

## The Editorial Board: Advocates are justified in worrying about logging at Zoar



Trees are marked with paint for logging within the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area in Collins. The project would create bird habitat, but logging poses other risks.

Libby March/Buffalo News

**B**e careful with Zoar Valley. Biodiversity and tree canopy preservation are both paramount environmental goals on a global level. On a local level, though, conservation of old-growth forests that contain treasured 80- or 90-year-old trees can be just as important.

Acting with Audubon Connecticut and New York, the New York State Department of Conservation **is planning a 92-acre clear-cutting project in Zoar Valley**, along Wickham Road in Cattaraugus County. It's located in the DEC-managed Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area, which, unlike the Unique Area, is not protected against logging. The clear-cutting is intended to create habitat that will help struggling bird species.

That some Zoar advocates are readying themselves to fight the state's logging plan should come as no surprise. Those trees are not only beautiful and old enough to command respect, but they help to clean the air of carbon.



The #BNDdrone takes you on a bird's-eye tour over Zoar Valley, one of Western New York's most amazing places. See how the shale cliffs and old growth forests create one of the most ecologically diverse landscapes in the state.

Conservation-minded groups like Friends of Zoar Valley have worked for decades to protect as much as they could of Zoar, which contains some of the largest remaining intact forests in the Great Lakes region as well as some of the tallest, oldest trees in the northeastern United States.

Indeed, the protected Unique Area came about after the state DEC attempted to log sections of old-growth forest in 1996. In 2007, those 1,492 acres were designated "forever wild" by the New York State Legislature and then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer.

It is to the DEC's credit that it continues efforts to make Zoar safer for visitors, including creating an ADA-accessible overlook trail (now in-progress), explicit signage about danger areas and other improvements that will help prevent injury and loss of life. But preserving the majestic forests that these visitors come to see should be the biggest priority.

Starting in the early 1960s, individuals like Herbert F. Darling Sr. and Herbert F. Darling Jr. donated and sold the land – almost 2,000 acres' worth – that helped make Zoar possible in the first place. When Darling Jr. **sold 612 acres to the Nature Conservancy in 2019**, he said, “It was my father’s wish from years back that this land should be preserved and kept as naturally as it could be. I just kept that enthusiasm. My children saw the benefits of protecting the land, and I’m hoping others will see the same benefits.”

**According to the Conservancy**, those 612 acres alone store 75,000 tons of carbon – the equivalent of taking almost 16,000 cars off the road for one year.

After the 92 acres are logged by the DEC, which could start this winter, 900 more could be subject to similar management in the future, **according to a 2021 DEC Unit Management Plan**.

That’s what worries John Buckley, a member of Friends of Zoar Valley, who said, “At a time when climate change is threatening our existence, we need these big trees to survive.”

Audubon Connecticut and New York believes that creating open areas in the dense forest, where lower-story shrubs and perennials can provide habitat for endangered birds, makes this clear-cutting and thinning necessary. The project also includes the removal of invasive species and the creation of a “slash wall” of logging detritus to keep out the deer that would eat those lower-story plants.

Again: Wildlife habitat and carbon sequestration are both key to the healthier environment all living creatures need. But this is a substantial new threat to Zoar Valley's tree canopy.

If logging is necessary, can it be reduced from the nearly 1,000 acres included in the DEC's plan? Is there nowhere better than Zoar to create this habitat?

These questions should be answered and advocates satisfied before any logging begins.

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