

## Ignoring the PA Wilds

by Jon Bogle, RDA Founding Member

The Pennsylvania Wilds offers our region a great opportunity to build a substantial and sustainable eco-tourism industry. Inexplicably and very unfortunately, Lycoming County's Visitors Bureau has a clearly stated position of ignoring this beautiful treasure.

The [PA Wilds](#) has over two million acres of pristine forest, an area larger than Yellowstone. With 29 state parks, great expanses of state forests, state game lands and the Allegheny National Forest, this area is definitely worth visiting.

There are hundreds of miles of rivers and streams including long stretches of [National Wild and Scenic Rivers](#) along the Allegheny and Clarion Rivers. Feeding the West Branch of the Susquehanna River are a number of major creeks flowing through scenic valleys fed by a multitude of small streams and runs. Many of these are habitats for native trout.

The Wilds has an almost intact ecosystem, missing only wolves and panthers. Elk are again thriving in Elk County and have become a major tourist draw. Along with the elk, the Pine Creek Gorge, Kinzua Bridge and the nationally known dark skies of Cherry Creek State Park are all focal points for visitors.

Williamsport is the largest city located in the PA Wilds and is geographically positioned to be the gateway for people coming from the large urban centers to the east and south. The Visitors Bureau's Director said visitors to the PA Wilds come to camp and do not stay in hotels or spend much money; however, more than 326,000 visitors came to the Wilds in 2010 and they spent 1.5 billion dollars.

### The North Star Survey

An online survey by North Star, done for the PA Wilds Center, strongly refutes the Visitors Bureau Director's opinion. The North Star Survey found that fewer than one out of three visitors to the Wilds camped. The survey profile shows slightly more female than male visitors, mostly middle age or older, and of middle to upper income. Of those surveyed, 93 percent were over 35 years old and the majority reported making more than 50,000 dollars per year.

Visitors mostly come from nearby metro areas and stay for less than a week. Primarily they want to experience our gorgeous countryside, hike, bird watch and see other wildlife. Generally they come looking for beauty and quiet, not excitement.

Overwhelmingly, they leave satisfied. Eighty-seven percent said they would very likely return and another eight percent said they would somewhat likely return. The PA Wilds Center estimated that for every dollar they spent on tourist promotion, the visitors they attracted spent 90 dollars. [Click here to view results of the survey.](#)

## We Need the Business

Lycoming County's unemployment rate is currently at 7 percent while the national average is 4.9 percent. Over 4000 in our workforce are without jobs. Less than 20 percent of the county's workforce has a college degree but the majority of the county's jobs are white collar jobs. Finding a job without a degree can be a struggle. Many of the rural townships have both high unemployment and high poverty. Sixteen percent of the county's residents live at or below the poverty line. [Click here to see 2015 US census data.](#)

## The PA Wilds is a Natural Fit for Williamsport and Lycoming County

The Wilds offers a sustainable industry based on natural assets. Many of the jobs that would result from an invigorated Wilds economy can be filled by those without higher or specialized education.

There are many cabins and camps throughout the Wilds which sit empty most of the year. An educational outreach to cabin owners would inform them how they can make thousands of dollars a year through [airbnb](#) or other agencies by renting out their camps when they aren't using them. Bringing camps and vacation properties into the economy will spawn supporting businesses like cleaning, maintenance and rental agencies.

## What could our Visitors Bureau, which receives several hundred thousand dollars a year in hotel taxes, accomplish?

- They could have an interactive website similar to [The Alleghenies](#), a tourist promotion agency for the counties in south central PA. It has an encyclopedic interactive map function which makes it easy for prospective visitors to find and contact any of the myriad of services they might need or want.
- As others have done, their webpage could be linked to a smart phone App. Research indicates that many tourists research their trip on their home computer but use their smart phone while on the trip.
- Social Media should be one of the main areas of focus, but the Visitors Bureau has left it to untrained volunteers. Other bureaus in the region, [Susquehanna River Valley](#), [Columbia-Montour](#) and [Centre County](#), collect email addresses and send weekly emails touting upcoming events. Lycoming's Visitors Bureau does not use email marketing and does not capture the email addresses of people who visit their website, which would be extremely basic and low-cost to do.
- They could, like the [PA Wilds Center](#), [survey tourists](#) to establish a fact-based marketing plan. At the very least, they could consult existing research from the state and federal governments as well as nonprofit sources.
- The Visitors Bureau could encourage and aid small enterprises in the Lycoming Wilds to start or build their business and help them attract customers. These could be businesses such as country stores, diners, restaurants, antique stores, artists and craftspersons.

- They could offer educational programs about business opportunities across a broad range of eco-tourism services: guides, outfitters, cabin-camp rentals, campgrounds, equipment rentals (such as hiking gear, bike or kayak rentals) and shuttle services. The PA Wilds Center, for instance, has just received a three-year, \$500,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission to assist with nature tourism development in the Pennsylvania Wilds.
- Williamsport has the only Original Little League Field in the world. The Visitors Bureau could establish a program where teams from around the country and the world can have the experience of playing on the original field. Visiting teams could also go to Lamade Stadium, the Little League Museum and/or Bowman Field, and visit other attractions like Reptiland. They could also engage in activities in the PA Wilds, such as camping, hiking and kayaking.
- For more than ten years, developers across the country have been tearing down big box stores and malls and replacing them with faux downtowns complete with cobblestone streets, trolleys and antique-looking storefronts. Williamsport's authentic downtown has already become a regional hospitality center and could become a shopping stop for visitors when packaged with the Wilds. The Chamber and the county have largely ignored downtown, focusing resources on the area around the now declining mall, an area largely controlled by a few developers.

A prosperous, sustainable future can be built on our already existing natural and historic assets. The Chamber's policy has been to disregard these assets and instead subsidize developers to build "attractions" to lure visitors. Even if this works, it will be the developers who mostly prosper.

Directing resources to helping a large number of small businesses throughout the county to become established, improve and gain customers will build our economy from a broad, solid foundation.