

## **Protecting our Hunting, Fishing and Outdoor Recreation Landscape**

On Sunday September 18, a program was held at the Lake Wallenpaupack Environmental Learning Center on **Protecting our Hunting, Fishing and Outdoor Recreation Landscape**. Pete Duncan, former chair of the Pennsylvania Game Commission, reminded participants of how our heritage defines recreation lands available today. Peter Pinchot, chair of the Alliance to Keep Pike Green, explained how we can protect our natural areas while accommodating the tremendous growth forecast. Sue Currier, Executive Director for the Delaware Highlands Conservancy, discussed how individual landowners and sports clubs can protect their property for future generations of outdoor enthusiasts. Robin Wildermuth spoke about forest management and landscape level actions clubs could take to increase the productivity of their land. Robin explained how forest management actions maintain forest health and diversity, improve quality, and enhance wildlife all while producing revenues for the club.

One of the principle foundations of the United States of America was the belief that all wildlife is owned by all the people and should be managed for the community benefit (in sharp contrast to the European feudal system). Building from that premise, the early conservationists focused on sustainable management of lands for abundant timber, plentiful wildlife, clean waters and passive recreation. By trial and error with scientific research, efforts in propagation, and attempts at breeding wildlife in captivity, we learned the key to wildlife management is simply to **provide suitable, sustaining habitat and the populations will explode**.

A second turning point in Pennsylvania came in 1963 with the passage of Project 70 – a \$70M bond issue to purchase land and create parks across the state. This initiative helped **create the mosaic of state lands** we currently enjoy in Pike County.

Today, it is no longer fiscally feasible for our government to simply purchase outright all the land we might like to see protected. Now to protect our natural resources, we must rely on **public and private partnerships**. A number of creative and innovative planning tools, and conservation options are being used by the government – at all levels, as well as by conservation organizations working with private landowners.

In Pike County our population is forecast to double or triple in the next 20 years. With current zoning and planning approaches, **Pike could lose two-thirds of our existing natural areas**. That loss of land will cause a significant decrease in our water quality, our scenic views, our quality of life and our abundant wildlife. Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) has reported that the largest threat to wildlife is sprawling development. As the landscape becomes more fragmented, the

natural areas become islands within a sea of development. The result is a decrease in the species diversity and the eventual loss of large game animals. Yet there are solutions. Linkages, greenways across blocks of private lands linking state game lands and other large protected acreages, can provide much needed wildlife corridors.

Protecting some of our critical natural and outdoor recreation areas is possible with foresight and smart planning. This proactive move to conserve land and resources also makes **fiscal sense**. Natural areas provide much more in tax revenue from private landowners than they demand in services – no emergency services, no traffic congestion, no road wear, no schools (and the associated tax burden).

Yet there are actions we can take as a community, as a County, that will protect our scenic and rural character. There are innovative planning tools like transfer of development rights, growth boundaries, and conservation design that will help protect our sporting heritage.

The Pike County Commissioners have placed a referendum on the upcoming November 8<sup>th</sup> ballot, for a Scenic Rural Character Preservation Bond. If passed, this \$10M Bond would be used to help the County and all municipalities and boroughs implement these planning tools and provide funds for the protection of key areas throughout the County.

These funds may be used for outright acquisition (i.e. recreational fields) or for the purchase of **land preservation agreements from willing landowners**. Under the terms of a land preservation agreement, also known as a Conservation Easement, the landowner continues to own the land, pay taxes and use the land, but puts restrictions on the property that will ensure that all future owners are bound by the stewardship goals that the current owner advocates. The Conservation Easement exists in perpetuity and the Conservancy, land trust, or municipal organization, undertakes the responsibility of ensuring the terms of that easement are reinforced, typically with annual monitoring visits, forever. The restrictions written into the Conservation Easement are based on the owner's requirements and desires, but usually restrict future subdivision and development of the property. In exchange for giving up some of these rights of use on the property, the landowner may be eligible for income tax and estate tax savings. In some cases, there are state or federal funds that may be available to further compensate landowners. Although there may be a small financial incentive, landowners choose Conservation Easements to ensure that some of the valuable land that they love – with its scenic vistas, beautiful forests, and pristine waters – remain for future generations.

Protected with Conservation Easements, these private lands will connect wildlife habitat across public and private holdings. The amount of acreage or range of wildlife varies considerably from up to 100 acres for grouse, 1000 acres for deer, and 10,000 acres for bear.

Pike County is currently in an enviable position – we have today the large interconnect habitat necessary to support viable populations of wildlife. With proper planning and preparation, we can take actions today to **protect our scenic and rural character**.