



Eco-warriors stand on E. Otto State Forest's grand old trees.  
From L: Don Shelters, Roger Tredo, Turiyah Mistretta, Albert Brown and their two sons.  
PHOTO: PETER KOCH

## NOT SO FAST

### Still not happy with the DEC's management plan for Zoar Valley

Three weeks ago Friday—the day after the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) released its draft unit management plan for Zoar Valley—the *Buffalo News* published an article under the headline “Zoar Valley's ancient trees protected.” Countless readers no doubt breathed a sigh of relief, happy in the knowledge that WNY's most significant ecosystem would remain intact. To a few readers, however, namely Albert Brown, Turiya Mistretta and Roger Tredo—all members of environmental group Friends of the Ancient Forest (FAF)—the *News'* declaration was premature.

One week after the article ran, Brown was on the phone with AV. “[DEC] is leaving the majority of the uplands open for logging, and that's a whole lot of land.” In fact, it's nearly half of the land that comprises the Zoar Valley State Multiple Use Area—1,404 of its 2,927 acres. While the *News* was correct that the draft plan would protect the gorge and put 300-foot-wide buffers along its edges and 200-foot-wide buffers on trails leading to the gorge, it failed to mention that almost half the preserve would still be open to “management.”

Brown, the president of FAF, had seen what the DEC's idea of “management” meant two miles away in the East Otto State Forest. He invited AV to take a look.

Two days later, Brown stood in the parking lot of the Country Faire convenient store in Springville, spreading a map of Cattaraugus County across the hood of a beat-up Jeep. “Which road is closed, though?” he asked. With pregnant clouds crowding the horizon, we had to get to East Otto pronto.

A short run over rolling country lanes brought us to Traffic Street in East Otto, and where the pavement ended, “Road Closed” barriers ended our drive. Don Shelters, a concerned conservation officer for the Zoar Valley Paddling Club, arrived just ahead of us. Shelters, who lives only a mile from the state forest and is intimately familiar with the land there, is mad as hell. “I understand logging, and in sustainable logging you don't kill the entire forest. When you take out this much forest, the floor is going to die. The sun comes through and dries it out. That moss regulates the moisture and helps prevent erosion and flooding...there are a billion

reasons what they're doing down here is wrong.” As we reach the edge of the forest, Shelters utters a telling declaration: “This was an awesome hike.”

From there on in, the East Otto State Forest tells its own story. Gnarly, mud-choked skid roads are gouged deep into the forest floor. The forest isn't clear-cut, but it might as well be. The understory has been butchered; trees that are only three and four inches in diameter lay in heaps on the ground, where they'll no doubt rot, since they have little commercial value. The woods were completely silent, and there was no sign of animal life whatsoever. Few of the stumps that we encountered indicated cutting of any valuable trees. At the same time, few of the trees that remained were significant, either. There seemed little rhyme or reason to the logging. (Vic Anderson, DEC's head forester for that project, didn't return AV's phone calls.)

Additionally, the ecologically sensitive riparian zones along the numerous feeder streams that crisscross the forest on their way to Cattaraugus Creek were chopped, leaving exposed slopes that would doubtless increase erosion.

At the edge of the cutting, the small trees gave way beneath huge cherries and towering maples. As we stepped into the mature forest, birds started singing. As we wrapped up our hike a half-hour later, we passed the loggers' sulking skidder truck. A bumper sticker plastered on the driver's side door adequately summed up DEC's management of the East Otto State Forest: “Timberjack—Logging first.”

FAF are concerned that the Zoar Valley uplands will receive the same treatment under DEC's draft unit management plan. And, as time passes, the chorus seems to be growing behind them. Albert Brown is not a small man, and when he's passionate about something, it sometimes manifests itself as bullishness. He speaks loudly, and tends not to back down when the red cape is waved at him. That's good news for Zoar Valley.

FAF was founded in 2003 around the Zoar Valley issue, when the DEC was conducting its last series of public scoping sessions for the management plan. “Bruce Kershner asked [DEC Region 9 head forester] Wayne Cooper about the Lake Erie Gorges Study, and he said he didn't know anything about it. That's when we realized they were lying to us.” The Lake Erie Gorges Study

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 16 >



that Brown refers to was conducted by the New York Natural Heritage Program, a partnership between the DEC and the Nature Conservancy, to inventory the ecological resources of the gorges in Western New York's Lake Erie watershed. That study said some significant things about Zoar Valley. Here are some outtakes:

"The Zoar Valley and the watershed of Cataraugus Creek has the highest number and concentration of rare plants in the Lake Erie Gorges Region."

"This forest apparently has a long list of superlative measurements associated with it at multiple scales. As of June 2002, they have officially documented 'champion trees' (i.e., the tallest examples of a species for a given geographic area) for 14 species..."

"That study resulted in the discovery of four significant ecological community occurrences, one rare animal, and six rare plants within the Zoar Valley MUA."

"Zoar Valley was chosen as an important site in the TNC portfolio for the Great Lakes Basin, and it is one of the most outstanding and impressive natural features within the study area."

It is for exactly these reasons that Brown and company are so adamant that all of Zoar Valley remain pristine. "We didn't ask for a piece of Zoar Valley," Brown says. "We didn't ask for it to be divided. We asked to protect all of it. Just because they give us a little piece of it, they think that we'll take it and go away. But that's not gonna happen."

What DEC actually calls for in the draft unit management plan for Zoar is that all 1,404 acres of uplands be managed. "Management" is a purposefully vague term used by DEC to describe a number of practices. In

some cases it means maintaining an existing field by periodically mowing it, in others it means removing trash or building wood duck nest boxes. In some locations, though, it means building a skid road or logging an 18-acre stand of Japanese larch to return native species. For hundreds of acres, the only plan is to "reinventory and propose management actions." Such hazy language indicates a few things: first, that DEC is creating a management plan without a clear idea or inventory of what it's managing; second, DEC wants to keep the door open on as many management practices as possible.

Interestingly enough, DEC also decided to up the ante on what qualifies as "old-growth" forest. In its first-ever crack at defining old-growth, DEC settled on 180-200 years old, rather than the generally accepted standard of 150 years.

This past Tuesday, DEC stood before the people at a public comment meeting at Bellevue Volunteer Fire Department in Cheektowaga. Things got ugly toward the end, as more and more citizens and environmentalists came around to the same conclusion as FAF: All of Zoar Valley needs to be protected, not just the gorge.

It started out amicably enough, with a few environmentalists—Art Kline of the Sierra Club and Larry Beahan of the Sierra Club and the Adirondack Mountain Club among them—even commending DEC on its unit management plan. They were happy that the gorge was being given such strong protection, the highest level of land protection in the state.

As the meeting wore on, though, more and more questions arose regarding the plan's vague language and DEC's purpose in managing the rest of Zoar Valley, the up-

lands. When asked why they raised the age at which trees are considered old-growth, the DEC's Wayne Cooper responded limply with, "That's what our department has come up with." When asked why they wanted to log the uplands, Cooper's response was: "The reason for the management of the uplands is to create vegetative types that would be native to the area that would be beneficial to the wildlife." Virtually everyone else in the room seemed to agree that those non-native species were going to die out soon anyway, though. When asked for assurances that "management" of Zoar would differ from "management" of East Otto, Cooper's final answer was, "I'd have to look at the plan, but we don't have any thinnings like that scheduled for Zoar."

By the end of the meeting, things had devolved into a feeding frenzy, and Wayne Cooper had become the DEC's unwilling whipping boy. Those who initially reacted favorably to the plan changed their minds. Larry Beahan received a round of applause when he stood up and said, "I said earlier that this was a good plan, but I'm starting to think that this is too much management." Several other environmentalists and naturalists expressed to AV some reasonable reservations about DEC's unit management plan.

Julie Broyles of the Zoar Valley Nature Society—who was quoted supporting the plan in the *Buffalo News* article—is now decidedly against management in the uplands. "Zoar Valley has always belonged in the [state Nature and Historic Preserve Trust]. Zoar Valley is an ecologically, geologically, historically, archaeologically important site, and it should be protected. The splitting of the property I don't think is right. The management of the uplands seems geared toward converting the ecology to suit hunt-

er's needs—creating habitat for deer and grouse." Broyles' other concern is that the DEC hasn't conducted a biodiversity inventory. "They don't know what species are there, and what their relationships are to each other. They've made a plan without even knowing what's there. It seems like they've gone in the wrong order."

Naturalist and old-growth expert Bruce Kershner is concerned with the seemingly arbitrary 300-foot buffer zones at the rim of the gorge called for in the management plan. "The things on the ground are what need to be protected," Kershner says. "You don't draw your line on a map. If they think that the forest is just lines and colors on a map and that's all that it's about, then it shows why we've had a problem with their attitude. It's what's on the ground. In one place it might be a waterfall, in another it might be ancient forest." He also stressed that DEC should not focus on Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area as resources that can be extracted, but rather as natural resources that can be promoted and enjoyed for recreation. "The forester should have a role in what happens at Zoar Valley, but he shouldn't be the manager of the place. They should be promoting recreation and developing Zoar for recreation, not logging."

The bottom line here is that the DEC plan isn't complete. All of Zoar Valley MUA should be protected, and there's still time to submit comments to the DEC. Another public hearing will be held tonight, Thursday, July 13 at Gowanda's American Legion Post 409 at 7pm. Comments can be submitted via e-mail until Aug. 22 at zoar@gw.dec.state.ny.us.

—peter koch

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