

Old growth' forests are good for ecosystem, tourism

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A hundred years ago, our state had been so heavily timbered that it was nicknamed “the Pennsylvania Desert.”

“A Valley Reborn: A Brief Environmental History of the Blacklick Valley,” a document available on the Indiana County Parks website, details the history of timbering in our area, first with the era of iron furnaces and, then, in the “Lumber Era,” from 1890s to 1914. A nearby lumber mill processed as much as 200,000 board feet a day.

Many, if not most, of us grew up thinking that huge trees grow only in the western United States. But that isn’t true. Histories of this region’s forests make it clear that our trees were once massive.

White oaks grew as large as 13 feet in diameter. Tulip poplars grew between 120-140 feet tall and measured 7-9 feet in diameter. One huge oak tree, by itself, filled an entire lumber train.

Less than one percent of the Eastern U.S.’s original forests remain today.

The mission of the Old Growth Forest Network (OGFN) is “to set aside a few (second growth) forests and allow them to recover their old-growth characteristics.”

OGFN’s goal is to have at least one future old-growth forest in every county in the United States.

“These ‘future old-growth forests’ will be our generation’s gift to the generations coming after us,” the OGFN mission statement explains. “If we are able to reverse the decline in mature, native forests we will be the first generation to have done so.”

We need more, older forests, not just because such forests provide extraordinary opportunities for human experience and education — which they do — but having older, bigger forests is important for ecosystems, as well.

The White's Woods Nature Center (WWNC) is an 80-100 year old "second-growth" forest that was set-aside 50 years ago, funded by state taxpayer monies, to protect this public-access "green space" in perpetuity and to provide a natural area for residents of the Indiana region.

Enrolling White's Woods in the OGFN will put Indiana on the national old-growth map and bolster our region's participation in Pennsylvania's large and growing recreational tourism economy.

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