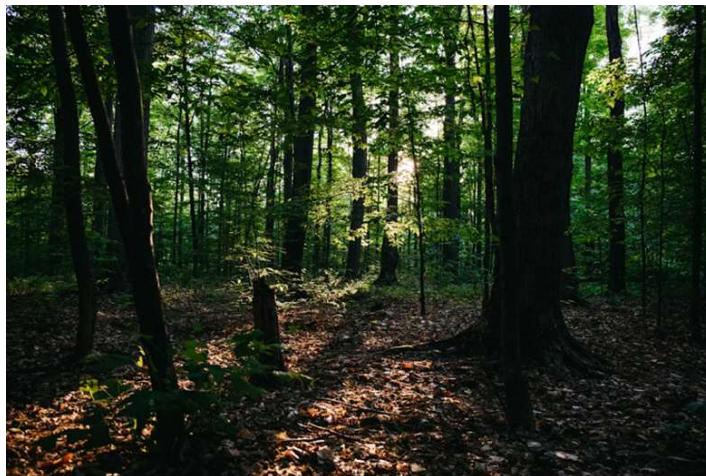


***A Zoar Valley Private Landowner's Concerns and Statement on the
Planned Zoar Valley Demonstration Forest Project***

*-Nathan Z,
Wickam Rd. Otto, NY
January 2025*

I am writing to respectfully request a reconsideration of the experimental forest management and logging [plan](#) at Wickham Rd., Otto, NY, within the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area. As the private landowner adjacent to this plan and an operator of a high-traffic campsite that relies on the area's natural forest, I strongly oppose the plan for ecological, economic, and social reasons. These reasons extend beyond private interest and are outlined below.

- **Ecological Risks:** The plan sacrifices mature forests and existing rich biodiversity for early successional habitats, risking invasive species spread, herbicide dependence, and ecosystem instability. Mature forests are vital carbon sinks and combat climate change effectively.
- **Economic Damage:** Zoar Valley drives eco-tourism and local revenue; the plan endangers this with fencing, fire-hazard slash walls, and loss of natural appeal, reducing visitor numbers and economic benefits.
- **Social and Cultural Loss:** Restricting access disrupts hunting, hiking, and cultural traditions, alienating communities who depend on and value the area.
- **Public and Expert Opposition:** 3,700+ petitioners and ecologists oppose the plan, citing scientific evidence of biodiversity loss, invasive species, and reduced connectivity. Prioritize preservation, collaborate with local stakeholders, and base decisions on comprehensive ecological data.



Pictured above is Wickham Woods, Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area Forest that will be removed by the DEC. Rich biodiversity and ecological complexity of the forest will be destroyed and replaced with an experimental forestry plan. Disrupting these forests contradicts established climate science and risks destabilizing a critical ecosystem.

This plan, while on the surface is presented as well-intentioned practical forestry, in fact is ecologically unsound, economically damaging, and socially detrimental. This viewpoint is shared by expert ecologists with specific knowledge of this land who have shown that this proposal calls for a thorough re-evaluation and justifiable opposition. Over 3,700 individuals have already signed a [petition](#) opposing the forest management plan at Zoar Valley. Resistance will undoubtedly continue, creating tension between forest advocates and government agencies, further eroding public trust and tarnishing Zoar Valley's reputation.

The primary justification for this plan is to enhance migratory bird habitats by creating early successional forests. However, this narrow focus overlooks the area's existing biodiversity and unique ecological complexity as part of the Zoar Valley ecosystem, of which half of the forest is rare and legally protected old growth forest situated in a designated protection zone. A 2023 scientific review, *Forest-Clearing to Create Early Successional Habitats: Questionable Benefits, Significant Costs* (Kellet et al., 2023), highlights significant risks of such projects, including the loss of mature forests, reduced connectivity, spread of invasive species, and long-term ecosystem instability. The lack of comprehensive data on this specific area's current biodiversity further undermines any scientific foundation for this plan.

Disturbing mature forests in this area could worsen invasive species, requiring years of intensive herbicide use with ongoing costs and environmental risks. Even with these efforts, invasive species are notoriously difficult to control, and the resulting landscape could become overgrown, inaccessible, and ecologically degraded. Downstream effects of herbicide application can negatively change the existing ecology along the many streams, seeps, and the Cattaraugus Creek watershed.

The claim that this plan combats climate change is also questionable. Mature forests, such as those in Zoar Valley, are highly effective carbon sinks. Older trees have the continuous ability to sequester carbon in their root system and regrow an annual supply of deciduous leaf storage. Disrupting these forests for an ecological experiment contradicts established climate science and risks destabilizing a critical ecosystem.



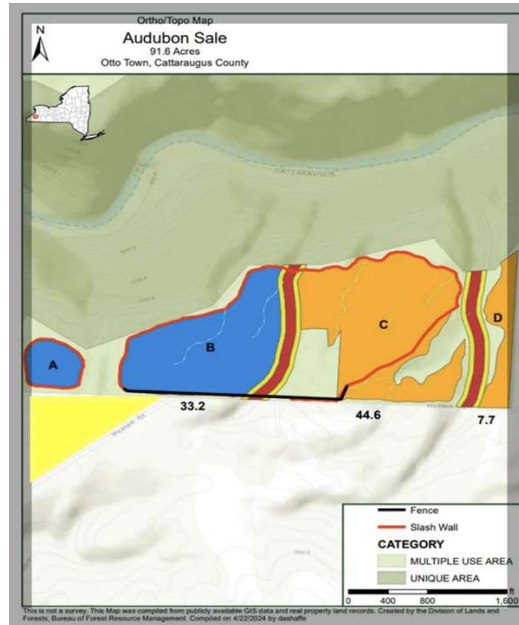
The owners' high-traffic campsites along the forest stand in Wickham Woods (pictured above) that will be removed and replaced with a fire-hazard slash wall border and metal fencing, posing a significant fire hazard. On Dec 14, 2024, DEC Rangers responded to a large slash pile fire in nearby Chautauqua County.



Brick fire oven and frequently used firepits pictured will become a fire hazard adjacent to slash wall.

Economic Impacts: Zoar Valley is a hotspot for local eco-tourism that draws thousands of visitors annually who contribute greatly to the region's economy. Cattaraugus County's entire tourism strategy is centered around "the Enchanted Mountains," of which Zoar Valley is an important part. In 2024, my [campsite](#) alone hosted 236 visitors from across the country, many of whom cited the forest and biodiversity as reasons for their stay. The proposed plan would compromise these qualities, leading to reduced visitation and economic losses for businesses like mine. The plan's inclusion of fenced enclosures and slash walls also poses safety risks,

particularly near campfire pits, and diminishes the land's value as both a recreational and economic resource.



The yellow triangle is the author's parcel, bordering fencing and slash wall within feet of campsite fire pits.

 **Recommends** · June 2022

Secluded and beautiful

Tent · [Zoar Valley Forest Retreat Campsite](#)

Lovely campsite easily accessible and very private. We loved exploring the woods behind the site. Campsite was well maintained. Really great find!



*“My 12 yr old son and I stayed for one night at Nathan’s campsite and it was truly a magical time for us both. We weren’t ready to backpack into the wilderness, but also didn’t want to stay in a typical campsite either. This was a perfect in-between. It is a drive up site, that also gives you the experience of being in the wilderness and secluded from society. **There is such good energy at the site and the surrounding woods, and you get the sense that it is a sacred space.**”*

*“The **woods themselves are gorgeous**, with lots of ferns and salamanders.”*

“The peaceful seclusion, under a canopy of towering beech trees, was exactly what we were looking for. We heard foxes, a barred owl, some coyotes far in the distance, and noticed evidence of numerous other animals.”

*“Highly recommended for those looking for a perfect, basic campsite that's near plenty of **explorable natural beauty.**”*

“Stunning and spacious site”

Hundreds of public reviews online praising the forest that will be removed. Photos include campfires that will be adjacent to fire-hazard slash walls.

Social and Cultural Significance: Zoar Valley is more than an ecological asset; it is a cherished cultural and social resource. Hunters, hikers, and wildlife enthusiasts rely on this land for food security, recreation, and a connection to nature. The plan's exclusionary measures, locking nearly 100 acres behind slash walls and metal fencing will alienate these communities and disrupt long-standing traditions such as hunting. Creating dense, early successional growth could also displace critical wildlife food sources, such as hickory and beech trees, and make the area overgrown and inaccessible to hunters and hikers. During the pandemic, Zoar Valley provided much-needed retreat for individuals. Restricting public access through fencing undermines this vital function and erodes public trust.



A hammocker forest bathing in Wickham Woods during the 2021 pandemic, and abundant wildlife as a sanctuary for hunters

I urge the DEC and Audubon to reconsider and explore alternatives that prioritize the preservation of Zoar Valley's unique ecosystems, support its cultural traditions, and keep its economic contributions. A collaborative approach that incorporates comprehensive ecological data and input from local stakeholders would ensure a balanced and sustainable solution.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this further and to take part in public hearings on the future of Zoar Valley.

Sincerely,
Nathan Z.