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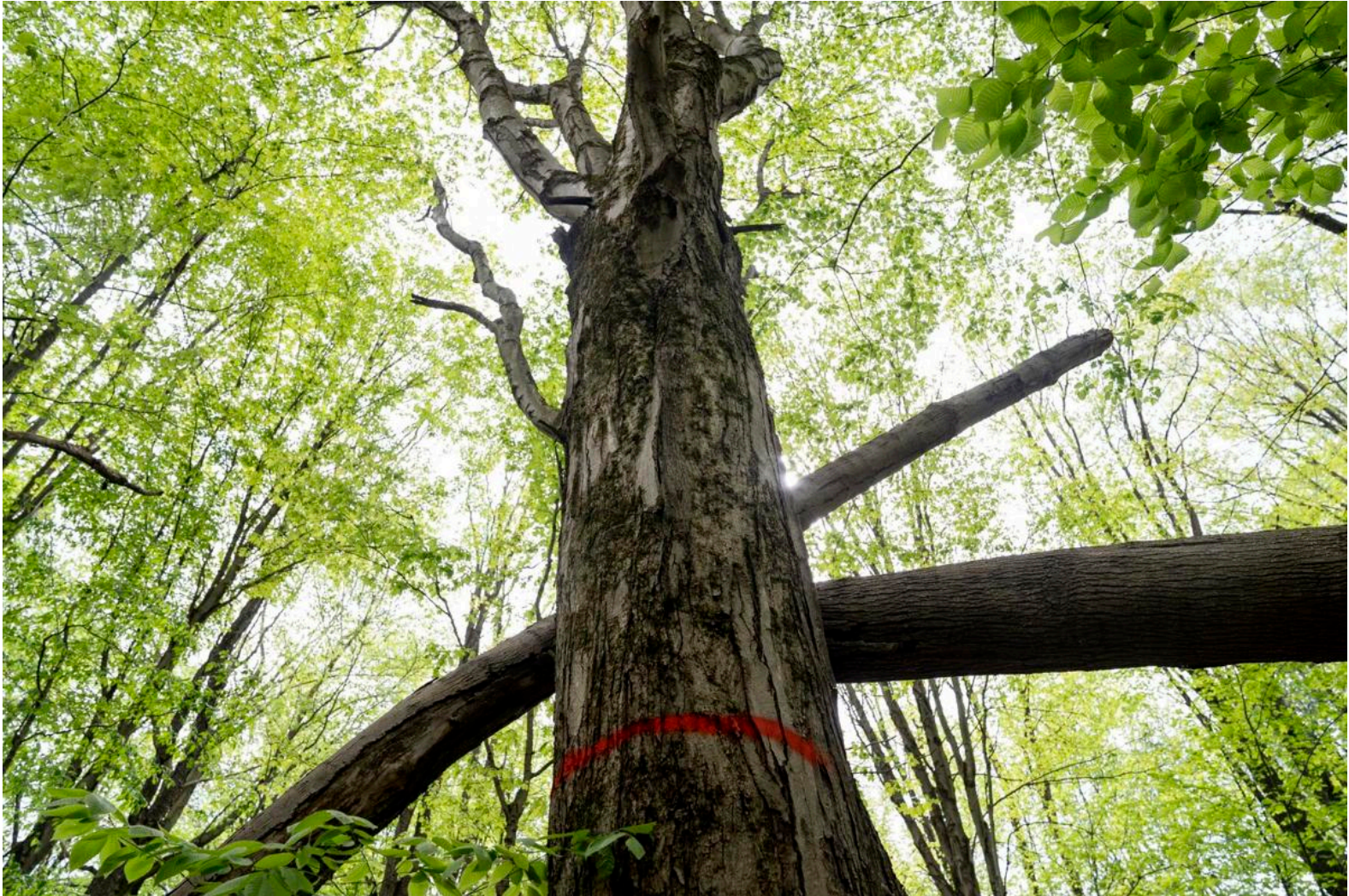
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TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

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

Mackenzie Shuman

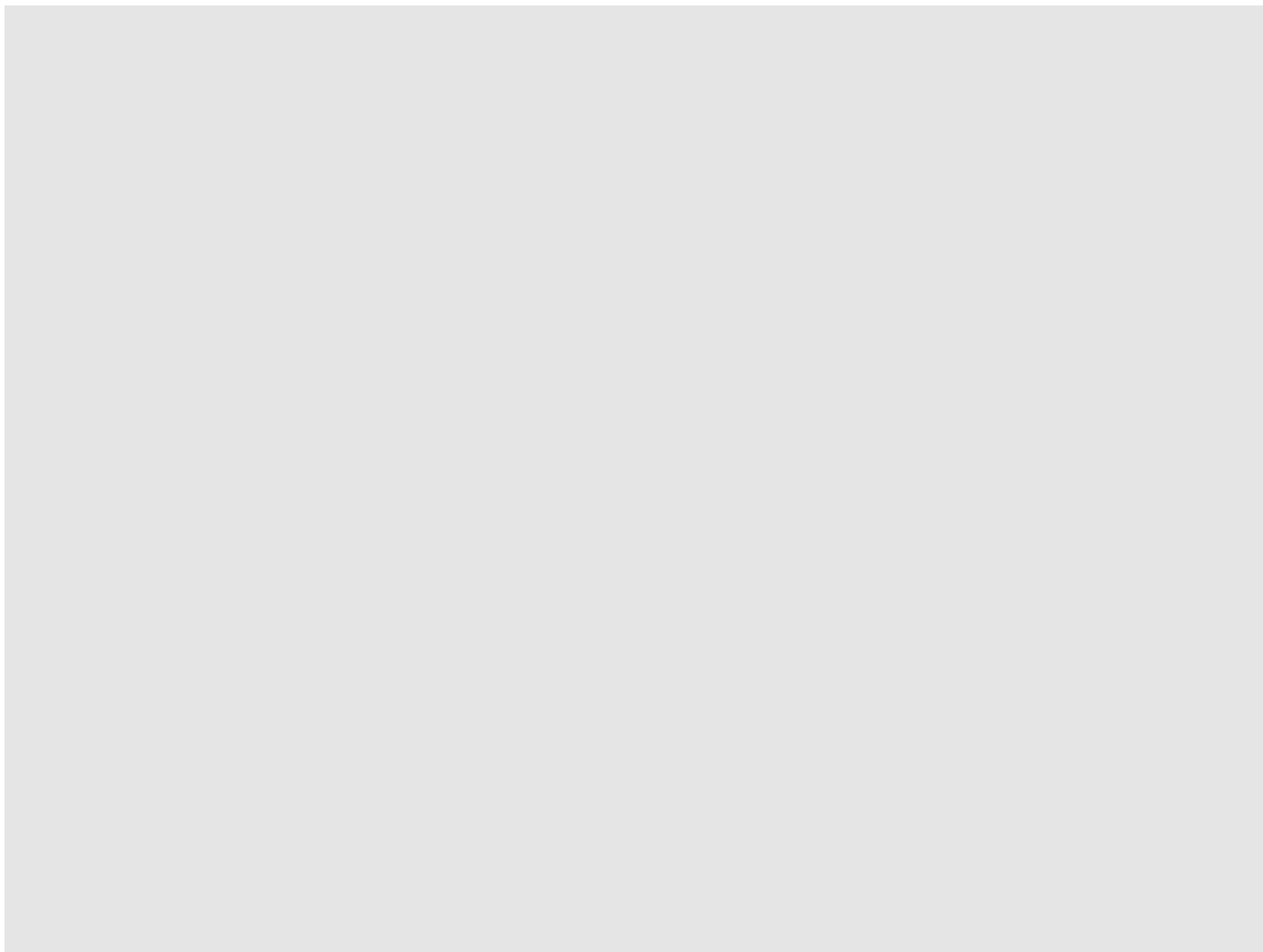
Feb 14, 2025



A maple tree estimated to be 80 or 90 years old is marked for logging, within the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area last May. Libby March, News file photo

**N**early 100 acres of trees above the Zoar Valley gorge near Gowanda were marked with bright orange slashes last summer, signaling they would soon be cut down.

But after an outcry from environmental activists and other members of the public who said the logging plans took them by surprise, the state Department of Environmental Conservation now says the trees will stay for the time being while the state agency rethinks its forest management plan for the area, a popular hiking destination on the border of Erie and Cattaraugus counties.



Nearly 100 acres of trees were “blazed” with paint, marked for logging, on state forest land in the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area near Gowanda last May.

Libby March, News file photo

DEC officials said this week that they paused their plans for logging at Zoar Valley, and will present new plans to the public as early as next month.

Environmental groups and nearby residents want the trees saved. But the DEC said it still plans to conduct logging in a way that will promote habitats for declining bird species. State officials also say they want their plan to address safety concerns at the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area, as well.

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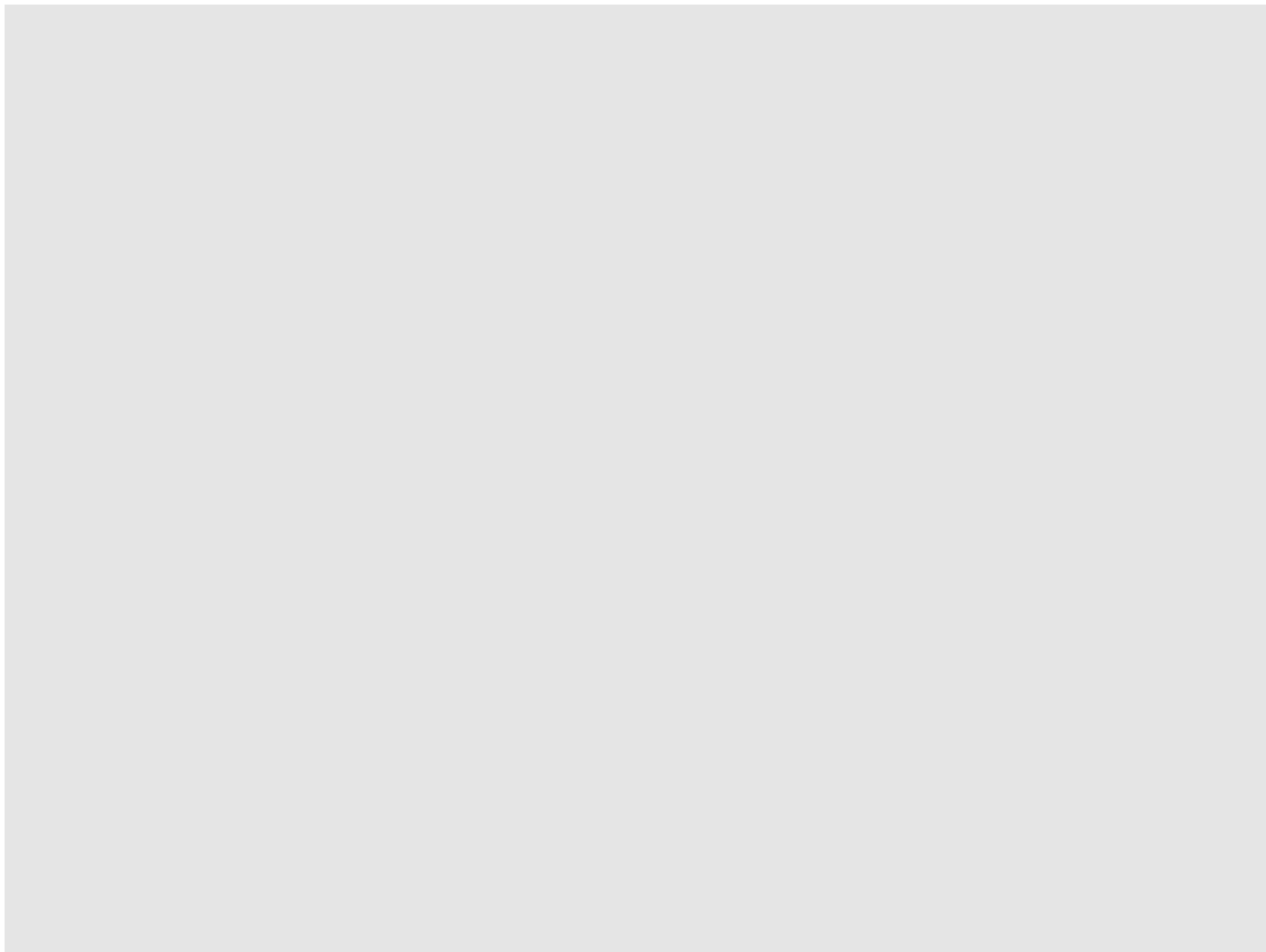
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Those fighting to save the trees created the **Zoar Valley Coalition LLC**. Members include residents who live near Zoar Valley, as well as groups like the Western New York Environmental Alliance, the Sierra Club Niagara Group, the Buffalo Ornithological Society and the Niagara Frontier Botanical Society, according to the coalition's president, Lynn Kenney.

“Zoar Valley is a rare and irreplaceable wilderness area beloved by the public, and the public has consistently expressed a high level of interest in Zoar Valley being left in its natural state,” Kenney told The Buffalo News. “Climate change has elevated the importance of forest as a stable source of carbon sequestration, capable of storing large amounts of carbon in mature trees.”

The logging project around Zoar Valley was proposed by the Audubon Society to the DEC as an opportunity to remake the mature forest into a young forest, with a thick underbrush suitable for certain types of birds that are currently struggling to survive in the area.

The logged area would be enclosed inside a large slash wall, a barrier made from the cut-down trees to prevent deer from disturbing the vegetation, so a new, young forest could thrive and attract birds like the wood thrush and cerulean warbler.



Trees that have been "blazed" with paint for logging within the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area in Collins, May 9, 2024.

Libby March/Buffalo News

The Audubon Society has recently run out of the federal funding that was supporting the work, and that leaves the DEC to decide what happens next.

“We provided our partners at the DEC with science-based forest habitat management recommendations and created a plan for a public demonstration site where forest owners and managers could see the results of forest regrowth and diversification,” said Mike Burger, executive director of Audubon New York and Connecticut, in a statement emailed to The News.

Sean Mahar, the interim DEC commissioner, said in an interview that the agency still plans to move forward with a forest management plan in the area, although it hasn't yet figured out when or how many trees may be coming down.

The original proposal by the Audubon Society involved cutting down possibly hundreds of trees on about 92 acres north of Wickham Road. Although most of the trees in the 92 acres were marked with orange paint indicating they would be cut down, Audubon's proposal included leaving some trees to maintain a scattered canopy.

Most of the focus in the area after the logging, per Audubon's proposal, was on keeping deer out and encouraging the growth of native trees and shrubs.

As a result, the logged area would provide habitat for birds that rely on young forests with thick underbrush, according to Audubon's plan.

"We are revising that plan and developing additional options for what could potentially happen in the area in the future," Mahar told The News.

The Zoar Valley Coalition continues to oppose every aspect of logging in the area.

Beyond simply cutting down trees, a cornerstone of the coalition's opposition is they said they had been left in the dark. The trees were marked with orange paint seemingly overnight, with no one noticing until hikers and drivers passing by happened to spot the marked trees last summer.

"DEC claims that they've met the minimum requirements for public input into the future of Zoar Valley, but our feeling is the DEC has fallen far short of meeting those requirements under SEQRA," Kenney said, referring to the State Environmental Quality Review Act, "especially the requirement that DEC conduct a public hearing when there is a high level of public interest in a plan."

Mahar said he wants to do better as the DEC moves forward with a revised project.

"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," he said. "We want to make sure they understand why we want to manage habitat, the importance of it from a forest health

perspective and an ecological perspective. But we want to do that in a way that recognizes their viewpoints and really takes them into consideration.”

Once it has revised its forest management plan for the Zoar Valley area, the DEC plans to hold community engagement sessions perhaps as early as March, Mahar said.

Reach climate and environment reporter Mackenzie Shuman at [mshuman@buffnews.com](mailto:mshuman@buffnews.com) or 716-715-4722.



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