

Residents oppose bow hunting in White's Woods

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Stock photo of the White Township sign.

Tom Peel / Indiana Gazette

Multiple White Township residents and Friends of White's Woods (FOWW) members spoke out during a regular supervisors meeting Wednesday to express their opposition to bow hunting in White's Woods.

With bow hunting season right around the corner, residents raised safety concerns over the township's Dec. 2021 adoption of a deer management program that will allow bow hunting in the 250-acre forest.

The bow-hunting program serves a dual purpose, according to township recreations director Ryan Shaffer. Not only would it offer another recreational activity for residents, but it could help reduce White's Woods' deer population, which would help with the health of the forest's understory.

The township has incorporated various logistical safety measures in its bow hunting program, but township vice chairman Rich Gallo and supervisor Sandi Gillette also emphasized that park-goers should take personal responsibility when entering the public woods.

“There will be warnings and things out there for the public to know,” Gallo said. “And then, (park-goers) have to be careful, like anybody, when they go out in the woods during hunting season; you’re going to have to wear bright clothes.”

But some township residents weren’t convinced wearing bright colors would be enough to mitigate potential dangers. One resident who claimed to be an experienced bow hunter mentioned the risk of arrows deflecting and traveling tens of yards.

“Obviously, it’s great that other park users can take precautions like wearing florescent orange, that sort of thing, but my concern is that even with that, if a hunter were to take a shot, an arrow can deflect very easily off a branch or even a twig or a rock and travel a very long distance,” the resident said to the supervisors. “Accidents can happen, and White’s Woods is over 200 acres. It’s a nice-sized property, but it’s not huge compared to, say, state game lands or that sort of thing.”

White Township’s deer management program will allow for 15 bow-hunting locations within the 250-acre property — roughly one bow-hunting stand per 17 acres. Hunters must register with the township before they are permitted to hunt in the woods, and they can hunt only from one of the 15 designated locations.

By requiring hunters to hunt from the township’s designated tree stands, they will have to shoot in a downward trajectory, which will reduce the risk of arrows deflecting, according to Shaffer. Additionally, Shaffer said he would brief the hunters on the topography and trails within White’s Woods and ask them to “stay well off established trail systems” to reduce encounters with hikers.

Gallo said park-goers will have to weigh their options and decide whether to enter the woods during bow hunting season, a sentiment on which Gillette doubled down.

“I think my feelings now are worried about personal responsibility,” Gillette said. “When they were doing all this construction on (Route) 286 ... I didn’t go that way. I didn’t. I just thought (there would be) less of a chance of issues, problems, so I chose to go elsewhere. So, if you really need to walk that day and you’re concerned, go somewhere else. There’s a lot of places.”

Gillette emphasized her desire to share the White’s Woods property with hunters and hikers alike.

“I know we’re saying ‘save the woods,’” Gillette said. “That seems to be the call of the day from Friends of White’s Woods. I say ‘share the woods.’ Let’s give somebody else the opportunity to use those woods, too.”

Despite Gillette's desire to share the woods, research by FOWW and IUP indicated that local residents mostly oppose bow hunting in White's Woods and that a hunting program may reduce the number of residents willing to use the forest.

A June 23, 2022, community interest study supervised by IUP sociology professor Susan Boser and conducted by five IUP graduate students found that approximately 57 percent of the roughly 280 respondents either strongly or somewhat opposed limited season bow hunting in White's Woods, and 51 percent of participants said they would decrease their use of the woods.

In a 2021 FOWW study that surveyed 150 citizens, 71 percent opposed hunting in the woods.

"Everyone in Pennsylvania and probably half the country are concerned about over-browsed (understory) by deer," said FOWW president Sara King. "The question is the way in which you (manage the deer population). ... What FOWW has tried to urge the township to do is to look seriously at the options for deer control and to be very alert to the public perception because not only did our survey suggest that the public was uncomfortable, but Dr. Boser's survey, the IUP survey, suggested discomfort by the public."

Shaffer said he doesn't want to consider such public input in his decision-making because the township did not take part in collecting the data or developing the research methods, an admission that King found "shocking."

"Frankly, that was shocking," King said. "The work of IUP graduate students and senior faculty who offered first to conduct their work in concert with the township deserve your respect. And Friends of White's Woods invites you to review any data that we have at your convenience."

"Mr. Shaffer also mentioned ... that the township preferred to rely on public input gathered by the township. I have brought for you that summary, which was provided to me at a right-to-know request (by the township) last fall. The public input gathered by the township regarding the planned bow hunt was more than two-to-one opposed."

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