
eral wilderness in Pennsylvania, nor in the
surrounding states of Ohio, New York,
Delaware, New Jersey, and Maryland.
Hickory Creek offered perhaps our last best
chance to provide residents of this heavily
populated region with an opportunity to
experience a wilderness environment close
to home.

Potential destruction
Despite the strong argument in favor of
Hickory Creek's wilderness designation,
a major problem over-shadowed the project.
As with most of the Allegheny National
Forest land, all subsurface mineral rights
in the Hickory Creek area were privately
owned.

Given the volume of oil and gas thought to
underlie this area, it was only a matter of time
before exploration and drilling would begin.
Such actions could have largely destroyed
the wilderness values of the land.

While the Conservancy is not opposed to
development and prudent removal of needed
natural resources, we believe that such activ-
ity should be channeled around places of
exceptional scenic, scientific, and recrea-
tional value—places like Hickory Creek.

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THE $2 MILLION GAMBLE

Therefore, after much research and negotiation, the Conservancy obtained an option to buy most of the mineral rights in Hickory Creek. By reselling these rights to the Forest Service, we could prevent future despoliation of the land and help clear the way for federal wilderness designation.

In doing so, the Conservancy had to risk nearly $2 million without any assurance that the mineral rights could be resold. At the time, federal funding for these rights simply did not exist.

After weighing the move very carefully, the Conservancy board decided to take the financial risk rather than lose the one, best hope we had for creating an important eastern wilderness area.

TOUGH ROAD IN CONGRESS

Despite having the support of all 23 Pennsylvania Congressmen and Senators Heinz and Specter, it took two years to pass the Pennsylvania Wilderness Bill. Because of its relatively small size, it did not generate the same level of national interest as other larger and better known wilderness proposals. During the long and hard negotiations, every aspect of the bill came under close scrutiny and was subjected to intensive debate.

Finally, on October 23, 1984, President Reagan signed the Pennsylvania Wilderness Bill into law and Hickory Creek officially became the state's first federal wilderness area.

ALLEGHENY ISLANDS WILDERNESS

In addition to Hickory Creek, the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act established the Allegheny Islands Wilderness. This comprises seven islands in the Allegheny River totaling about 363 acres. Three of these islands had previously been acquired by the Conservancy and sold to the Forest Service as part of our ongoing Allegheny River project. Wilderness status will protect the interesting and diverse plant and animal life on the islands, which will be managed for appropriate recreation, conservation, and educational uses.

ALLEGHENY NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

The Pennsylvania Wilderness Act also designates four other parts of Allegheny National Forest as the Allegheny National Recreation Area. Totaling 23,100 acres, they include: the Allegheny Front along the Allegheny River; Tracy Ridge on the east bank of the Allegheny Reservoir; the Complanter area which lies on the opposite shoreline of the reservoir; and the northern part of the Allegheny Reservoir.

In these areas, conservation of scenic, wilderness, cultural, scientific, educational, and other values will be emphasized. Hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation is permitted. However, existing private rights in these places are fully protected. Owners of oil, gas, and mineral rights will be able to explore and develop their resources, provided they do so in a manner consistent with sound environmental practices.

A FAIR AND REASONABLE BALANCE

We believe that the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act of 1984 is good legislation that strikes a fair and reasonable balance on the tough issues of wilderness protection and national recreation area designation in the national forest. It sets aside the most pristine part of Allegheny National Forest, while allowing removal of needed resources in other, less sensitive areas.