



Greetings!

Hello & welcome to our first official *Keep it Wild* newsletter. This issue is intended to highlight the economic potential of our beautiful PA Wilds. We continually hear industry spokespersons and their elected cheerleaders touting the financial benefits of gas development, a proven boom/bust cycle with devastating long term consequences. In truth, the long-term economic potential of Penn's Woods lies in what is on the surface, not under it.

First, some good news: [PA just extended the drilling moratorium for any new leases in our state forests for five more years.](#) The moratorium was recommended by DCNR in its recently released 10 year forest management plan. Though unpopular with the drilling industry, the moratorium was supported by many of the more than 300 people who attended 12 public meetings held to gather input on the plan, and also in the 4,800 comments received by the bureau. Thank you to all who were active in the effort.

Read on for some disconcerting information on the Lycoming County Visitors' Bureau's lack of involvement in promoting the PA Wilds. Recreational tourism and the PA Wilds campaign was once an important focus in Lycoming County. That was before the natural gas industry moved into town. Let's do what we can to bring the abundance of opportunities for outdoor recreation back to the forefront of what is best about life in Lycoming County.

Our feature article is followed by the [announcement](#) of a newly formed bipartisan citizens group that has legitimate concerns regarding public hotel tax monies. These Lycoming County taxpayers invite you to join them in asking the County Commissioners for transparency and accountability in the handling and use of these public funds. Please sign on and help spread the word.

Finally, check out details on the Loyalsock State Forest [event](#) coming up this weekend. Be sure to RSVP ASAP, as attendance is limited.

Ignoring the PA Wilds

by Jon Bogle, RDA Founding Member

The Pennsylvania Wilds offers our region a great opportunity to build a substantial and sustainable eco-tourism industry. Inexplicably and very unfortunately, Lycoming County's Visitors Bureau has a clearly stated position of ignoring this beautiful treasure.

The [PA Wilds](#) has over two million acres of pristine forest. That's an area larger than Yellowstone. With 29 state parks, great expanses of state forests, state game lands and the Allegheny National Forest, this area is definitely worth visiting.

There are hundreds of miles of rivers and streams including long stretches of [National Wild and Scenic Rivers](#) along the Allegheny and Clarion Rivers. Feeding the West Branch of the Susquehanna River are a number of major creeks flowing through scenic valleys fed by a multitude of small streams and runs. Many of these are habitats for native trout.

The Wilds has an almost intact ecosystem, missing only wolves and panthers. Elk are again thriving in Elk County and have become a major tourist draw. Along with the elk, the Pine Creek Gorge, Kinzua Bridge and the nationally known dark skies of Cherry Creek State Park are all focal points for visitors.

Williamsport is the largest city located in the PA Wilds and is geographically positioned to be the gateway for people coming from the large urban centers to the east and south. The Visitors Bureau's Director said visitors to the PA Wilds come to camp and do not stay in hotels or spend much money; however, more than 326,000 visitors came to the Wilds in 2010 and spent 1.5 billion dollars.

The North Star Survey

An online survey by North Star, done for the PA Wilds Center, strongly refutes the Visitors Bureau Director's opinion. The North Star Survey found that fewer than one out of three visitors to the Wilds camped. The survey profile shows slightly more female than male visitors, mostly middle age or older, and of middle to upper income. Of those surveyed, 93 percent were over 35 years old and the majority reported making more than 50,000 dollars per year.

They mostly come from nearby metro areas and stay for less than a week. Primarily they want to experience our gorgeous countryside, hike, bird watch and see other wildlife. Generally they come looking for beauty and quiet, not excitement.

Overwhelmingly, they leave satisfied. Eighty-seven percent said they would very likely return and another eight percent said they would somewhat likely return. The PA Wilds Center estimated that for every dollar they spent on tourist promotion, the visitors they attracted spent 90 dollars. [Click here to view results of the survey.](#)

We Need the Business

Lycoming County's unemployment rate is currently at 7 percent while the national average is 4.9 percent. Over 4000 in our workforce are without jobs. Less than 20 percent of the county's workforce has a college degree but the majority of the county's jobs are white collar jobs. Finding a job without a degree can be a struggle. Many of the rural townships have both high unemployment and high poverty. Sixteen percent of the county's residents live at or below the poverty line. [Click here to see 2015 US census data.](#)

The PA Wilds is a Natural Fit for Williamsport and Lycoming County

The Wilds offers a sustainable industry based on natural assets. Many of the jobs that would result from an invigorated Wilds economy can be filled by those without higher or specialized education.

There are many cabins and camps throughout the Wilds which sit empty most of the year. An educational outreach to cabin owners would inform them how they can make thousands of dollars a year through [airbnb](#) or other agencies by renting out their camps when they aren't using them. Bringing camps and vacation properties into the economy

will spawn supporting businesses like cleaning, maintenance and rental agencies.

[Click here to read the full article including what our Visitors Bureau could accomplish with several hundred thousand dollars received each year in hotel taxes.](#)

A prosperous, sustainable future can be built on our already existing natural and historic assets. The Chamber's policy has been to disregard these assets and instead subsidize developers to build "attractions" to lure visitors. Even if this works, it will be the developers who mostly prosper.

Directing resources to helping a large number of small businesses throughout the county to become established, improve and gain customers will build our economy from a broad, solid foundation.

[Click here to view the full feature article.](#)

Where Does Our Tax Money Go?



A bipartisan group known as the LYCOMING COUNTY CITIZENS FOR HOTEL TAX ACCOUNTABILITY is concerned about the lack of transparency and accountability in the use of the hotel tax. These are public funds paid by visitors who stay in our hotels.

DID YOU KNOW ???

- Since 2006, the Lycoming County Commissioners have turned over \$6,205,602 in hotel tax monies to the local Chamber of Commerce. (Note: this figure does not include 2016 tax money.)
- The commissioners do not apply the same level of scrutiny to the oversight of hotel tax funds as they do with all other tax monies - effectively a double standard.
- The commissioners permit the unsupervised use of hotel tax monies and have not adequately questioned the \$200,000 paid annually from these funds to Chamber members for part time work.
- Chamber members are allowed to advertise and promote through the publicly funded Visitor's Bureau free of charge. All other taxpayers are required to pay a fee for this service.
- According to last year's Visitors Bureau financial statement, "During 2015, the Organization [Chamber] granted \$500,000 to help fund the Liberty Arena project in the Williamsport area." (Note: Liberty Arena is a privately-owned, for-profit enterprise owned by Chamber members.)

If you agree that it is time for transparency in the use of our hotel tax, we invite you to sign on to a letter asking the Lycoming County Commissioners to hold the Chamber of Commerce accountable for the use of this public tax money. Please SIGN ON at the link below.

[Click here to sign the request.](#)

A Better Path Forward

Hike One of the Best Trails in the PA Wilds this Sunday

Begin your day at 10 am in the historic ghost town of Masten and learn about native area snakes with Clyde Peeling of Reptiland. Afterward, choose your guided hiking option. Hikers will be shuttled to locations along the Old Loggers Path and will hike back to Masten. A written guide to other areas of the Old Loggers Path and Rock Run will be available for those who wish to continue their day in the forest after the hike.

Registration is required & space is limited. Click the image or button below to RSVP.

This special outdoor event will be held rain or shine.

A BETTER PATH FORWARD

Hiking the acclaimed Old Loggers Path in solidarity against natural gas development in the Loyalsock State Forest

Sunday, October 2, at 10 a.m.
Meet at Old Loggers Path
Trailhead at Masten
Event is rain or shine! #saveloyalsock

Join the Save the Loyalsock Coalition and other organizations for an educational day hike on one of Pennsylvania's best hiking trails.

- Special presentation on native snakes by Reptiland's Clyde Peeling
- Guided hikes on selected sections of the Old Loggers Path
- Learn about drilling in our public lands

Registration required, space is limited! Register at www.saveloyalsock.org



Photo courtesy Jeff Mitchell

[Click here to view the event page and RSVP.](#)

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See what's happening on our social sites:

