



The Highlands Voice

Since 1967, The Monthly Publication of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

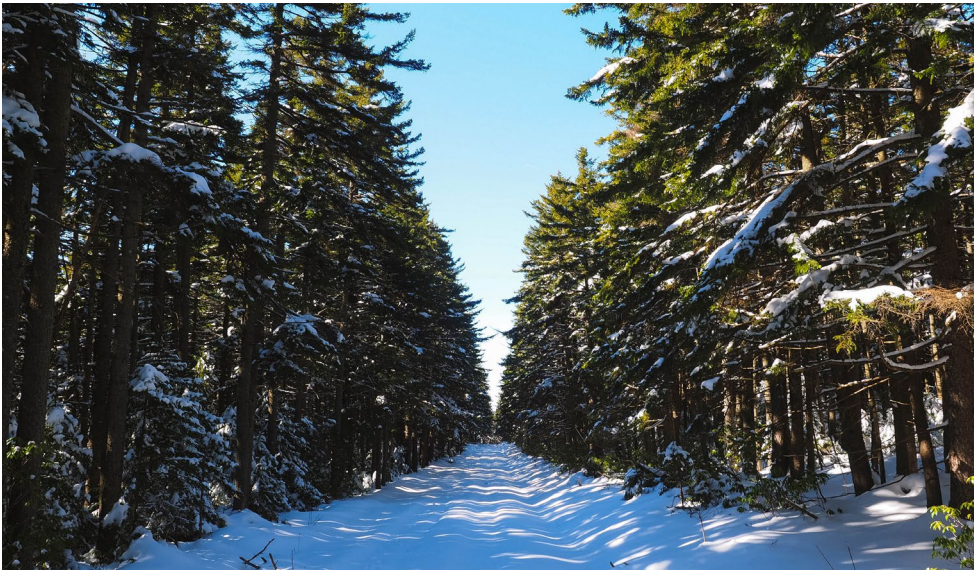
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A Future With More Old-Growth Forests?

By Olivia Miller

I have often tried to imagine what our forests in West Virginia must have looked like prior to the widespread deforestation that occurred across the state in the 19th century. My mind drifts to the ancient redwoods in California, the towering Eucalyptus trees in Australia, and the small patches of western red cedar groves in Idaho that narrowly escaped logging because the terrain was too difficult to access. I have been fortunate to spend time exploring old-growth forests in other parts of the world.

Glimpses of these powerful and sacred West Virginia forests remain in parts of the state that were fortunate enough to have been “spared” by surveying errors—notably the 140-acre



A snow-covered hike to the top of Gaudineer Knob. (Photo by Olivia Miller)

Gaudineer Knob Scenic Area in Pocahontas County. If I could time travel, I would choose to be plopped down right in the very center of the great ancient red spruce and eastern hemlock forests that once stood in the high areas of Dolly Sods and Flatrock-Roaring Plains. Trees in this stand were recorded to be well over a thousand years old.

Anyone that has visited a virgin forest knows that walking through these big trees stirs up an overwhelming feeling of awe. This feeling of awe, as well as the many other benefits our forests offer to our physical, spiritual, and mental well-being are difficult to measure.

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Thoughts From Our President

By Marilyn Shoenfeld

As 2023 comes to an end, we look back on the accomplishments of the different committees of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, of our Program Director, of our Board of Directors and our new Membership and Operations Director. I am amazed at what we have done and awed by what we still have to do. Advocacy is more important than ever, and we need to continue our efforts to protect and preserve the beautiful West Virginia Highlands.

We appreciate you, our supporters, as we move forward with our goals. You are the reason we continue to move forward—to protect the environment for you to continue to enjoy all the Highlands has to offer as the years go by.

I am writing this the day before my 80th birthday and am reflecting on the history of the Conservancy. I have been involved with this organization for over 20 years and have seen it grow and thrive. Many other environmental groups grew out of the work of the Conservancy and still are our partners today.

Although most of the following information was in the last issue of the Voice, I thought it bore repeating. This is a summary of the achievements of the activities of our various committees in 2023.

The Legislative Committee had several key successes in the last legislative session. Bear in mind that the 2024 legislative session is starting shortly, and the same issues will likely arise. The Committee successfully prevented the passage of a bill that would allow Off Road Vehicles to access our public lands. The PFAS Protection Act was passed. The Legislative Committee continues to support and work with the West Virginia Environmental Council

to set goals and coordinate lobbying efforts.

The Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards continues to grow and expand its efforts to protect and preserve the Dolly Sods Wilderness. The area has grown in popularity and the number of visitors has increased exponentially in the last five years. The Wilderness Stewards provide information and support good wilderness practices. Entering its third year, the program will expand to train folks for trail monitoring and maintenance as well as other efforts. Continuing to work with the United States Forest Service, the Stewards are providing a much-needed service to this unique area of the West Virginia Highlands.

The Highways Committee continues to work to reroute Corridor H to the northern alternative that avoids crossing the historic Blackwater Canyon and splitting the two sister mountain towns of Davis and Thomas. It is imperative that any unnecessary environmental harm is avoided. This has resulted in many meetings with appropriate parties, participation in hearings and comments filed on issues such as core drilling.

The Public Lands Committee continually monitors activity on public lands, especially the Monongahela National Forest. It identifies issues that need exploring, solicits public opinion and much more. This Committee been working diligently on issues that impact our public lands and you will be hearing from them a great deal in 2024.

The Extractive Industries Committee has been involved in trying to hold extractive industries to the law and has had many legal successes.

The Rivers Committee has been working on water testing relevant to the building of Corridor H. It has as-

Save the Date: Save Our Solar Rally

Join us on January 20, 2024 from 2 to 4 p.m. at the State Capital to celebrate the benefits of solar for West Virginia.

Solar is under attack by legislators and monopoly utilities that are leading the effort to change net metering rules—important policies that ensure solar is economically viable and accessible to all consumers. We cannot let this happen.

Community solar and net metering are important to West Virginians, we want a sustainable future and fair compensation for the power we produce.

This indoor/outdoor event will include speakers from the industry, decision makers, and solar customers, as well as advocacy training and the chance to speak face-to-face with key decision makers. Music and limited refreshments will be provided. Register now to participate in ride sharing or catch one of our buses from across the state! We hope to see you there.

RSVP for the Save Our Solar Rally here: <https://bit.ly/SaveOurSolarWV>

sembled a team of civilian water testers to gather baseline data for the waters in the affected areas. There will be many opportunities to get involved with this committee in 2024 to safeguard our waters.

The Grants Committee has been identifying sources of funds to expand our efforts in all of these areas. They have applied for and received several grants and continue to work towards those goals.

These are just a few examples of what the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy does. We are fortunate to have our members support our activities and to have the passion that is contributed to all these efforts. We always need new committee members with new ideas to aid us. Please contact us if you would like to become involved.

Thank you for your support and have a Happy New Year!

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy is a non-profit corporation which has been recognized as a tax exempt organization by the Internal Revenue Service. Its bylaws describe its purpose: The purposes of the Conservancy shall be to promote, encourage, and work for the conservation—including both preservation and wise use—and appreciation of the natural resources of West Virginia and the nation, and especially of the Highlands Region of West Virginia, for the cultural, social, educational, physical, health, spiritual, and economic benefit of present and future generations of West Virginians and Americans.

Oh, the Irony

By Cynthia D. Ellis

Editor's Note: This article first appeared in the February 2014 issue of *The Highlands Voice*, nearly a month after 10,000 gallons of Methylcyclohexanemethanol (MCHM) was released from a Freedom Industries facility into the Elk River, a tributary of the Kanawha River. This January marks the tenth anniversary since the tragic spill contaminated the drinking water for more than 300,000 West Virginians.

"Is this water 'ironic?'" I can hear my 9 year-old self asking that question as the handle went up and down and water flowed from a pump at a roadside park along a two-lane West Virginia highway sometime a long while ago. I loved words...collecting new ones, learning their meaning and context, and I was with friends and family on an outing. The friends included a teacher and newspaper reporter; they could be friendly adult resources for a budding vocabulary enthusiast. In truth, I'd just heard someone say it was iron water. No, they smiled indulgently...that water is not exactly "ironic."

Now, decades later, I'm watching water flow from my own faucets with a real sense of irony...or something sadder. As one of the 300,000 (individuals? families?) affected by a chemical spill in the Elk River, I've had many sensations. And not even a long-standing passion for collecting words may support me in telling of this event. It could be nearly indefinable or indescribable.

First, it feels very strange to have been someone who reviewed a book, in this newsletter three months ago, about looming water difficulties ("The Ripple Effect," Oct. '13). Of course, I made some mental connection to the problems described in stories from around the United States and the world, but that is not like living it.

In the same way, I had participated in a number of environmental activities, directly and

indirectly linked to the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, and had seen bad water and ruined streams

and other sources elsewhere in our state and had been deeply moved by affected residents. Now, I am one. I may have more options and choices than others, but I am an affected resident. I cannot drink the water from the tap. I cannot cook with that water. Like some other West Virginians, affected by mining, or fracking; and like people dealing without water worldwide, I must now make decisions about self, family, pets, livestock, plants, and the value of my property.

Here are some thoughts on the event that could be examined for irony, or lack of.

Many people decried the surge of lawsuits following the disaster. Investigative reporter, Ken Ward, Jr. has urged that people remember that some solid facts may be derived from the investigations of this leak.

Soon it happens that I will become a Great Aunt. I'm happy. And I'm very worried, as is the mom-to-be. She struggles and juggles, to find accurate information and to handle her water usage in a non-harmful way.

Among the most helpful people, in bringing water, baby wipes, and other supplies to areas away from the metro Charleston area have been tree huggers and out-of-state religious groups. These are the same folks reviled by some in the coal counties as meddlers.

In 2010, National Geographic magazine devoted an entire issue to one topic..."WATER; Our Thirsty World." I purchased extra copies and gave them to my local legislators. None acknowledged receipt.

"Throw the bums out!" say some, as a suggestion for improving legislative action. But how would good candidates be recruited and how would they fund their election efforts? Enhanced by the "Citizens United" deci-



Cindy's great-niece, born two months after the water crisis. Cindy writes, "As far as I (and I guess the scientific and medical community) know, no children present at the time of the crisis, nor born to women pregnant then, have been documented with lasting effects."

sion, the political funding by extraction industries here is well maintained. Those industries work to limit regulation.

"Take Back the Tap." I have liked the name and the focus of that campaign. There are so many negative aspects of bottled water—questionable sources, content, impact of

bottle production and disposal/recycling—that I could support the idea that we should all work to make our own local water convenient, affordable, and safe. However, now, here, we have been told we can "take back" our tap, but our trust is gone.

In my own area, to complete bird surveys at a lake reservoir maintained by the Putnam PSD, I had to

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Cindy's great-niece helping out with water quality testing.

West Virginia Highlands Conservancy
Online Store Catalog

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- WVHC Cotton Hat (Black or Army Green): \$22.50
- WVHC Hemp Hat (Black or Green): \$25.00
- WVHC 100% Cotton T-Shirts (Coyote Brown, Kelly Green, Navy Blue, Black) Available in XS-XXL: \$22.00
- Black 50th Anniversary T-Shirt with “Celebrating 50 years” logo. Available in Small-XXL: \$20.00
- I Love Mountains T-Shirt Short Sleeve. Available in M-XXL: \$18.00
- I Love Mountains T-Shirt Long Sleeve. Available in S, M, L, XL: \$22.00
- I Love Mountains Toddler T-Shirts. Available in 18-months, 2T, 3T, 4T, 5/6: \$20.00
- Square Black Bandana: \$5.00

Drinkware

- WVHC Hydro Flask 20 oz. All Around Tumbler (Birch, Indigo, Black): \$35.00
- WVHC Hydro Flask 21 oz. Standard Mouth Flex Cap Water Bottle (Pacific, Mesa, Indigo): \$45.00

Stickers

- I Love Mountains Bumper Sticker: \$3.00 for one, \$12.00 for 20

Books

- Monongahela National Forest Hiking Guide, 9th Edition: \$21.95
- Fighting to Protect the Highlands: \$15.95

To order by mail make checks payable to West Virginia Highlands Conservancy and send to P.O. Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321. Please indicate the item and relevant color and size if applicable. To view and purchase store items online, visit wvhighlands.org



BUMPER STICKERS

To get free I ♥ Mountains bumper sticker(s), send a SASE to P.O. Box 306, Charleston, WV, 25321. Slip a dollar donation (or more) in with the SASE and get two bumper stickers. Businesses or organizations wishing to provide bumper stickers to their customers/members may have them free. (Of course if they can afford a donation that will be gratefully accepted.)



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and Committee Chairs

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Please email any poems, letters, commentaries, etc. to the Voice editor at comms@wvhighlands.org or by real, honest to goodness, mentioned in the United States Constitution mail to WV Highlands Conservancy, PO Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321.

A Future With More Old-Growth Forests? *continued from page 1*

What can be easily measured, though, is the rate at which our forests store carbon. Our forests absorb carbon dioxide equivalent to more than 10 percent of our nation's annual greenhouse gas emissions. On a tree-by-tree basis, old-growth forests have been shown to store significantly more carbon than their younger counterparts. Thanks to this, the Biden-Harris Administration views the conservation of old-growth forests as a key climate mitigation solution.

In April 2022, the Biden-Harris Administration announced an executive order calling for an inventory of mature and old-growth forests, setting reforestation targets on federally managed lands, and analyzing reforestation opportunities to enhance forest resilience to climate change. The executive order also instructed the Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Department of Agriculture,

and Forest Service to create clear working definitions of old-growth and mature forests.

The accompanying report to the executive order was released in April 2023, and established working definitions for over 200 regional vegetation types. Things like tree size, accumulations of large dead woody material, number of canopy layers, species composition, and ecosystem function were all considered. In addition to their ecological attributes, the report states that old-growth forests are distinguished by their ecosystem services and social, cultural, and economic values. This task was not as simple as merely establishing a criterion for age.

The Forest Service's inventory found that 24.7 million acres, or 17 percent of its 144.3 million acres of forest are old-growth, while 68.1 million acres, or 47 percent, are mature.

Building on this report, in

mid-December, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a historic proposal to amend all 128 forest land management plans to conserve and steward old-growth forest conditions on national forests and grasslands nationwide. This would be the first nationwide amendment to forest plans in the 118-year history of the Forest Service. If adopted, the proposal would allow logging to maintain and improve old-growth characteristics, not for timber production.

Beyond the benefits of carbon dioxide storage, the Biden-Harris Administration has publicly acknowledged that old and mature forests are vital to providing clean water and protecting biodiversity.

The Forest Service is seeking public comment on the proposal through Feb. 2. Comments can be submitted online at <https://bit.ly/3t12ZFb>. The West Virginia Highlands Conser-

vancy's Public Lands Committee will be commenting on the proposal.

According to the World Resources Institute, less than 1 percent of "Frontier Forests"—large, contiguous forests with all species intact—still exist in the lower 48 states. Of the original 1.04 billion acres of virgin forest in the United States, over 96 percent has been cut down.

If current plans continue, we will continue to witness the decimation of old-growth forests across the nation. We can't undo the mistakes of the past, but we are being presented with the opportunity to provide sweeping protections for mature and old-growth forests and safeguard wildlife, clean drinking water and air, and prevent the some of the worst consequences of climate change. Our children and future generations deserve to reap the beauty and benefits of ancient forests.

No Rush for Corridor H

By Bonni McKeown, Stewards of the Potomac Highlands

West Virginia Division of Highways chief Jimmy Wriston recently vowed to have two unbuilt, controversial sections of Corridor H under contract by the end of 2024.

The two sections in question—the nine-mile, \$467 million stretch from Parsons to Davis in Tucker County, and the \$166 million, seven miles from Wardensville to the Virginia line in Hardy County—are the most sensitive in the 100-mile route. Legally, environmental reviews must be done before construction.

There are good reasons to be cautious when proposing huge permanent changes to local communities and Main Street economies, massively altering mountains, streams, forests and farms with blasting, earthmoving, and paving. Yet even with its Corridor H track record of muddied streams and half-built bridges caving in, WVDOH

wants to rush through environmental studies and build, build, build.

Businesses, residents, and visitors who value, appreciate, and depend on the natural and historic qualities of West Virginia have a right to full disclosure and honest deliberation based on updated facts of economics and science. The last full environmental impact studies were done in 1994-96.

In Tucker County, a local coalition, backed by national allies, has gone to great lengths to propose a practical "Go North" route that differs from WVDOH's preferred alternative. "Go North" would avoid a four-lane splitting the towns of Davis and Thomas and avoid major impacts to Blackwater Canyon and historic areas near Thomas. But even with federal agencies' encouragement, WVDOH so far is not treating the Go North proposal seriously. They are just in a hurry to build, build, build.

In the other section, eastern Hardy County, the terrain is full of sinkholes, caves and springs—including the aquifer in the path of Corridor H that now furnishes water for the Town of Wardensville and many homeowners' wells. When the politicians leave office, and the highway engineers and construction contractors are all done, they get paid and go home. Those who live, work and recreate here get stuck with their mess. A mess not easy to clean up.

DOH's Wriston no doubt hopes his urgent words for Corridor H might nicely detract from public focus on his family conflicts of interest. But for the citizens and taxpayers, what's the rush? Our area has done fine for years without these sections of Corridor H.

Further, Corridor H remains a "Road to Nowhere." WVDOH has no agreement from Virginia to build its proposed section of Corridor H from

the state line to Interstates 81 and 66. Virginia's Commonwealth Transportation Board retains its plans NOT to build the four-lane. In October 2022, Shenandoah County, Virginia, and the town of Strasburg renewed their opposition by passing resolutions against Corridor H.

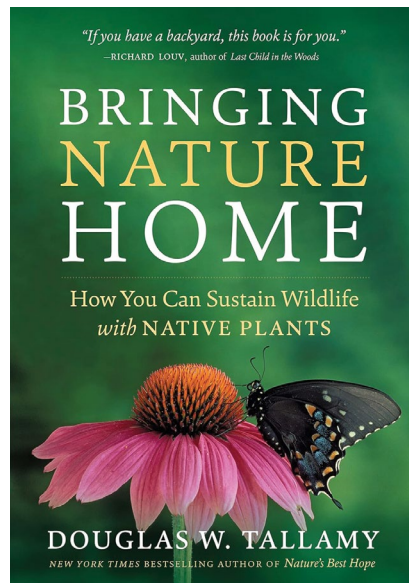
Let's just ignore Mr. Wriston's build-it blathering, and proceed cautiously and slowly on Corridor H. Environmental studies need to respect the millions of years nature took to build our Potomac Highlands mountains, forests and rivers.

Bonni McKeown, a writer and lifelong transport activist from Hampshire County, is president of the citizens group Stewards of Potomac Highlands, which opposes the Corridor H highway through eastern West Virginia.

WVHC's 2023 Winter Reading List

As winter sets in and blankets the West Virginia Highlands in snow, past and present board members of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy have curated a list of ten books that promise to inspire and connect you closer to nature during these long, cold nights. From Joyce M. Barry's compelling "Standing Our Ground," which illuminates the courageous role of women in the fight against mountaintop removal, to Richard Powers' powerful Pulitzer Prize winning "Overstory," this list spans a diverse range of perspectives and narratives.

The books named in this selection have helped our members deepen their own understanding of conservation and the pressing environmental challenges that call for our collective action. We hope there is something for everyone to enjoy.



1. "Bringing Nature Home - How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants" by Douglas W. Tallamy

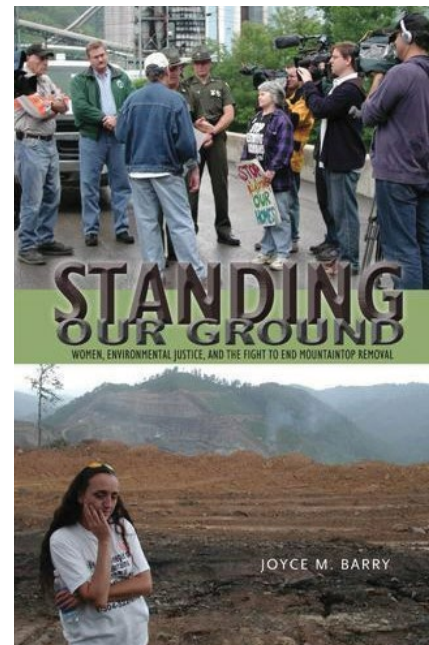
A practical, informative and beautifully illustrated guide to bringing native plants into your home garden. The author does a fantastic job explaining how plants, trees, insects, birds and larger animals all can benefit from replacing exotic and non-native plants with natives. The incredible bug photography alone is worth the purchase price! In its 16th printing, it is essential reading for anyone interested in creating biodiversity around their home.

Recommended by Luanne McGovern, WVHC Senior Vice President

2. "Smokescreen: Debunking Wildfire Myths to Save Our Forests and Our Climate" by Chad Hanson

This is a book about forest fires—how we talk about them, how we think about them, and, most importantly, public policy toward fire control and suppression. Any discussion about fire inevitably leads to a discussion of logging, including how we manage logging on public lands. There is also discussion of how logging policy impacts climate change. Some of the ideas in the book are contrary to conventional wisdom. The unconventional ideas are supported by research which is cited in the book.

Recommended by John McFerrin, WVHC Secretary



Member

4. "Brave the Wild River: The Untold Story of Two Women who Mapped the Botany of the Grand Canyon" by Melissa L. Seigny

A well-written descriptive account of the 600-mile trip down the Colorado River in 1938, two years after the Hoover/Boulder Dam was completed. Three homemade cataract boats with six people were used for the two-month journey. The trip was intended to be an adventure coupled with plant collections by two women botanists from the University of Michigan.

Recommended by Patricia Gundrum, WVHC Board Member

5. "Winter World: The Ingenuity of Animal Survival" by Bernd Heinrich

Cindy Rank describes this book as, "science written with grace." "Beautifully illustrated throughout with the author's delicate drawings and infused by his inexhaustible enchantment with nature, Winter World: The Ingenuity of Animal Survival awakens the wonders and mysteries by which nature sustains herself through winter's harsh cruel exigencies."

Recommended by Cindy Rank, retired WVHC Board Member

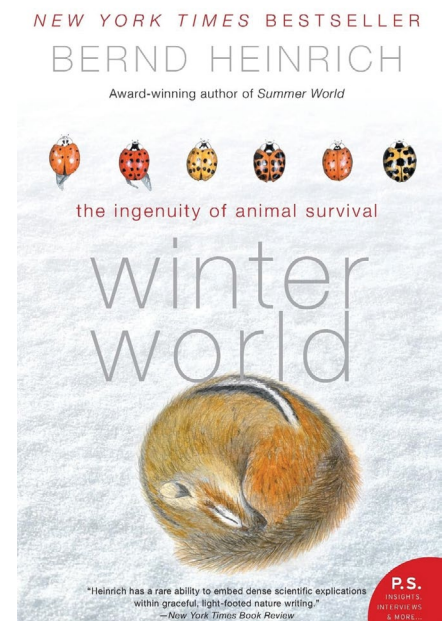
6. "Death and Life of the Great Lakes" by Dan Egan

This book is about fish management in the Great Lakes. Historically the Lakes were an isolated ecosystem since any immigrant species would have to go up Niagara Falls to reach them. Then there was a canal around the falls and the reversal in flow of the Chicago River and the Great

3. "Standing Our Ground: Women, Environmental Justice, and the Fight to End Mountaintop Removal" by Joyce M. Barry

This organization, WVHC, wants to save mountains; so do the women depicted in this book. A number of us marched with them, attended meetings and protests with them, and found comfort in our common purpose. Touching on history, economics, and global implications, the author sketches important themes for all of us interested in preservation of our landscape and communities in our state. The preface quotes Denise Giardina, "You are flattening our mountains and filling in our hollows, and this is the last evil you will do."

Recommended by Cindy Ellis, WVHC Board



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Lakes were open to invasive species on both ends. Species came in on boats, other species were introduced intentionally, they interacted, etc. There are lots of facts and ideas about ecology. There are also enough little anecdotes about the people involved, etc. to keep it light and prevent it from turning into a monograph on fish ecology.

Recommended by John McFerrin



7. “Encounters with the Archdruid” by John McPhee

“Encounters with the Archdruid” by John McPhee is a captivating exploration of the ideological battles waged by environmentalist David Brower against proponents of resource exploitation and unbridled development. McPhee’s narrative brings to life three distinct encounters that define Brower’s unwavering commitment to wilderness preservation. From clashing with a pragmatic miner in Glacier Peak Wilderness, Washington, to resisting a real estate developer’s plan for Cumberland Island, Georgia and ultimately facing off against the United States Bureau of Reclamation’s commissioner, Floyd E. Dominy, Brower’s struggles underscore the perpetual tension between human progress and the imperative to protect the environment.

Recommended by Andrew Young

8. “The Journal 1837-1861” by Henry David Thoreau

This book was my winter reading project a couple of years ago. I read it every night,

chronologically through the twenty-four years. It was a happy choice. Thoreau is only twenty when the journal begins, and he is less than a year away from his death (tuberculosis) when it ends. I felt I was growing up with him. Over 700 carefully-chosen pages, we see the local world of Concord and Concord in the world, town-woods-rivers-farms, through his eyes, his opinions, his quotable prose. It’s a wonderful record of a gifted, idiosyncratic, sympathetic mind at work.

Recommended by Hugh Rogers

9. “Half Earth, Our Planet’s Fight for Life” By Edward O. Wilson

A pretty easy read, very informative and important to anyone who is concerned about sustaining levels of biodiversity on our planet. One of the world’s preeminent naturalist and biologist, EO. Wilson is a master of discovery and he offers profound insights into the earth and its inhabitants, and the criticality of preserving the earth’s biodiversity. He writes about some of the newly discovered species living a mile below the subterranean bottom of the Mariana Trench and in the closing sentences of Chapter 14 offers a glimmer of hope for us, (although you might not immediately recognize it). Part of the book is devoted to an educational travelogue of some of the biologically special places in earth’s biosphere and what aspects make each of them special. Wilson offers some optimistic solutions to maintain a balanced earth, stem the loss of biodiversity and avert some of the calamitous consequences attendant with Anthropocene era.

Recommended by Randy Kesling

10. “Overstory” by Richard Powers

This is a true tree huggers book. It is fiction but refers a lot to true history about environmental issues and fights. It is just delightful to read. Overstory won the 2019 Pulitzer for fiction. The prose is lyrical. My two favorite novelists: Barbara Kingsolver and Ann Patchett wrote glowing statements about it.

Recommended by Beth Little

Become a Dolly Sods Wilderness Steward!



Sign up today at bit.ly/DollySodsWildernessStewards

Leave a legacy of hope for the future

Remember the Highlands Conservancy in your will. Plan now to provide a wild and wonderful future for your children and future generations. Bequests keep our organization strong and will allow your voice to continue to be heard.

Your thoughtful planning now will allow us to continue our work to protect wilderness, wildlife, clean air and water and our way of life.

Methane Pollution: EPA Issues Ruling That May Affect WV Emissions

By Mike Tony, Charleston-Gazette Mail

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has issued a final rule targeting a kind of harmful air pollution that has been disproportionately pervasive in West Virginia.

The EPA's final rule released Saturday for gas and oil operations is designed to significantly lower methane emissions — which accelerate climate change — and other air pollutants that drive cancer risk from oil and gas facilities.

The new rule contains the first ever emissions guidelines under the Clean Air Act for states to follow in developing and implementing plans to establish standards to limit methane emissions from existing sources in the oil and gas sector.

The finalized standards build on methane rulemaking the EPA proposed in 2021 and 2022 that drew submissions of nearly 1 million formal comments — including criticism from the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection. The DEP is expected to play a critical role in carrying out the rule since it requires states to develop and submit a plan for reducing methane from existing sources.

The EPA says the rule will avoid an estimated 58 million tons of methane emissions from 2024 to 2038, nearly 80% less than projected methane emissions without the rule. The agency projects the rule will avoid 16 million tons of smog-forming volatile organic compound emissions and 590,000 tons of air toxics.

The final rule will phase out routine flaring of natural gas from new oil wells, require all well sites and compressor stations to be monitored regularly for leaks and create a “super emitter” program aimed at detecting large emissions events.

The EPA estimates the rule will yield net climate and ozone health benefits of \$97 billion to \$98 billion dollars from 2024 to 2038 after accounting for the costs of compliance and savings from recovered gas.

By keeping methane from

reaching the air, the rule will increase recovery of enough gas that otherwise would be wasted from 2024 to 2038 to heat nearly 8 million homes for the winter, the EPA predicts. Ozone reductions resulting from slashing volatile organic compound emissions will prevent up to 97,000 cases of asthma symptoms and 35,000 lost school days a year, according to the agency.

“We hope this will be a start to rein in damaging pollution from the oil and gas industry,” Jim Kotcon, chair of the West Virginia chapter of the Sierra Club, said in an email. “This is one of the most important steps we can take to address the climate emergency.”

W.Va. especially vulnerable

Evidence has emerged that West Virginia, the nation's fourth-largest producer of marketed gas, stands to benefit disproportionately from lower methane emissions.

At least three-quarters of the population in over a third of West Virginia counties lived within a mile of a gas or oil well according to data published in conjunction with a study released last year. The study was conducted by researchers from the Environmental Defense Fund, a New York-headquartered environmental advocacy nonprofit, and Cornell University and published in the peer-reviewed Population and Environment science journal.

West Virginia has a high concentration of low-producing gas wells.

An April 2022 report in the peer-reviewed scientific journal Nature Communications found that roughly half of all well site methane emissions nationwide come from low-production well sites. The study from Environmental Defense Fund researchers found low-production wells emit six to 12 times as much methane as the average rate for all U.S. well sites.

Wells that produce less than 15 barrels of oil equivalent per day comprised 94% of reported wells in West Virginia in 2020, according to federal

Energy Information Administration data — much higher than the 77% clip nationwide.

In a 2018 study of West Virginia well sites, Princeton and McGill university researchers found the EPA underestimates by 7.5 times methane emissions projections from conventional active wells.

“With the large number of oil and gas wells in the state, West Virginians deserve strict controls on harmful pollution,” West Virginia Rivers Coalition Executive Director Angie Rosser said in a statement Saturday applauding the rule.

The DEP objected to EPA-proposed methane rulemaking released in Nov. 2021, arguing in a nine-page comment filed in Jan. 2022 the proposed rule would be too expensive for the agency to implement and could force small local oil and gas businesses to shutter.

DEP Chief Communications Officer Terry Fletcher said Monday the agency is reviewing the rule and would work to maintain compliance with all applicable state and federal air quality rules and regulations.

Key rule provisions

The final rule contains requirements for state plans for existing sources. The requirements include quarterly audible, visual and olfactory surveys in which inspectors listen, look and smell for leaks at single wellhead and multi-wellhead well sites. Such surveys will be every other month for well sites with major production and processing equipment and centralized production facilities.

The final rule also mandates states to submit plans for lowering emissions from existing sources within 24 months. The EPA had proposed to give states only 18 months to submit plans. The rule generally requires that state plans require compliance by no later than 36 months after the plans are due to EPA, meaning existing sources could have up to five years before they

must comply with state plan requirements.

The most common emissions by far in the Appalachian basin have been vented emissions — intentional releases of gas from equipment such as gas-driven pneumatic devices, tanks and compressor seals.

The industry uses pneumatic controllers to regulate pressure and temperatures.

The new rule provides a one-year phase-in for zero-emissions standards for new pneumatic controllers, which the rule calls “process controllers,” and most new pumps outside Alaska.

The EPA will collect data from certified third parties to identify and address “super emitting” sources of large leaks and releases.

Under the final rule's super-emitter program, the EPA will certify third parties, evaluate the data the third parties provide, and send notifications to owners and operators. Once notified, owners and operators must investigate to find the source of the super-emitter event, report the results of the investigation to the EPA and repair any leaks or releases covered by an EPA standard.

Varying responses to rule

Gas and Oil Association of West Virginia Executive Director Charlie Burd said that while his industry trade group was encouraged that the EPA addressed some of the group's previous comments, the group remains concerned with some provisions, including the third-party monitoring program.

The American Petroleum Institute, a national gas and oil industry group, didn't weigh in definitively on the new standards either way in a statement Saturday, saying it was reviewing the rule.

The rule's proponents say it will create jobs in addition to cleaner air in West Virginia.

John Rutecki, Environmental
continued on next page

Methane Pollution *continued from page 8*

Defense Fund regulatory and legislative manager for Appalachia, called the new rule “a huge win not only for West Virginia’s climate, but for the health and economic wellbeing of all West Virginians.”

An Environmental Defense Fund communications specialist pointed to a study reporting 75% of manufacturing firms and 88% of service firms (57 firms combined) said they would expect to hire more employees if future state or federal methane emission rules were put in place. The methane emissions mitigation industry-focused study released in 2021 was prepared by international consulting firm Datu Research for the Environmental Defense Fund.

“We applaud President Biden for showing the world that we can have good jobs and a clean environment if

we act to fight climate change the right way,” BlueGreen Alliance Executive Director Jason Walsh said in a statement released by the EPA welcoming its new rule.

The BlueGreen Alliance is a national coalition of labor unions and environmental groups.

“This final rule is a major victory for our health, the environment, and the global climate, and demonstrates that rigorous enforcement benefits us all,” Kotcon said.

Find more information:

The new rule and related information, including a regulatory impact analysis, can be found at bit.ly/EPA_MethaneReport.

Note: This article originally appeared in the Charleston-Gazette Mail.

The Last Oak

By Nelson Tinnel

**On a barren hill all alone
clings a tiny oak to a jagged stone**

**The loggers came with wheel and claw
No longer they use the axe and saw**

**No more the horse with chain and hook
with blade and claw the earth they took**

**They stripped the land and scarred its skin
deep to the stone like a wounded thing
with fractured bone**

**The trees, their roots were its veins
and now the streams their blood stains**

**This tiny oak, will it stand?
for 100 years on this barren land**

**Can its seed find root on this skeletal rock
till men come again and seem to mock
the laws of God that they forgot**

Dolly Sods Roads Update – Forest Roads 19 and 75 will close Jan. 2, 2024

Monongahela National Forest officials will implement the annual winter road closures in the Dolly Sods area by closing the gates on Forest Roads 19 and 75 January 2, 2024. These roads are closed to motor vehicle use from January to early or mid-April annually to provide for public safety due to variable road conditions in the winter months. Non-motorized use of the roads is allowed.

Forest Road 19 is the east/west route along the southern edge of Dolly Sods that provides access to Rohrbaugh Trail (#508), Boars Nest (#518) and South Prong (#517) trails between Laneville and Jordan Run Road.

Forest Road 75 is the north/south route along the eastern edge of Dolly Sods that provides access to Bear Rocks, Red Creek Campground, and several trailheads.

The Highlands Voice: It's Not Just for Reading Any More

The Highlands Voice is the main way that the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy communicates with its members. But we would like to communicate with more than our members. We have a valuable perspective and information; we would like to communicate with everybody. We still offer electronic delivery. If you would prefer to receive it electronically instead of the paper copy please contact Crys Bauer at membership@wvhighlands.org. With electronic delivery, you will receive a link to a pdf of the Voice several days before the paper copy would have arrived.

No matter how you receive it, please pass it along. If electronically, share the link. If paper, hand it off to a friend, leave it around the house, leave it around the workplace. It's not just for reading. It's for reading and passing along.

Be an Advocate!

Upcoming WVEC Events

The West Virginia Environmental Council (WVEC) invites you to Environmental Day (E-Day), a day of citizen advocacy, at the State Capitol on February 13th!

E-Day is a chance to see the legislature at work, tour the Capitol, meet environmental groups and advocate for crucial environmental priorities. Participation is free! Learn more and register at wvecouncil.org/eday.

In addition to exhibits from environmental groups, E-Day will include a rally with advocates and legislators to discuss environmental issues and promote legislation. WVEC and partners will host two webinars to help prepare you for E-Day!

Advocacy 101: Make a Difference for West Virginia on Tuesday, Jan. 16, Noon – 1 pm: A Lunch & Learn webinar about how the WV legislature works, how a bill becomes a law, and some tips for talking with legislators.

Register for the advocacy webinar at bit.ly/WVAdvocacy101

E-Day Advocacy: Bills and Talking Points on Tuesday, Feb. 6, 7 pm – 8 pm: This webinar will offer up-to-date information about legislation WVEC supports and provide talking points for meeting with key legislators.

Register for the talking points webinar at bit.ly/E-DayAdvocacy2024

E-DAY
2024!

February 13
@ The WV State Capitol



JOIN US FOR A DAY OF
CITIZEN ADVOCACY!

WVECouncil.org/eday

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Membership categories (circle one)

	Individual	Family	Org.
Senior	\$15		
Student	\$15		
Introductory	\$15		
Other	\$15		
Regular	\$25	\$35	\$50
Associate	\$50	\$75	\$100
Sustaining	\$100	\$150	\$200
Patron	\$250	\$500	\$500
Mountaineer	\$500	\$750	\$1000

Mail to West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, P. O. Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321

West Virginia Highlands Conservancy
Working to Keep West Virginia Wild and Wonderful

You may also join online at www.wvhighlands.org

Community Solar in West Virginia?

By John McFerrin

Whenever there is discussion of capturing more sunshine to make electricity, someone always points out that doing that on the scale necessary to operate an entire power grid would take a tremendous amount of land. They make calculations, talk about farmland that would have to be covered in solar panels, etc.

This is all just a matter of perspective. From the ground, it may look as if we would need to cut down forests, cover farmland, etc. From the perspective of a Blackpoll Warbler (or any migrating bird), it is different. They see acres and acres of rooftops, just sitting there, waiting for solar panels. What we must do is make things easier for those who want to cover these acres of rooftops with solar panels.

We took one step years ago with net metering. Any homeowner or business that wants to install solar panels can do so and still remain connected to the electricity grid. If the homeowner's panels produce more electricity than the homeowner needs, the excess goes back to the grid. If the panels produce less, the homeowner draws electricity from the grid. The homeowner only pays if the electricity he takes from the grid is more than the electricity his panels contributed to it. The Public Service Commission has rules controlling how this works.

We took another step last year with legislation on Power Purchase Agreements. Before the legislation, the net metering option was only available to home and business owners who could afford the upfront cost. This eliminated solar panels as an option for many people. The Legislature fixed this by making it possible for a company to install panels at its expense on someone's house and then sell that electricity to the homeowner.

Now is time for the next step: community solar.

Community solar allows entities with big roofs—a business, a parking garage, a church, a medical center—to install solar panels on those

roofs and then sell the power that it doesn't use. For example, a business with a big roof and no shade trees anywhere nearby could cover that roof with solar panels. With such a big roof, it would produce more electricity than it needed. It could then sell the right to use the excess.

Community solar would not be restricted to existing roofs. It could be constructed as a free-standing entity. People could buy shares in the electricity produced by a free-standing community solar operation just as they would in one installed on an existing rooftop. If West Virginia allowed community solar, freestanding community solar operations would probably be more common than those on big roofs.

As a practical matter, any community solar operation could not sell electricity to consumers directly. In addition to the legal barriers, there would be the practical problem of having to string wires, etc., to deliver the electricity. Instead, the excess electricity produced would go back into the electrical grid. Consumers would buy shares of the excess electricity produced by the business, the church, etc. They would then be credited on their electric bills in proportion to the shares they owned in the community solar operation.

This opens up the possibility for all manner of people to have solar power who cannot have it now. Even though renters do not have their own roofs where they could install their own solar panels, they could buy shares of the electricity produced from some big building or freestanding entity. Those who lived in shady spots where solar panels are not possible could buy shares. Those who could not afford the up-front investment in solar panels could buy shares.

It also opens up the possibility of savings for consumers. Estimates are that consumers could save about ten percent on their electric bills by enrolling in community solar.

It also jump starts the use of solar power in West Virginia. West Virgin-

ia currently has dramatically less use of solar power than other states, including surrounding states. In 2021 West Virginia was 49th in the United States in solar jobs per capita. 21 other states (including Virginia and Maryland) and Washington, D.C., have community solar legislation and policies. Community solar would help West Virginia catch up.

Even if this sounds like a good idea, it can't happen in West Virginia under existing law. In West Virginia, electricity is sold by regulated monopolies (mostly Appalachian Power and Mon Power). They are regulated by the Public Service Commission which sets rates and controls many aspects of their operations. As regulated monopolies, they control the poles, wires, etc., that a community solar operation would need to distribute electricity to its members.

This is where the Legislature comes in. Before community solar can become a reality in West Virginia, the Legislature would have to change the law. It would have to authorize community solar and require the Public Service Commission to adopt rules setting

out how the monopolies it regulates (mostly Appalachian Power and Mon Power) would have to cooperate with community solar operations.

A bill to authorize community solar was introduced during the 2022 session of the West Virginia Legislature. It did not pass.

In the 2023 session, House Bill 2159 (Establishing a community solar program for subscribers to gain credits against their utility bills) and Senate Bill 627 were both stopped in committee, the victims of the coal lobby. SB544 (Increasing power purchase agreement cap) was a step in the right direction, increasing the power purchase agreement cap from 25 kW to 50 kW for residential customers and from 500 kW to 1,000 kW for commercial customers. This will allow larger commercial solar installations to move forward.

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, the West Virginia Environmental Council, as well as other groups have once again made enactment of community solar legislation a legislative priority for the 2024 session.

Oh, the Irony *continued from page 3*

have an approved application to enter the site, with an affidavit of purpose, a referral, and two pieces of ID. We are learning that other water sites are not so secure.

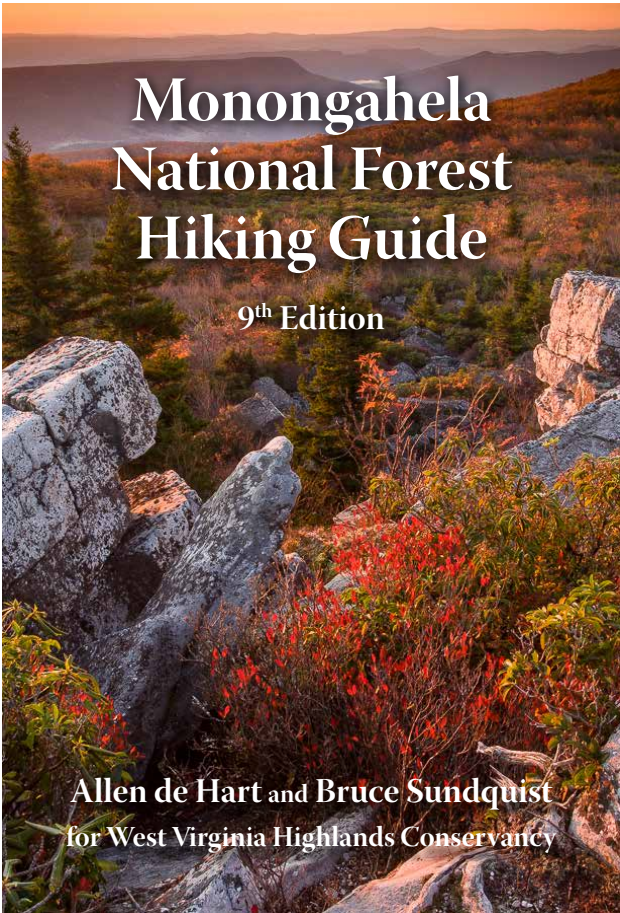
So, to return to the word "ironic." There is one definition which uses an opposite as an example. It poses, "What's NOT ironic?" Answer: "It's just an unfortunate scenario; there's no reversal of expectations."

The water at a roadside park

in 1956 may not have been ironic. Perhaps, in early 2014, the water supplied by West Virginia American Water to nine counties may not be either. But the latter, laced with at least two hazardous substances, is a deeply "unfortunate scenario."

And anyone who reads The Voice knows it was preventable.

Hit the trails with our Mon National Forest Hiking Guide



Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, the new edition of the treasured guide to every trail in the Monongahela National Forest features brand-new topographic maps and Kent Mason’s gorgeous photos, all in color. The Guide has been updated with the cooperation of National Forest District Rangers and Recreation Specialists to reflect changes in the past ten years:

- newly designated wilderness areas
- new trails near campgrounds and sites of special significance
- a new complex of interconnected trails on Cheat Mountain
- rerouted and discontinued trails
- ratings for difficulty, scenery, access to water, and much else

The definitive guide to the Mon adds a wealth of information about history, wildlife, and botany; safety, preparation, and weather; horseback and mountain bike riding and cross-country skiing; as well as sources of further information on the Forest and its environs.

The Monongahela National Forest has long been known as a ‘Special Place.’ The hiking, backpacking, and cross-country skiing opportunities it provides are among the best in the eastern U.S. New wilderness and backcountry trails have been added to the outstanding areas we have appreciated for decades – Otter Creek Wilderness, Dolly Sods Wilderness, Flatrock Plains, Roaring Plains, Blackwater Canyon, Spruce Knob, North Fork Mountain, Shaver’s Mountain, Laurel Fork Wilderness, Cranberry Wilderness -- and there are lesser-known gems to be found in between.

Profits from the sale of these guides support a wide variety of worthy environmental projects for the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy.

Send \$18.95 plus \$3.00 shipping to: West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, P.O. Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321 OR order from our website at www.wvhighlands.org

Get your I ❤️ MOUNTAINS and WVHC gear at our online store!

Show your love for the mountains with our range of bumper stickers, cotton tees, hats, onesies, toddler tees and Hydro Flasks. Shop now at wvhighlands.org

