



Friends of White's Woods, Inc.

P.O. Box 1271
Indiana, PA 15701

April 12, 2023

White Township Stewardship Committee
950 Indian Springs Road
Indiana, PA 15701

Dear Barb, Sierra, Dave, Matt, and Jeff:

We are writing to express our concern that the White Township Stewardship Committee does not appear to recognize that all of your work can be undone in an instant in the absence of a clear management philosophy and implementation guidelines.

Comprehensive sample stewardships plans, including most of the stewardship plans that the committee has reviewed, generally take great care to articulate a stewardship perspective. The statement of the history, purpose, management philosophy, management objectives, and guidelines for implementation help to make certain that all subsequent stewardship activity will be consistent with publicly-supported objectives, and that no stewardship activity will either intentionally or inadvertently subvert plans to take care of the White's Woods Nature Center.

To achieve both maximum clarity and maximum success, the stewardship plan should include:

- a. **A clear description of this natural resource and its history:** In 1970, White's Woods was funded by state and federal tax-payer dollars to serve as a regional forest, as part of the Project 70 initiative to protect in perpetuity undeveloped green space near urban population centers.
- b. **A clear description of the intended purpose:** The White's Woods Nature Center was designated to remain as a natural area, to be left "largely in its natural state," and used for low-density, passive recreation.
- c. **Statement of a management philosophy:** Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) recently shifted their management philosophy and felt that it was very important to let the public know in their current strategic plan:

Today, a new shift in management philosophy is emerging, namely ecosystem management. One of the basic tenets of this philosophy is that forests, rather than being viewed as containing a set of resources, in fact, are more than the sum of their parts. Forests are comprised of quantifiable components such as trees, but forests are also systems performing various functions and processes. Forests provide human goods as well as human experiences, ranging from recreation to peace and solitude...

Ecosystem management can simply be defined as an ecological approach to

resource management. All aspects of an ecosystem are considered important, and the interdependency of biological and non-biological systems and cycles is recognized as central to this holistic approach. Humans are part of the ecosystem and must be taken into consideration in the development of management strategies.

Penn's Woods: Sustaining Our Forests, p. 8.

Stewardship plans that you have reviewed also make a clear commitment to an ecological perspective, emphasis on protection and conservation, protection of the tree canopy, extensive collaboration with the public and local environmental groups, routine monitoring, preservation of natural ecosystems and habitat, and even protection of the planet.

All of these documents provide important guidance and direction.

An ecological management philosophy is essential for care of a natural area, including the White's Woods Nature Center. It is important to collaborate with the community at every step, and focus on protection and conservation. Preservation of the tree canopy is critical for controlling invasive plants and, as DCNR pointed out, for providing aesthetic value and shade for recreation.

- d. **A clear statement of overarching management objectives:** Twenty-seven years of public input has made clear that the overarching management goal for White's Woods is to allow this mid-successional forest to mature via natural succession. DCNR also makes clear that a major responsibility in taking care of a public forest requires taking care of its multiple, interlocking ecosystems, including at-risk, vulnerable, and federally-protected plant and animal species, along with addressing climate change mitigation concerns such as stormwater management, air quality, and temperature mitigation.
- e. **Guidelines for implementation:** Management philosophy and objectives will lead directly to guidelines for implementation and these guidelines need to be articulated.

With a commitment to natural succession, protection of at-risk species, passive recreation, and ecological management, guidelines for implementation include:

- least-intrusive management strategies;
- assessment of any proposed project or recreational use for potential collateral damage;
- reliance on volunteers for management activities; and
- reliance on ecologically-trained, natural area experts.

It is important to note that heavy equipment kills trees by compacting soil and inflicting direct damage. An article posted by the USDA (Clatterbuck 2006) reports that 75% of remaining trees were damaged in a selective logging operation. Other studies have indicated that eight trees are destroyed or damaged for every tree removed. Least-intrusive techniques are critical in the care for a natural area.

f. Relying on the right consultants:

Natural area managers have particular educational backgrounds, professional associations, professional literature, and expertise that allows them to conduct relevant research, work with volunteers, and draw on the successes of other natural area stewardship experiences. They know how to work with volunteers, how to set up and work with monitoring systems, and how to access up-to-date natural area management literature and databases. They are trained to work with natural succession as a focal point.

At a Board of Supervisors meeting a year or two ago, Supervisor George Lenz opined that managing a natural area is a lot like managing a sewer. If he was referring to the need to get the right experts, he may have had a good point.

Many experts, including most foresters, are likely to be unfamiliar with natural area management professional literature, approaches, monitoring, funding opportunities associated with public lands, a primary focus on natural succession, the use of volunteers, protection of fragile areas, or even reliance on inventories, such as those of protected species, to make management recommendations. The committee's own forester-consultants have made such knowledge gaps clear. And the advice of foresters to the Township in years past, offered in the absence of knowledge or understanding of obligations and legal restrictions for public land, has led to enormous, costly mistakes.

But won't a forester just do what the "landowner" tells him to do? To the degree that this is true, it would only be true if the "landowner" is in a position of never needing advice.

So, the "landowner" would need to be the expert about volunteer programs, protected species, fragile trails, monitoring systems, at-risk species; protection of streams, how to work with natural events in the forest to support natural succession - and more

Why put White's Woods and the public in a spot that any advice provided to the Township is coming in the absence of familiarity with natural area management and professional literature?

Please do not perpetuate conflict by stating priorities and objectives in the absence of a management philosophy that commits to natural succession, an ecological perspective, passive recreation, big trees, least-intrusive management strategies, and advice from professionals whose primary expertise is in natural area management.

Make certain that any Request for Proposals for consultant work in White's Woods specifies that experience in natural area management, protection of at-risk species, public-land protection of big trees, and preservation of fragile ecosystems are basic application requirements.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors,
Friends of White's Woods