

MINUTES

**CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES
ADVISORY COUNCIL (CNRAC)**

January 27, 2021

MEMBERS PRESENT

Silas Chamberlin, Member
Greg Goldman, Member
Meredith Graham, Member
Sarah Hall-Bagdonas, Secretary
Dean Jackson, Member
Joanne Kilgour, Member
Bob Kirchner, Vice Chair
Gary Kribbs, Member
Geraldyn Singer, Chair
Steve Stroman, Member
Janet Sweeney, Member
Ted Tharan, Member
Dave Trimpey, Member

DCNR

Cindy Dunn, DCNR Secretary
Gretchen Leslie, CNRAC Advisor

ADMINISTRATOR

Katrina Harris, CNRAC Administrator

GUESTS PRESENT

Eric Nelson, DCNR, Director of Legislative Affairs (presenter)
Meredith Hill, DCNR, Director of Conservation Landscapes Program (presenter)
Tataboline Enos, CEO, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship (presenter)
John Hallas, DCNR, Director, Bureau of State Parks (presenter)
Ellen Shultzabarger, DCNR, Director, Bureau of Forestry (presenter)
John Norbeck, DCNR
Sherri Anderson, DCNR
Nicole Faraguna, DCNR
Aara Vinsh, DCNR
Nate Lotze, DCNR
Chris Novak, DCNR
Jake Newton, DCNR
Peter Spadaro, DCNR
Justin Royer, DCNR
Shea Zwerver, DCNR
Joseph Herbstritt, DCNR
Michael Hoffman, DCNR
Matthew Crosbie, DCNR
Eric Rensel, DCNR
Natalie Shearer, Geosyntec
David Hess, PA Environment Digest Blog

Hannah Brock, PA Wilds Center
Sarah Corcoran, Sierra Club
David Cale, Laurel Caverns
Megan Filak, Luzerne County Convention and Visitors Bureau
Elizabeth Krug
Bob Shughart
Fritz Lecker, Elk County Commissioner
Matthew Marusiak, Western PA Conservancy
Tim Herd, PA Recreation and Park Society
David "Otto" Kurecian, Columbia Montour Visitors Bureau
Buffie Boyer, Juniata River Valley Visitors Bureau
Robert Stoudt, Montour Area Recreation Commission
Derek Eberly, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Clifford David, Conservation Economics
Emily Gates, PA Recreation and Park Society
Griffin Caruso, Research Analyst, PA House of Representatives

WELCOME

Ms. Gretchen Leslie opened the meeting and welcomed everyone to CNRAC's first virtual meeting for 2021. Ms. Leslie read a list of Council members present. She stated Council members have the ability to interact with presenters and have discussions among themselves, and the general public will have an opportunity to speak at the end of the meeting. She stated the meeting is being recorded, and by participating, consent is being given to the recording, retention and use of the session recording. Ms. Leslie introduced some of the DCNR staff present. She also acknowledged the many individuals joining the virtual audience.

Ms. GERALYN SINGER, Chair, expressed appreciation for everyone taking the time to attend. She advised no one had pre-registered to make comments, but if after hearing the presentations, anyone is interested in making a comment, they can place their name and topic in the Chat feature, and they will be acknowledged during the public comment period.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Council unanimously approved the November 18, 2020 minutes.

COUNCIL REPORT

Geralyn Singer, CNRAC Chair

Ms. Singer stated Council has remained busy and engaged in many issues during the pandemic. She noted the Council has had several planning sessions and had set its major goals for 2021. She said the Council is looking at ways to increase public input, and some ideas will be discussed further during the Work Group reports.

SECRETARY'S REPORT

Cindy Dunn, DCNR Secretary

Secretary Dunn thanked guests for taking time to join the meeting. She also thanked Council members for giving of their time and assisting the public and DCNR in maintaining transparency.

Secretary Dunn commented that the anniversary of the pandemic is approaching, and it has been a challenging year. She stated the record breaking attendance numbers at state parks and forests confirms the importance of outdoor recreation and the decision made early on with the Governor's Office that public lands should remain open. She advised the increase in visitor numbers is not slowing down as it typically does during the winter, with trail head parking lots remaining full and camping and cabin rentals remaining high.

Secretary Dunn stated budget season is beginning, and DCNR faces the dual challenge of extremely high usage and serving the public in a manner never called upon before while being stretched thin on the staff side. She noted partnerships are more critical than ever.

Secretary Dunn noted another factor in the increase in outdoor recreation is the impact on the economy. She advised outdoor recreation equipment demand and sales continue to be high, and infrastructure projects supported by the Keystone Fund and Environmental Stewardship Fund and grants have kept contractors (including small businesses) working and supporting local jobs and communities across Pennsylvania.

DCNR ADVISOR REPORT

Gretchen Leslie, CNRAC Advisor

Ms. Leslie gave meeting dates for the balance of 2021—March 24, May 26, July 28, September 22, and November 17. She noted the March and May meetings will be virtual; decisions will be made at a later date as to whether the balance of meetings will be virtual or in-person or a hybrid meeting.

Ms. Leslie said DCNR announced the previous day that grants in the amount of \$339,000 were awarded to six recipients for all terrain vehicle and snowmobile facilities and trails. She noted the next round of ATV/snowmobile grants opens on February 1 and closes March 31; grants are open to municipalities, non-profits, and for-profit organizations. She advised DCNR is also accepting grant applications for recreation and conservation projects through the Community Conservation Partnerships Program, and this ground of grants will close on April 14.

Ms. Leslie advised that the Delaware and Hudson Rail Trail was named the 2021 Trail of the Year the previous week; she noted this 38-mile trail extends through Lackawanna, Susquehanna, and Wayne Counties.

Ms. Leslie reviewed results from a recent Lion Poll of about 1,000 Pennsylvanians conducted by the Center for Survey Research at Penn State Harrisburg; she explained DCNR provided questions to determine how the pandemic was impacting outdoor recreation. She stated the results reinforced the importance of outdoor recreation and outdoor amenities to Pennsylvania. She advised the results showed:

- Nearly 50% of respondents had visited a local park or trail with 25% traveling more than 30 minutes to participate in outdoor recreation.
- Nearly 25% planned a trip based around outdoor recreation.
- One in five tried a new outdoor recreation activity.
- 75% agreed that funding for outdoor recreation facilities should be considered a top priority by state and local governments.
- One in five bought outdoor recreation equipment, gear or clothing during the pandemic.

Ms. Leslie displayed several infographics that DCNR Communications staff will be sharing via social media. She stated one of the most significant results was that 4 out of 5 who traveled to a park or trail believe that the time spent outdoors is essential to their physical and mental health.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Eric Nelson, Director of Legislative Affairs, DCNR

Mr. Eric Nelson advised that budget hearings scheduled for February and March have been postponed to April and May. He stated that with the legislature just back in session no bills are moving through the process yet that impact DCNR.

COUNCIL BUSINESS

Ms. Singer advised there are no items that require a vote at this time.

PRESENTATIONS

INCREASING DEMANDS ON PA'S STATE PARKS AND FORESTS: LOOKING BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

John Hallas, Director, Bureau of State Parks
Ellen Schultzabarger, Director, Bureau of Forestry

Mr. John Hallas started his presentation with a brief overview of the Bureau. He stated there are 121 State Parks in Pennsylvania, with four regional offices embedded in parks which provide direct support to the field, and a small central office. He noted the Bureau going into the 2020 operating season was challenged by lower than optimal staffing levels to meet the public demand for services.

Mr. Hallas said at the start of the pandemic emergency there were complete closures of all on-site park facilities; however, gates were open and lands and waters were designated as essential and remained open shortly into the emergency declaration. He noted the Bureau very quickly recognized that starting in March 2020, uncharacteristic visitation began to occur; he said significant increases in visitation were happening on public lands globally. Mr. Hallas stated the Bureau needed to quickly decide how to safely provide public service during the start of the pandemic when there were many unanswered questions and then implement the decisions. He noted the COVID mitigation measures and health and safety protocols were put in place which encouraged the public to limit travel, socially distance, and wear a mask. Mr. Hallas said the Bureau also needed to quickly purchase personal protective equipment for staff, acquiring more than 15,000 face coverings, 8,500 bottles of hand sanitizer, a large quantity of disinfectant, and gloves.

Mr. Hallas said in accordance with the CDC and Pennsylvania Department of Health, the Bureau developed COVID operating guidance including health and safety, cleaning, public contact, public encounters, vehicle cleaning and recovery, and face masks. He recognized the huge lift received from the Department's Communications staff in helping to explain to the public what to expect when they arrived at parks and saturating the public with this information to achieve the best result.

Mr. Hallas advised that record high visitation continues on all public lands. He gave some examples of visitor numbers when park facilities were still closed in March 2020, such as 500% increase compared to 2019 at the Schuylkill River Trail near Hamburg and 165% increase at Presque Isle.

Mr. Hallas discussed challenges with traffic coming into state parks, parks reaching capacity, and full parking lots. He noted visitors would park wherever they could and walk to the park which created many local challenges with park neighbors, as well as creating safety issues for people accessing the parks.

Mr. Hallas stated a phased re-opening began in May 2020, and again the Communications staff provided assistance with creating an interactive map for all facilities to keep visitors advised of what facilities were open and getting information out to the public as seamlessly as possible.

Mr. Hallas said during peak season, May through September, attendance increased by more than one million visitors each month. He advised record numbers of visitors were seen at any facilities where visitors could get close to or in the water. Mr. Hallas said in 2020 there were 46.9 million visits to state parks, a 26.6% increase over calendar year 2019. He noted campgrounds were at capacity on weekends, with many reaching capacity on weekdays as well.

Mr. Hallas discussed some of the law enforcement challenges faced during the pandemic, including the need to temporarily close parks due to capacity being reached. He noted law enforcement staff remained professional and committed to handling the extraordinary challenges presented. Mr. Hallas said the Bureau also worked closely with its partners at PennDOT, local law enforcement, State Game and Fish Commissions, Army Corps of Engineers, local officials and commissioners to communicate current information along highways, employ traffic control, and maintain safety. He stated there were also many challenges with overcrowding at parks, and park rangers were brought in from across the state to assist with more than 75 special details to provide enforcement support at locations experiencing overcrowding. Mr. Hallas noted at times crowds overwhelmed infrastructure, and park staff and volunteers worked hard to remove trash and ready parks for the next day's activities.

Mr. Hallas stated there were also challenges with many of the visitors being new, uninitiated, and inexperienced with state parks. He advised these additional issues included search and rescues, increases in incidents, increases in slips/trips/falls, and medical emergencies.

Mr. Hallas explained there were also barriers to overcome with language and cultural awareness and inexperience with the outdoors. He said park staff worked to provide welcoming and safe access to parks and will continue to make this a priority moving forward.

Mr. Hallas noted an issue park staff grappled with the most was capacity--having sufficient infrastructure to meet public demand while protecting natural resources. He stated this is a critical question to answer moving forward.

Mr. Hallas said an issue which is always on his mind is the budget and whether there is going to be sufficient funding to meet the demand in the coming season, particularly in light of the expected increased costs.

Mr. Hallas advised the Bureau is employing some of the lessons learned, such as incorporating them into the new strategic plan, Penn's Parks for All. He stated the plan will include strategies to tackle challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic.

Mr. Hallas concluded by stating the Bureau was only able to meet the mandated mission in 2020 and now in 2021 because of the exemplary and highly committed professional staff serving the public and stewarding the resources every day.

Mr. Hallas then turned the presentation over to Ms. Ellen Shultzabarger.

Ms. Schultzabarger noted that much of Mr. Hallas' presentation also applies to the Bureau of Forestry. She noted Forestry staff have continued to respond with creative ways to address issues and be excellent public servants to meet the demands.

Ms. Schultzabarger advised that the bureaus of State Parks and Forestry worked together as a team to look at all the new guidance on quarantining and safety measures and determining how to incorporate any new measures into staff and visitors' safety guidelines.

Ms. Schultzabarger noted one difference between parks and forests in terms of recreation is that state forest lands provide a dispersed load density in outdoor recreation experience with large blocks of forested areas versus concentrated parks.

Ms. Schultzabarger explained that Forestry does more long-term monitoring of visitors versus the daily monitoring done by Parks. She noted Forestry does not have the same type of entrance points as parks, and instead monitors factors such as the number of permits.

Ms. Schultzabarger stated Forestry is responsible for 2.2 million acres over 20 forest districts offering many different recreational opportunities including motorized, equestrian, hiking, biking, and scenic driving, which remains one of the highest uses.

Ms. Schultzabarger advised huge visitor increases were seen in 2020, with some areas seeing extremely high usage and larger tracts/lesser used trails also saw increases. She stated Forestry also worked with local law enforcement and PennDOT to reduce traffic issues and safely get visitors to the forest lands. She noted incidents also increased including trash and illegal dumping, graffiti, and fires not being properly extinguished. Ms. Schultzabarger stated grant money and volunteers were used to address some of these challenges.

Ms. Schutzabarger said camping in state forests increased 100% over the 10-year average, with a 30% increase over 2019.

Ms. Schultzabarger discussed the Bureau's work towards advancing the tracking of visitors to state forests, starting with a focus on parking areas. She stated a system is being built to better monitor visitors and their needs. She said the use of forests for outdoor recreation has been steadily increasing over the past 10 years, with a significant recent increase.

Ms. Schultzabarger advised the Bureau is better prepared for 2021 usage increases and is incorporating improvements and efficiencies learned during 2020. She noted that similar to what occurred at state parks, the forests also had many new users which required education and appropriate signage in different languages.

Ms. Schultzabarger reviewed some immediate next steps for the Bureau, including working with Penn State on better monitoring of usage and value of users. She said visitation has doubled over the past 10 years and more visitors are coming for recreation purposes. She said the Bureau is also looking at how to incorporate a daily count of visitors into its monitoring procedures.

Ms. Schultzabarger discussed the public feedback and input process that has been underway at the Bureau. She noted the Bureau had recently updated its Forest Action Plan and is working on its Strategic Plan. She stated public input is being sought through a variety of methods including staff, SWOT analysis, Lion Poll, advisory committees, stakeholders and partners, focus groups and public surveys. She said thousands of responses have been received through the surveys.

Ms. Schultzabarger said the feedback showed the top values of state forests are intangible ecosystem services and recreation—plant and wildlife habitat, scenic beauty, clear air and water, and recreation. She stated 73% of respondents had visited forests or other green space only a few times a year or less, and 25% had visited a state forest in the past year. She said another important result of the survey was that even those who were not visiting state forests commented that the state forests are very important to them.

Ms. Schultzabarger discussed the Bureau's strategic direction which includes landscape-appropriate recreation and creating forest stewards and advocates through combining recreation with education and outreach.

Mr. Silas Chamberlin expressed his appreciation for the work done by both Bureaus. He noted the availability of these resources during the pandemic was incredibly important to the general public and local communities. He thanked the staff from both Bureaus for their dedication and professionalism. Mr. Chamberlin asked how the Bureaus are engaging or envision engaging with communities that have a symbiotic relationship with state parks and forests, including coordinating with gateway communities.

Secretary Dunn responded that DCNR is in frequent conversation with partners that include local communities and local partners, either in very focused discussions on immediate practical issues or how communities can benefit and plan for the current demand. She noted local outfitters have done remarkably well in sales, even amidst some constraints with social distancing and limits on visits to businesses and some concern that visitors could bring COVID-19 to the community especially in the early phases of the pandemic.

Mr. Hallas added that the Bureau is in the final phase of working with Penn State on a multi-year visitor capacity study at Beltsville, which included in-depth engagement with the community, stakeholders and partners, and elected officials. He stated virtual meetings will be held, along with in-person meetings in the future, with the public. He said the study will hopefully result in some best management practices to export to other parks. He noted the Bureau also maintains contact with local communities and public near parks, along with having two DCNR advisory committee at Presque Isle State Park and at Delaware Canal State Park which meet quarterly to discuss current issues and future planning. Mr. Hallas said another important component are the state park Friends Groups, many of them under the PA Parks and Forests Foundation umbrella; regular meetings and engagements are held with those groups, and as needed, the Friends Groups meetings are expanded to include community members and the general public. Mr. Hallas noted there is always a high degree of reciprocity that needs to occur with the local

community as they are the parks' neighbors so there is continuous contact with management staff in the field at all state parks.

Ms. Singer thanked Mr. Hallas and Ms. Schultzabarger for their presentations and stated CNRAC is available to assist both Bureaus as needed. She advised CNRAC is looking to host some public listening sessions to look at current challenges and opportunities presented by the high usage during the pandemic.

PA WILDS: USING THE OUTDOORS TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE RURAL ECONOMY
Meredith Hill, Director, DCNR Conservation Landscape Program
Ta Enos, CEO, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship

Ms. Meredith Hill explained the Conservation Landscape Program is an innovative program that DCNR has been operating for about 15 years. She noted the PA Wilds is the largest geographically and one of the most mature landscapes. Ms. Hill stated the Conservation Landscape Program is where the resources of DCNR are brought to an area landscape for a collaborative effort with stakeholders to align goals around conservation and outdoor recreation. Ms. Hill said in 2019 DCNR undertook a study to look at the program and issued a report which she would email out to Council members as it discusses best practices across the program. Ms. Hill further explained that DCNR provides resources to one key external organization to convene and support the work on the ground in each landscape; there are internal staff at DCNR who work with the external lead to move the program forward. Ms. Hill noted that one of the Council's members, Janet Sweeney, is engaged in the program as the external lead for the Pocono Forests and Waters Landscape. Ms. Hill introduced the external lead for the PA Wilds Landscape, Ms. Ta Enos, who has been working with the program since 2008.

Ms. Enos explained the PA Wilds area consists of 2 million acres of public land—the greatest concentration of public land within the Commonwealth—with 29 state parks, 8 state forests, 50 state game lands, and Pennsylvania's only national forest. She continued explaining PA Wilds also has the largest wild elk herd in the Northeast, 2 national wild and scenic rivers, and some of the darkest skies in the country. Ms. Enos stated the region is an economically distressed region, with population and industry declining. She advised national studies have shown counties known as a destination county which is rich in natural resources and outdoor amenities have been successful in overcoming economic distress. Ms. Enos said the PA Wilds work has been critical to the region's turnaround.

Ms. Enos noted the 13 counties which make up the PA Wilds have only 4% of the state's population so the region is very rural in some parts. She stated there has been significant investments by DCNR and DCED, with DCNR using special funds, such as the Keystone Fund, to support the conservation landscape program. She explained DCED has provided marketing, loan programs and tourism support, which has also been an important factor in the economic development of the region. She continued explaining that DCNR provided anchor facilities to attract visitors and keep them within the region for a few days, which contributes to the local economy. Ms. Enos stated DCNR also invested in trail maintenance, signage and other infrastructure needs, which were critical components of the region's development as a destination.

Ms. Enos discussed the broad mix of partners that are represented on the Board of Directors to implement the mission of marrying conservation and economic development in a manner that strengthens and inspires the local communities. She also explained the intergovernmental

cooperative agreement that binds all the counties together under this work and creates a PA Wilds planning team.

Ms. Enos stated the program is working well and inspiring new growth. She said young people are moving back home to start businesses. She advised tourism is about 11% of the region's economy, and double-digit growth in visitor spending has been seen in every county over the last decade. Ms. Enos said in the two years prior to the pandemic, the region saw record-setting growth in visitor spending, becoming a \$1.8 billion industry.

Ms. Enos discussed the branding/marketing program put in place for the PA Wilds region, which includes building a commerce platform to connect rural businesses to the visitor market. She stated about 375 businesses and organization are participating. She advised the PA Wilds is looked upon as a national model and has been featured in recent reports as a successful case study of growing outdoor recreation. She encouraged everyone to check out the PA Wilds website.

Ms. Enos reviewed the conservation gift shops that were piloted at a state park. She noted the products sold are 95% locally sourced. She advised they had teamed with the PA Parks and Forests Foundation to have a checkout campaign where purchases were rounded up and the donation given to PA Parks and Forests Foundation for reinvestment back into state parks and forests. She noted the checkout campaign had raised about \$20,000. Ms. Enos said stewardship messages were also part of the campaign to raise awareness about the need for infrastructure maintenance funding. Ms. Enos said the second shop will be opening soon with a goal for up to six in the near future. She said an online marketplace has also been established; total sales have exceeded \$1 million through all of the commerce platforms.

Ms. Enos said another important component of the program is engaging the next generation in the PA Wilds landscape. She noted they are contracting with the outdoor industry outfitters, which are critical to the regional growth, to hold educational programs for young adults. The programs are held in the off-season so it benefits the outfitters as well as the young adults. Ms. Enos said a plan is also being developed to promote field trips to teachers including providing grants for the field trips.

Ms. Singer thanked Ms. Enos for her presentation. Ms. Singer added that Council thought it was important to have the overview of the PA Wilds on the agenda to make the public aware of a notice DCNR received from the Maryland Air National Guard proposing low-level training (down to 100 feet) and flyovers over the PA Wilds region. She stated the flyovers would occur four hours per day, 170 days a year, with up to six aircraft. Ms. Singer said the next step in the process is the National Guard's release of an Environmental Assessment for a 30-day public comment period. Ms. Singer said CNRAC wanted to take this opportunity to make the public aware of the upcoming Environmental Assessment and comment period.

Mr. Greg Goldman said he wanted to recognize Ms. Enos' building of the PA Wilds brand and creating such a comprehensive program. Mr. Goldman said he also wanted to express concerns of any Audubon Society members in the region about the plans for low-level flyovers by the National Guard. He said he will be glad to engage with Audubon chapter members in the PA Wilds area when the Environmental Assessment is released.

Ms. Enos said providing comments during the 30-day public comment period will be very important and the PA Wilds Center anticipates submitting comments. Ms. Enos said she was a

military journalist and is supportive of the military as are many in the PA Wilds region. She said while the need for training is important, there are concerns about the impact on the substantial investment made by the private and public sector to grow the outdoor recreation and associated economy, as well as concerns for the region's wildlife.

WORK GROUP REPORTS

MOTORIZED RECREATION WORK GROUP

Bob Kirchner, Chair

Mr. Bob Kirchner said the Motorized Recreation Work Group continues to work with DCNR leadership on CNRAC's January 2019 report and monitor how the report's recommendations are being addressed. He advised an update to the report will be prepared in the first quarter of 2021, and a few more recommendations may be added to the report.

COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH WORK GROUP

Sarah Hall-Bagdonas, Chair

Ms. Sarah Hall-Bagdonas stated the work group is focusing on several priorities and goals to provide improved communication and reach stakeholders. She said the group is continuing with the e-newsletter and expanding the distribution list. Ms. Hall-Bagdonas said the group is also working on holding several luncheon discussion in 2021 on various topics such as outdoor recreation and diversity, equity and inclusion. She advised the first discussion is targeted for late April.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION WORK GROUP

Joanne Kilgour, Chair

Ms. Joanne Kilgour said the work group continues to coordinate with DCNR's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion staff member. She said the work group is also collaborating with the Communications work group on a DEI luncheon discussion for April 2021.

INFRASTRUCTURE WORK GROUP

Geralyn Singer, Chair

Ms. Singer advised the Infrastructure work group is collaborating with the Communications work group on an infrastructure luncheon discussion, tentatively scheduled for October 2021.

STRATEGIC PLANNING WORK GROUP

Meredith Graham, Chair

Ms. Meredith Graham advised the work group's next projects will be looking at how CNRAC can provide input on proposed changes to the state science education standards, followed by a review of the draft Bureau of Forestry's Strategic Plan.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Ms. Singer noted no requests for providing public comments had been received.

OTHER BUSINESS

Ms. Singer asked for any other business topics, and none were offered.

Ms. Singer said the next meeting will be virtual and will be on Wednesday, March 24, 2021 10 a.m.

MEETING ADJOURNED

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 12:10 p.m.

Notice of the January meeting was published in a newspaper of general circulation in Dauphin County and mailed to individuals and offices in compliance with the Sunshine Act (1986-84). These minutes constitute the official record of the Conservation and Natural Resources Advisory Council; no official transcript is provided.