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The Editorial Board: Zoar Valley logging project may have good intentions but needs more public input

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Trees are marked with paint for logging within the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area in Collins. A logging project that's now on pause comes with many questions that need answering.

Libby March/Buffalo News

Good decision. **In putting its plans for clear-cutting in Zoar Valley on hold**, the state's Department of Environmental Conservation is listening to the well-reasoned concerns of many Western New Yorkers – just as it did in 2007 when it created the Zoar Valley Unique Area. Those 1,492 acres of old-growth forest are now designated “forever wild,” but it took years of research and activism from tree authorities like the late Bruce Kershner for that to happen.



Now, another group of trees is under threat. Last year, the DEC announced a proposed logging project that would cut down possibly hundreds of trees over 92 acres of Zoar's Multiple Use Area, where forest management is allowed.

State puts Zoar Valley logging plans on hold after pushback from environmentalists

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This demonstration project is part of a partnership between the New York DEC and Audubon New York and Connecticut, intended to create a more open habitat for struggling bird species. The proposal came with questionable baggage, however. First, trees meant to be cut down were marked with colored paint before there had been any publicized announcement or hearing on the project. Hikers and passers-by happened to notice the paint last spring and opposition to any cutting in this area quickly mobilized.



Another Voice: Old forests in Zoar already support rare bird life and should not be clear-cut

It's hardly the appropriate way to go about making major changes in a cherished wilderness that's one of Western New York's most renowned scenic beauty spots and a popular destination for a wide range of recreational activities.

Now there will be community engagement sessions, but DEC officials should be prepared for justifiable indignation from many who attend. The agency says it still wants to proceed with a revised forest

management plan, but that plan needs to be informed by the knowledgeable input of such local groups as the Western New York Environmental Alliance, the Sierra Club Niagara Group, the Buffalo Ornithological Society and the Niagara Frontier Botanical Society, which have joined to form the **Zoar Valley Coalition LLC**.



Logging slated for Zoar Valley splits environmentalists

That a birders' group – as well as the **Buffalo Audubon Society** – is among those who oppose a project intended to create bird habitat provides significant evidence that the voices of these seasoned conservationists should be heard. It's also reasonable to question the need for such a demonstration project in Zoar, one of the last stands of old-growth forest in the region.

Though the trees intended to be cut are not old-growth, they're not exactly youngsters, either. Many are approaching – or have passed – their centennial and are considered mature, or second growth. All of them are important for carbon sequestration, a crucial natural weapon in the fight to manage global warming. For that fight, the state needs more, not fewer, trees.

During an interview with The News' Mackenzie Shuman, interim DEC commissioner Sean Mahar said "I think we heard loud and clear from the community that they wanted to be involved in a process of determining actions on this area," and that the agency wants to communicate its intentions "in a way that recognizes their viewpoints and really takes them into consideration."

However, the major reason for the current pause on this project must be that Audubon New York and Connecticut has run out of funding to support it. If the DEC, as stated, wants buy-in from local residents, it will need to recognize such concerns as worries that the "slash walls" of tree debris – meant to protect the areas cleared for habitat – could present fire hazards as well as exclude people from the areas, essentially removing public access to public land. There are also valid questions about the existing ecology that could be disrupted or destroyed during this project.

The creation of bird habitat is a noble goal, but asking people to choose between biodiversity or conservation isn't the way to reach it.

It's good that the DEC has decided to take more time to decide how it will implement this project. It should also seriously consider whether Zoar is the best place to do it.