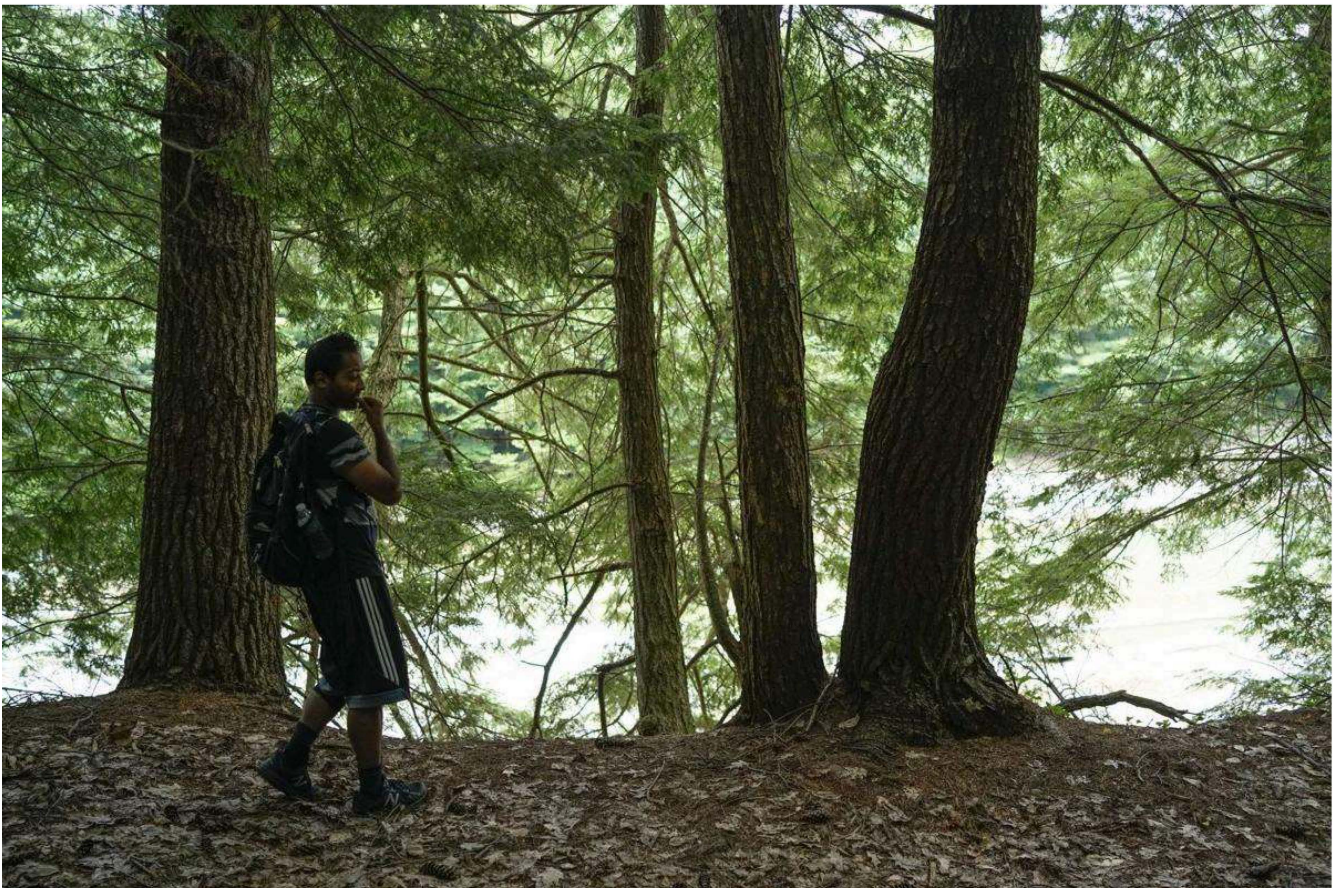


Elizabeth Licata: Zoar retains its fascination and its controversy

It often is, in the way that Western New York's truly mysterious places sporadically nudge for attention. Zoar is nature's version of the H.H. Richardson towers, but while Richardson's spooky hospital has been at least partially tamed, Zoar is still renowned as one of the region's wildest places – though it is only about a half hour's drive from Buffalo's City Hall.

Zoar is on the border of Erie and Cattaraugus Counties near Gowanda, near another spooky –and long abandoned – hospital, J.N. Adam near Perrysburg.

Is anyone sure of the reason it is called Zoar? There are no municipalities by that name nearby, but credible sources reference a “city on the plain” called Zoar, from the book of Genesis (13:10). It is a cool-sounding word – maybe some devout 19th century settler thought the same.



While hiking is something that can be enjoyed alone, hiking groups offer support and activities for anyone looking for company on the trails. Derek Gee/News file photo

Whatever the origin, the word Zoar means one thing to local outdoors enthusiasts: a beautiful, largely unspoiled place to walk, hike, raft and canoe. Some hunt and fish there. Many access the creek for swimming in summer, though that is not an officially listed activity.

Zoar might be easier to define and use if it were a state park. It's not. The state Department of Environmental Conservation calls it a Multiple Use Area – 3,000 acres of state-protected land that is available for recreation, as parks are, but not patrolled or managed in the same way parks are. There is also adjacent private property, plenty of it. A large swath is now owned by the Nature Conservancy and many individual landowners have property along Cattaraugus Creek, the waterway that created the canyon and its 400-foot-high cliffs.



The steep sides at Zoar Valley.

Robert Kirkham/News file photo

Danger management

Zoar is notorious for accidental deaths caused by falls or drowning. The steep cliffs, many with crumbling shale surfaces, offer great hazards to hikers who aren't hyper-vigilant. Cattaraugus Creek, which gently ripples on a dry summer day, turns into a raging current in spring, with rapids that approach Class II or IV on the whitewater scale.

While volunteer firefighters and safety patrols have long borne the brunt of responding to emergencies and generally policing the area, the state and other entities have been stepping in more frequently to make Zoar safer for visitors and further protect its trees and wildlife. These efforts have been somewhat controversial.

Circa 2007, the Nature Conservancy purchased properties along the South Branch of Cattaraugus Creek to close off access to a waterfall – “Big Falls”/Deer Lick Falls – that had been the site of accidents. Creek walkers can just about view the waterfall, but then they have to turn around. In 2017, Nature Conservancy volunteer William Cain told the Olean Times Herald that “the number of emergency rescues and injuries have plummeted” since access to the falls was restricted, though enforcement often comes from volunteers, who can only warn.

In 2021, The DEC added 450 safety and informational signs and kiosks to inform hikers of dangers and help make sure they stay on marked trails. Last week, the agency opened Memorial Trail, the first trail at Zoar to meet federal accessibility standards. The quarter-mile loop replaces the original trail at the Valentine Flats overlook. It is 6 feet wide and set back at least 15 feet from the cliffs edge. Those wanting clear vistas of the gorge below can access four viewing areas.



The new memorial trail at Valentine Flats at Zoar Valley is open. Courtesy New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Reactions are mixed. Marla Walker, whose 16-year-old daughter Brooke died from a fall while hiking Zoar in 2020, told **WKBW Channel 7's Michael Wooten**, that the new trail was "amazing, inspiring, hopeful," and that "Brooke would have loved it."

It was admirable and poignant that both Walker and Bridget Mazierski, who, in 1989, lost her brother Brian, were willing to visit the site and speak with hope about its future.

But members of a Facebook group, Zoar Valley Life, were not impressed, with the majority of comments deriding the trail's sightline restrictions and calling the experience "ruined."

Cain, the Nature Conservancy volunteer, wrote a letter to the Times Herald in May, urging that “construction of this trail be immediately abandoned.” His reasons: Hikers would still stray closer to the cliff and the trail would immediately be subject to vandals – “a permanent cost and liability to multi-levels of government and a deadly danger.”

Any Western New Yorker who’s been paying attention knows that there will be controversy and disagreement when the subject of how to manage Zoar Valley comes up.

Writers and the wilderness

There is additional contention now, due to a new DEC plan that could involve some logging. That is probably why I couldn't get the Zoar experts I contacted to go on the record for this column.

I turned instead to the writer who was my first encounter with Zoar: the late Bruce Kershner, Western New York naturalist. Kershner's "Secret Places" is out of print, but has been updated as "Secret Places of Western New York: 25 Scenic Hikes," with the help of co-authors Jennifer Hillman and William McKeever. Both books are highly recommended and - between them - provide comprehensive guided tours of Zoar and a host of other beauty sites in New York and Ontario.

Kershner was keenly aware of Zoar's dangers and made frequent use of boldface for sentences such as "Many people have drowned here" and descriptions that include "Caution," "It is dangerous to," and "Don't dare try it." But he and the other authors are also eager to help readers enjoy Zoar safely, walking a fine line between enthusiastic encouragement and practical advisories.



Hiking companions Zachary Szafranek of Buffalo and Jessica Pieters of Amherst explore the gorge. The Cattaraugus Creek has been carving into the stone bottom of the gorge for thousands of years at Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area. This was on Tuesday, June 28, 2016. The NYS DEC claims on its website that "Forty Road Parking Area is located on Forty Road near Point Peter Road. A kiosk is provided there with additional information." The GPS coordinates are N 42.425211, W -78.897056." (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

By BN

Kershner not only shared Zoar's beauty with his writing, he was instrumental in securing state protection for a large portion of its forest, which gave it "forever wild" status. Kershner led those who verified the existence of old-growth forest in Zoar, which was news to the DEC at the time. But when Kershner said, "We've found the first virgin forest in New York State outside of the Adirondack and Catskill preserves," he was right.

It was a sea change that has led to respect for old-growth tree stands throughout Western New York. The DEC's protection plan was finalized in 2007, just before Kershner died.

More than anyone, Kershner understood that fine line combining respect for nature, the desire to experience it and the need to do so warily.

His legacy is at the heart of why Zoar remains not just forever wild, but forever fascinating.

*Never visited Zoar? This **DEC site** (dec.ny.gov/places) provides the details; just input Zoar.*
