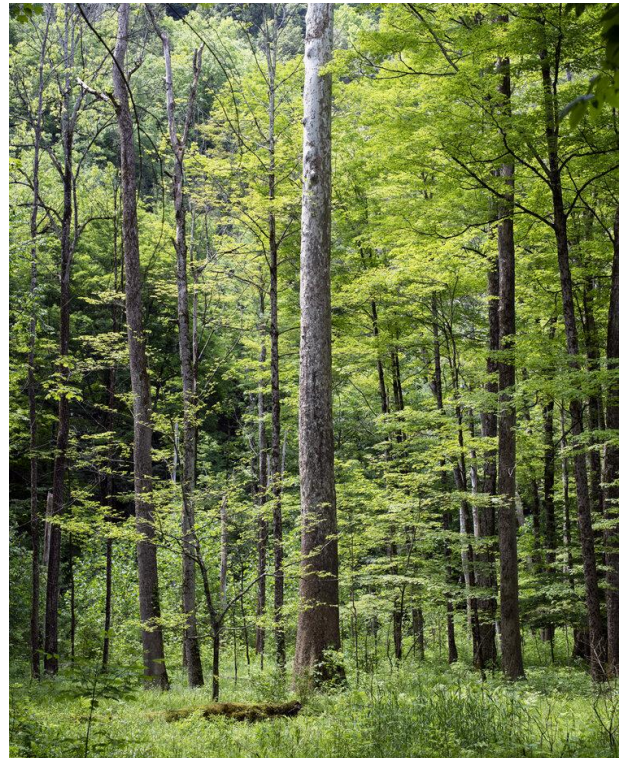
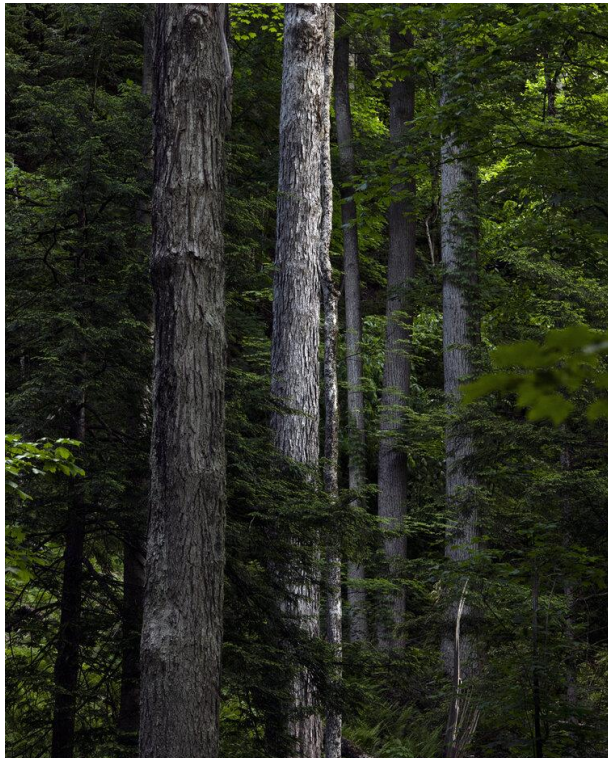


NYS DEC and the CT/NY Audubon Society Determined to Log Zoar Valley, but Citizens Say: Not So Fast

by: The Zoar Valley Coalition, November 4, 2024

Little more than ten years after the towering old growth forests in Zoar Valley, New York, were legislatively protected and dedicated to the State Nature & Historic Preserve Trust in 2007, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation began writing a logging plan for the remaining public forests in Zoar Valley, including clear cuts of 100+ year-old Eastern hardwood forests.

While the old growth in Zoar, half of its 3,000+ acres, was elevated to Unique Area status as part of the legislative victory, the remaining half remained a Multiple Use Area. MUAs are public lands acquired for the primary purpose of public recreation, and Zoar Valley remains one of Western New York's most beloved wilderness getaways for hiking, hunting, world-class Steelhead Trout fishing, birdwatching, snowshoeing, rafting, kayaking, and canoeing. Zoar Valley and its surrounding environs are the setting for many of renowned artist Charles Burchfield's paintings, and the natural beauty of Zoar's forested gorges and uplands continue to inspire painters, photographers, sculptors, fiber artists, and poets alike, leading to two regional Art of Zoar Valley exhibitions in years past. Old growth forest expert Burce Kershner, who worked tirelessly to scientifically document the forest ecology and towering old growth trees in Zoar Valley, described it as a "green cathedral."



Others are not so inspired, and Zoar Valley is now the latest target in what has been a rapacious bout of heavy logging and clear-cutting across public land in Western New York by the NYS DEC. They are leaving no land category unscarred -- State Forests, Wildlife Management Areas, Multiple Use Areas, and even the Zoar Valley Unique Area. The pace and aggressiveness of the logging has left citizens stunned, angered, and fighting back.

Cause for concern about Zoar Valley is very real. There are over 100 acres of forest already marked with paint for logging, and the DEC recently destroyed the wilderness setting of the Valentine Flats uplands in Zoar when they cut down approximately 100 legislatively protected old growth trees in the Unique Area this past year to build a poorly executed

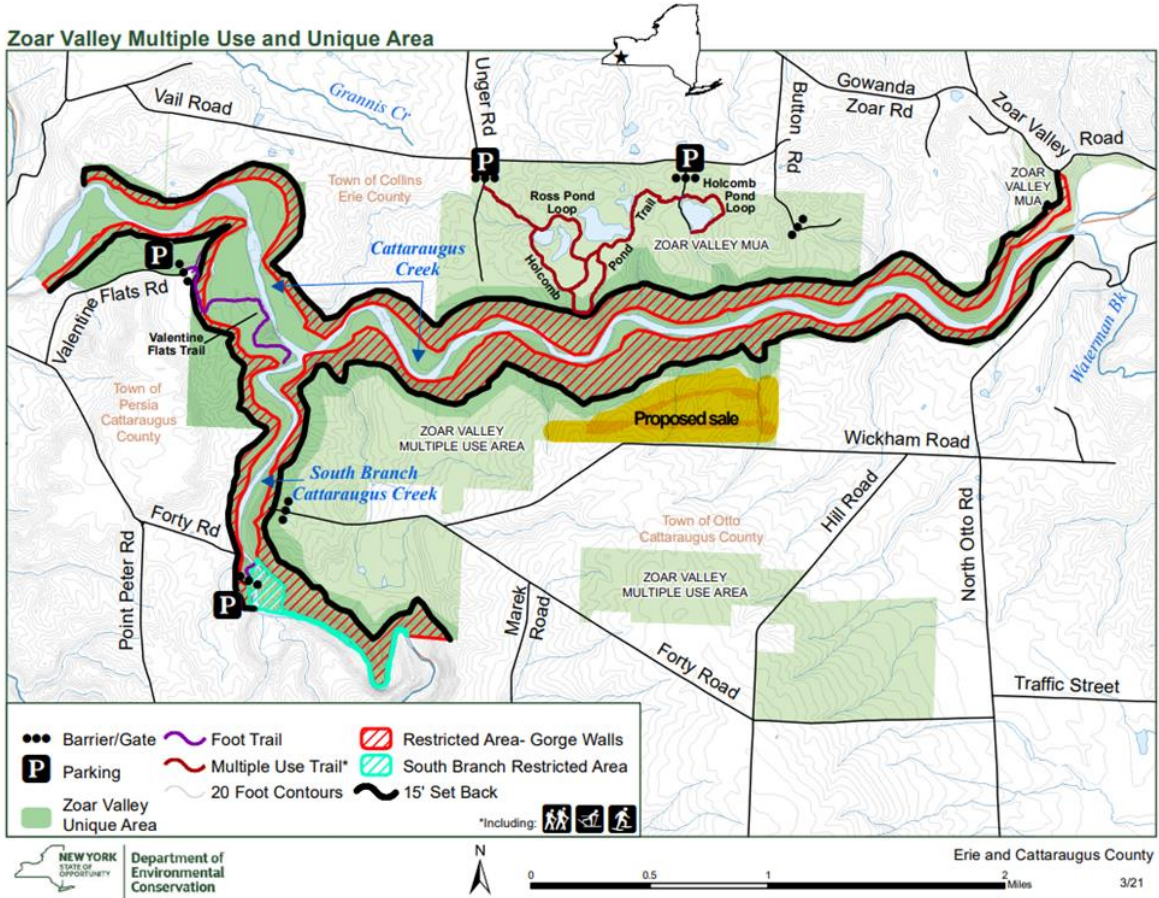
hardscaped trail, prompting a wave of outrage from the public. This protected old growth forest was also part of the land gift by Herbert Darling, Sr. and the Darling family when they donated the Zoar Valley gorges to the People of New York. It was Mr. Darling's express wish that Zoar Valley remain in its wild, natural state for the enjoyment of all. At the time, former DEC Commissioner Harold Wilm publicly gave Mr. Darling the State's written promise that his wishes would be honored. Sixty years later, the DEC broke that promise and logged Zoar's legislatively protected old growth.

The DEC's logging plan for Zoar, found in the 2021 Draft Niagara Frontier Unit Management Plan, calls for 340 acres of the Multiple Use Area to be logged in the coming five years and 233 acres to be logged in the following five years. There is a similar logging schedule contained in the Plan for the nearby East Otto State Forest. The amount of forest scheduled for logging is also subject to change, as evidenced by the fact the DEC has already marked one additional forest stand for logging that was not originally slated for logging in the five-year schedules. The targeted forests include hardwood forests and conifer plantations.

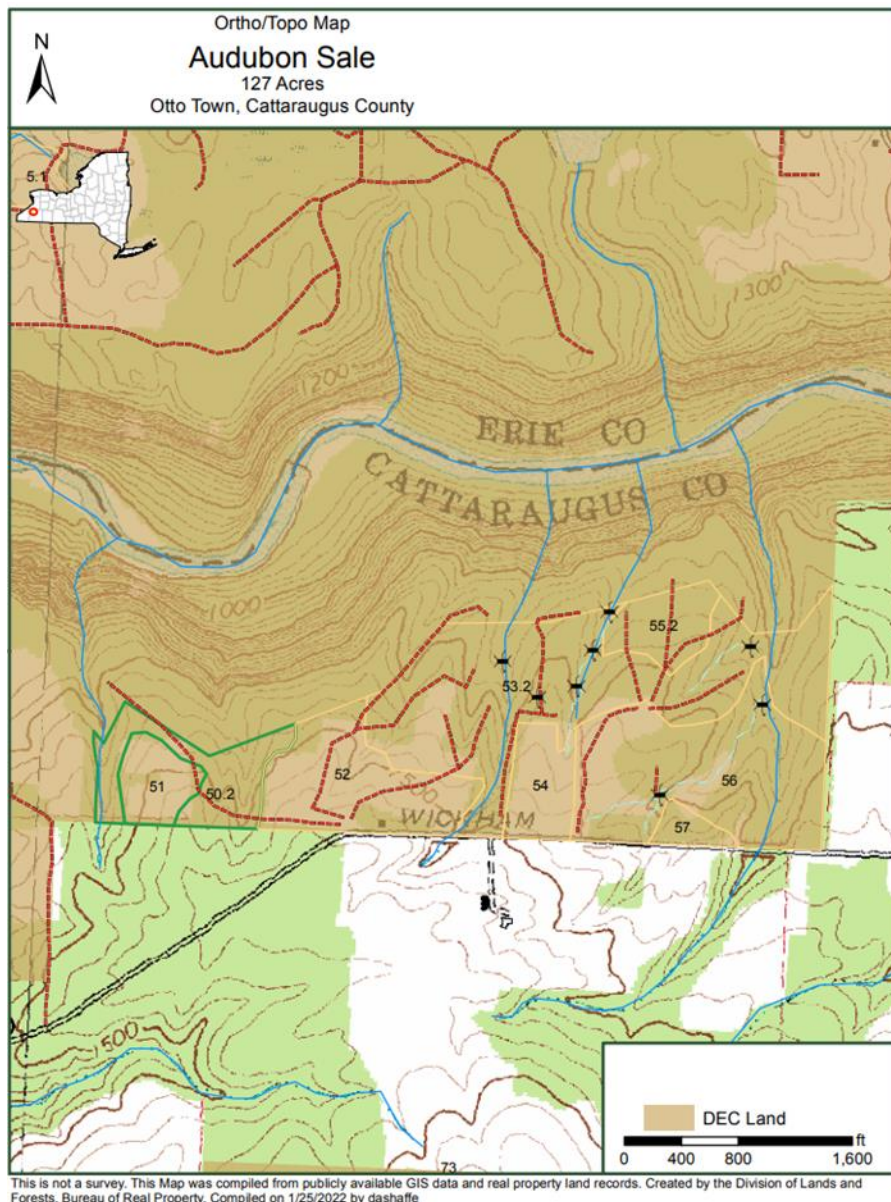
The first timber sale scheduled under DEC's logging plan for Zoar encompasses approximately 154 acres of Eastern hardwood forest off Wickham Road in the Town of Otto known as Wickham Woods. The trees are already marked with paint for logging, however, the DEC Region 9 Head Forester stated on October 3, 2024, that the timber had not yet been put up for bid sale.



This DEC map highlights the first timber sale area in yellow:



The shocking number of logging roads the DEC has planned for Wickham Woods are shown on this map:



A portion of what appear to be the future logging roads planned for the North Rim of Zoar Valley on the Erie County side of Cattaraugus Creek are visible in the upper portion of the logging road map. (The map legend denoting public land being shown only in pink is incorrect.)

The symbols across some of the tributaries appear to mark what are known as check dams, which are supposed to function as siltation catches. This is an acknowledgment by the DEC that erosion will result from logging an area with this topography. Wickham Woods slopes downward towards Cattaraugus Creek and is crossed by more than half a dozen tributaries flowing through ravines in the undulating topography. (There are additional tributaries that are not marked in blue on the map). Wickham Woods also contains more than a dozen ecologically sensitive seeps (a rare Rich Sloping Fen habitat in Wickham Woods previously designated as such by the DEC appears to have been delisted from the DEC's database). These fragile ecological areas are home to protected species.

The Connecticut/New York Chapter of the National Audubon Society wants to steward the conversion of this forest into young growth in order to satisfy the requirements of a federal grant it received to clear forest trees in favor of young growth for bird habitat, primarily migratory songbirds. Many people are surprised to learn The Audubon Society now employs foresters and writes logging plans under the guise of forest stewardship, plans that keep Audubon connected to a steady stream of federal grant revenue involving logging to create bird habitat. That's right, this isn't your Grandparent's Audubon.

Before and after the logging, Audubon often applies herbicides to control growth. In the case of Zoar, they plan to build an experimental deer exclusion barrier around the logged land in Wickham Woods to prevent deer browse. They call these experimental deer barriers slash walls. Slash is what the loggers leave behind – tree canopies, branches, trees undesirable at the sawmill, and all the young trees they knock down to get to the big trees. These slash walls are experimental forestry out of Cornell. The specifications are for the walls to be 20-feet wide by 10-feet high.

Audubon and DEC already built one of these behemoths at Bush Hill State Forest in Cattaraugus County, shown in these photos:



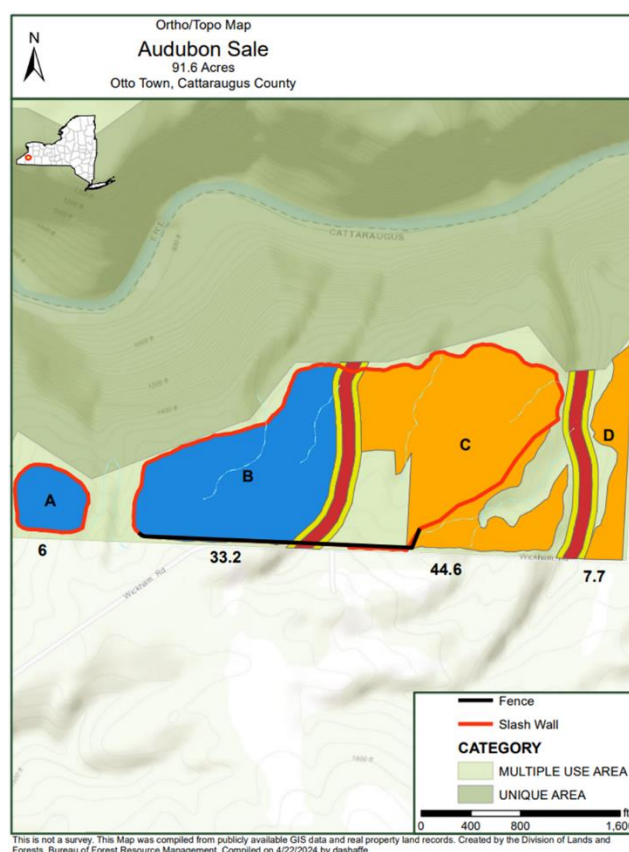


Audubon and DEC intend to close off 92 acres at Wickham Woods with one of these experimental slash walls after the timber sale that encompasses approximately 154 acres.

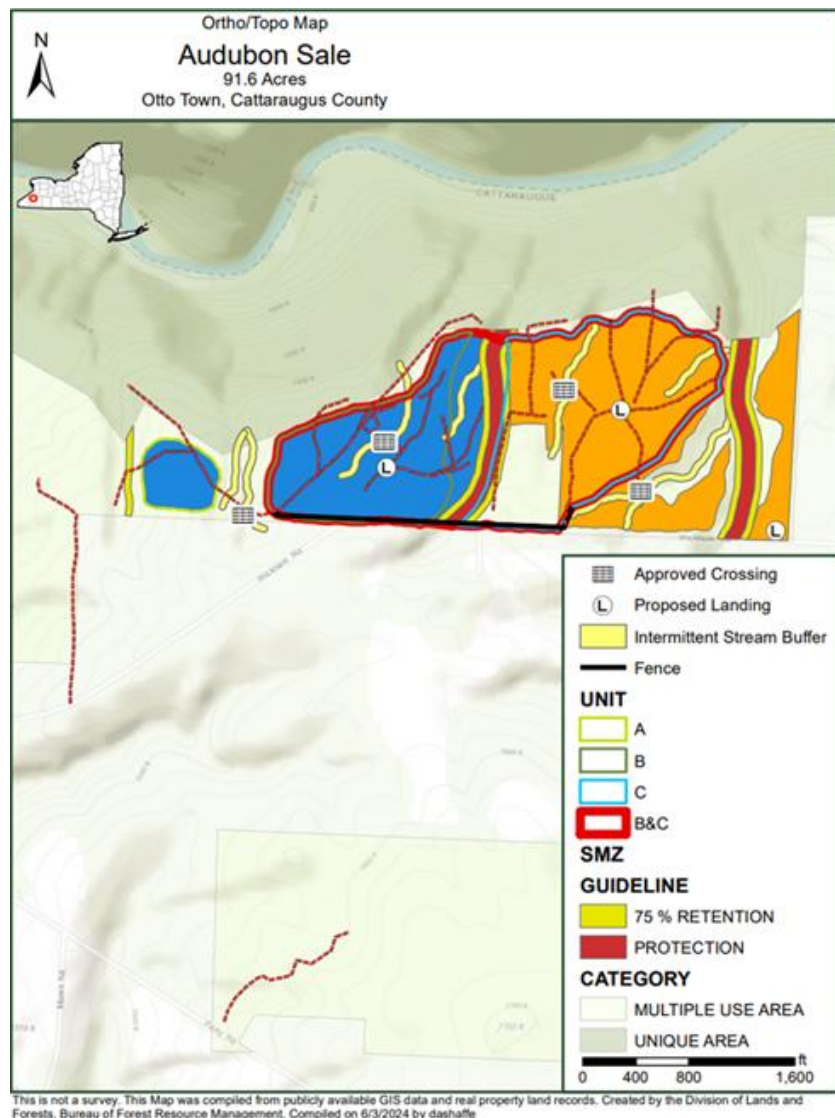
One glaring aspect of these dead tree berms is what a fire hazard they create with their untold tons of dried kindling piled high around the forest. A large dead zone is also created on both sides of these experimental walls. While the slash walls may keep more money in the DEC's and Audubon's coffers by eliminating the cost of slash removal and standard non-flammable fencing, the risks and damage have not been properly considered.

Also, importantly, the slash wall built at Bush Hill State Forest has a locked gate, which excludes more than deer. This excludes people, too, removing public land from public access and recreational use and giving it over to the purposes of a private entity, in this case The Audubon Society, which has a long track record of receiving millions of dollars of federal tax dollar grant money in the process of these questionable habitat projects up and down the Atlantic Flyway.

This DEC map shows the outline of the slash walls DEC and Audubon have planned for Wickham Woods:



Here is the DEC's map showing the logging roads, four logging staging area clearings, numerous tributary crossings, and the experimental slash walls. It isn't hard to envision the shocking destruction and environmental damage DEC and Audubon plan for Wickham Woods if they are allowed to do this to the land:



Other troubling aspects of this map are the logging roads shown extending into the old growth forest protection zone (gray shaded area) in six places, and the direct adjacency of both the logging and the slash walls to the old growth forest protection zone. This is a remarkably poor act of site selection by the DEC and CT/NY Audubon. Adding to that recipe of ecological harm, this site has downward sloping terrain, tributaries and seeps crossing an old growth forest preserve to the gorge rim above a major Lake Erie basin tributary with protected plant species and old growth in the gorge that are hydrologically dependent upon what happens in the uplands.

DEC and Audubon keep claiming there is no clear cutting planned, despite Audubon admitting to “clear cutting and thinning some forested areas” when interviewed by The Buffalo News this year, and despite an October 2022 email from the DEC Forester to the Audubon Forester in which two of four forest stands being discussed were described as involving clear-cutting. Here is that email exchange:

From: Shaffer, Daniel A (DEC)
 Sent: Friday, October 14, 2022 4:29 PM To: Treyger, Suzanne Subject:
 RE: Zoar Valley forest demo site
 If it works for you, I will finish the prescriptions early next week and send to you. **I have a few stands planned for a more intense harvest.** Some quick thoughts below.

Stand 54 and 98, (21ac.) will not have any work during this sale.

Same RX: 50.2 – 11.65 ac.

51 – 6.4 ac.

52 – 20.45 ac.

53.2 – 46.16 ac.

Canopy gap, single tree and group selection 55.2 – 7.6 ac.

Patch clearcut 56 – 20.77 ac.

Seed tree 99 – 11.22 ac. **clearcut** retain white pine

Just last month, the Head Forester for DEC Region 9 said the logging would be the furthest thing from a clear cut, but in the next breath said, “We are going to create some openings and some of them might be a little bit large, four acres or so.” For reference, four acres is the size of three American football fields.

What do these forest clearings look like after the logging? Here are examples of Audubon prescribed forest clearings on Sparta Mountain in New Jersey:



New Jersey Audubon was held back to a fraction of the acreage they proposed logging on Sparta Mountain thanks to the efforts of many concerned citizens. New Jersey Audubon committed so many egregious acts in their poor forest stewardship of Sparta Mountain that their Sustainable Forestry Certification through the Forest Stewardship Council of the Rainforest Alliance was revoked. And it wasn't the first Sustainable Forestry Certification Audubon had revoked. The National Audubon Society previously had one revoked for poor forest stewardship on public forest land in South Carolina. You can read more about the battle to save Sparta Mountain here:

New Jersey Forest Watch and Friends of Sparta Mountain

<https://www.facebook.com/FriendsOfSpartaMountain/>

<https://www.savespartamountain.org/>

Wolfe Notes Blog: <http://www.wolfenotes.com/?s=sparta+mountain>

Hikers, hunters, nature enthusiasts, and scientists are united in opposition to this destructive plan for Zoar Valley. People across the region are also railing against the amount of deforestation by the DEC to satisfy the goals of Audubon and the bird hunting lobby to replace mature forests with young growth. The backers of this strategy call it the “Young Forest Project” or the “Healthy Forest Initiative,” which they justify by claiming there is an overabundance of mature forest that needs to be replaced with young growth to promote migratory songbird habitat and habitat for hunted birds such as the American Woodcock and Ruffed Grouse. The overarching goal is to revert 10-15% of all public forest land to young growth, and to maintain this level through a continual cycle of logging. Audubon has stated their goal for the Zoar area is 5-10% young growth. The Audubon Forester in charge admitted in an email the Zoar area meets the target of 5% young growth in the forest so there is no need to create more, but the Audubon and DEC Foresters ultimately settled on forest clearing for bird habitat in Zoar anyway, with the deciding factor being that Wickham Woods is conveniently located next to a road.

For more on the background of deforestation for bird habitat, this article is a good place to start:

“Forests Are Being Destroyed and ‘Nature Lovers’ Are Helping”

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/forests-are-being-destroyed-and-nature-lovers-are-helping/>

Many scientists have refuted the claims of the proponents of forest clearing. The peer-reviewed scientific Journal article found here offers sound reasoning and science against the practice:

“Forest Clearing to Create Early-Successional Habitats: Questionable Benefits, Significant Costs”

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/forests-and-global-change/articles/10.3389/ffgc.2022.1073677/full>

New York State, however, is full steam ahead with forest clearing, having adopted the pro-logging and special interest Young Forest Project into New York’s State-wide forest management plans. This photo, taken in September 2024, is an example of recent clear-cut logging by the NYS DEC. This is, or rather was, a portion of the Cattaraugus State Forest on West Hill Road in Cattaraugus County:





It's fitting the loggers knocked the State Forest sign down, since there's no forest there anymore.

A few miles from Cattaraugus State Forest, the Dobbins Memorial State Forest has suffered the same fate at the hands of the DEC. These are photos of the forested drive to the picnic area, taken in April 2023, when the trees were marked for cutting but before the logging began.



Here is what that former picnic area looks like now, in pictures taken in September 2024 during the logging job:





Will anyone be spending time here for a picnic anytime soon? The logging continues a long distance back from the road, involving a sizable swath of the former forest.

We're losing public forest land at the County level, too. These photos were taken at the former Cattaraugus County Forest on Ashford Hollow Road in April 2023:



They'll have to take this sign down now, too, because this forest is also gone.

The list of affected public lands in Western New York is long, and there is no end in sight to the DEC's clear-cutting and heavy logging. As this article is being written, there is a bid sale notice up on the DEC's website for logging at Nine Mile State Forest. It requires 1,150 trees be taken out of just 10 acres, with one fourth of them – smaller trees with trunks down to 8" diameter – slated to be pulverized into wood pulp. Will anything 7" diameter and under survive the heavy logging equipment? Surely this is a clear-cut on paper and a future clear-cut on the ground. The Bid Notice lists biodiversity of 13 different species of trees being removed, with Red Oak and Red Maple leading the tree count. Why is it being deforested? Why is any forest being cut down at this level?

There is growing public outrage over how our public forest lands are being mismanaged and sold off. The Zoar Valley Coalition wrote to Governor Kathy Hochul and the NYS DEC last month to request a moratorium on logging in Zoar Valley. We also asked for the State to conduct public meetings on the future of Zoar Valley and open a public comment period so all voices are heard and considered. We also asked for a conflict-of-interest recusal consideration by Interim DEC Commissioner Sean Mahar, who came to the DEC from New York Audubon where it was his job to work with government agencies to advance Audubon's policy agendas -- policies that connect Audubon to a revenue stream of millions of dollars.

We have asked the DEC about prioritizing climate sequestration in the State-wide forest management plans, but did not receive a positive response.

We also reminded Governor Hochul of the long history of stewardship of Zoar Valley by New York's Governors. Governor George Pataki was instrumental in stewarding Zoar Valley to permanent protection as part of the Forest Preserve, and in 2007 Governor Eliot Spitzer signed the legislation into law dedicating the Zoar Valley Unique Area to the State Nature & Historic Preserve Trust. Governor David Paterson signed the Bruce S. Kershner Old-Growth Forest Preservation and Protection Act in 2008, which afforded additional protections to the old-growth forested ecosystems in Zoar Valley.

Will Governor Hochul's administration continue this tradition of preservation stewardship of Zoar Valley, or will she allow her Department of Environmental Conservation to put Zoar Valley into a logging rotation, drastically altering and diminishing this much-loved recreational area and important habitat? The People are speaking up loudly and clearly, and The People want this rare old growth forested wilderness and the adjacent mature forests left forever wild.

Please take a moment to sign the Save Zoar Valley Petition on [change.org](https://www.change.org/p/save-zoar-valley/)
www.change.org/p/save-zoar-valley/

If you would like to learn more or get involved in the cause, please visit www.zoarvalley.org.

