

White's Woods logging: 'There will be a lot of tears'

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White's Woods Nature Center entrance, North 12th Street, Indiana, Pa., May 2, 2020. Photo by David Loomis.

By Sara Stewart

“In childhood the wilds seemed infinite. Along Crooked Creek in the Allegheny Mountains of western Pennsylvania there was a tract of forest we called the Big Woods. The hemlock, beech, poplar, red oak, white oak, maple, and shagbark hickory grew on slopes so steep they had never been logged... Now I would not care to visit those faraway scenes. The forest which seemed so vast to us was only a small thing after all, as the bulldozers, earth movers, and dragline shovels have proved.”

— excerpt, “*Shadows from the Big Woods*,” by Edward Abbey

INDIANA — The author and environmentalist [Edward Abbey](#), a native of Home, wrote these lines in 1974. They have a particular resonance now, during the latest dispute between the five-member White Township board of supervisors and a growing number of Indiana residents over the township’s plan to remove trees from [White’s Woods Nature Center](#).

How many? The number is proving difficult to pin down. At the township board’s meeting on May 13, a member of the [Friends of White’s Woods](#) group asked township manager Milt Lady how FWW had counted nearly 700 trees spray-painted for removal when the [official tally given by the township](#) was 250.

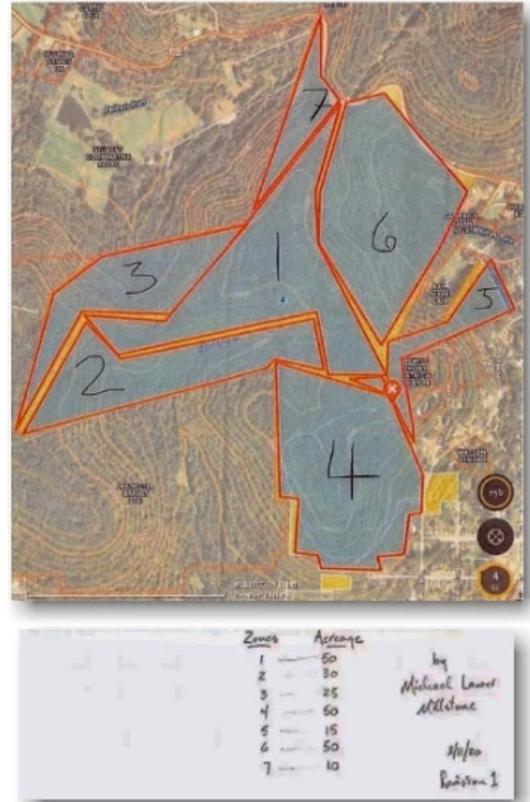
And this was just on the initial tract, one of seven tracts shown on a [map](#) submitted by [Millstone Land Management LLC](#), of Marion Center, the contractor chosen by township supervisors to perform forestry work in the publicly owned recreational forest.

An earlier map showed [five tracts](#).

"I need to talk to our forester and clarify that discrepancy," said Lady at last week's meeting, adding that Lawer "may have marked additional trees," and that any forest project involving "any type of timbering, we have to do the data."

Although the township has protested that it has not yet submitted any timbering plan to the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, its forester's overview clearly includes it.

"If you look at the documents," FWW member Christina Ruby, an IUP biology professor, told The HawkEye, "they have planned on removing something like 56 percent of the tree volume in the entire park."



Map of White's Woods, submitted to White Township officials by Millstone Land Management LLC, of Marion Center, the contractor township supervisors have chosen to perform work in the recreational forest. The map's seven tracts indicate areas within the 250-acre forest where Millstone plans to schedule its work. Source: Friends of White's Woods website. Click to enlarge.

'... they have planned on removing something like 56 percent of the tree volume in the entire park.'

This expansive new "sustainable forestry" plan appears to reposition the township's recreational woods as an ongoing source of timber income. Millstone's [website](#) explains this philosophy :

"Through the use of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), Millstone can ensure that you can continue to harvest your valuable timber multiple times over the years. By implementing a plan, harvesting select timber, and controlling invasive species Millstone Land Management can help grow your timber at a more sustainable rate. Millstone Land Management also watches for high value timber on the land. This high value timber has the potential to increase land value dramatically."

The township's strategy, for the [third time](#), is at odds with the provisions of the Project 70 Land Acquisition and Borrowing [Act](#), the state government fund with which the land was purchased. The 1964 statute states that

White's Woods must be used for recreational, conservation and historical purposes.

Although the township has justified its new plan as primarily “for the health of the forest,” based on planned removal of invasive species, supervisors have once again met with public opposition. A May 14 [petition](#) created by Friends of White's Woods had more than 2,400 signatures as of May 22, and the group has raised more than \$12,000 for legal representation.

[Letters to the editor](#) of The Indiana Gazette have weighed in on the township's actions, with the majority in opposition.

The township says it is updating the plans.

“Per DCNR's request a Stewardship Plan is currently in the works but in draft form only,” Lady said.

Lawer has not responded to interview requests from The HawkEye.

AMID CHANGING INFORMATION from the township, The HawkEye spoke to three experts about plans submitted by Mike Lawer, Millstone's owner, in [four documents](#) posted on the FWW [website](#).

Jeffrey Larkin, an IUP distinguished professor of conservation biology, said he spoke in mid-April with Lawer about Millstone's plans for the woods.

Larkin said the polarization over the proposed forestry was unnecessary.

“I've spent my entire career trying to help avoid these situations,” he said. “[The township has] done a splendid job, in a matter of months, of showing how one does not do community-based conversations and forest management.”

Larkin said he met with Lawer following an April White Township supervisors meeting. He toured the initial 50-acre White's Woods tract and heard details of the plan, which involves “mechanized forest mulching efforts” to remove invasive plants, rototilling the soil, and removing marked trees.

Larkin said he was not impressed with what he heard from Lawer and saw for himself.

“The invasives on that 50 acres, quite honestly, are not at all to the point where you actually need to go in and mechanize to remove them,” Larkin said. “If you grind them up with a mulcher you're not killing them. Those things have produced seedlings. They are going to flourish when you open up the canopy and give them sun to grow.

“And the proposed site is right along a power line corridor,” he continued. “It's got a heck of a nice source of Japanese stiltgrass that will invade the rich soil like nobody's business when you open it up to sun and disturb the



Jeffrey Larkin, Ph.D., IUP distinguished professor of conservation biology.

forest floor like what is being proposed. Most practicing foresters will say if you break open the canopy at all, one thing you better be ready for is an invasion of stiltgrass. You typically don't open up the forest canopy and do the low shade understory treatment at the same time.

"Any forester who would look at that and say this is an acceptable process, I would bet my life that you will not find one," Larkin said. "All you have to say is, 'We're gonna rototill the ground, and we're then going to remove all of these trees that are marked, and not going to account for herbicide or overabundance of deer, and we're going to plant some expensive ground cover and everything's going to go great.' They would look at you like, are you for real?"

The only person this process benefits, Larkin said, is Lawer. His company will have to return to treat invasives when they inevitably spring up again.

"They're going to have to go in there continually to do this, at a rate of something like \$400 an acre," Larkin said. "It's not a fiscally responsible way to manage a forest. I guarantee you DCNR would not sign off on this if it were land they managed."

'It's not a fiscally responsible way to manage a forest.'

Larkin also expressed concerned about the bidding process for the logging by Lawer.

"His valuation statement shows he's going to go about overseeing the sale of the timber," Larkin said. "The bidding process seems like a very odd approach that's not normal. The general procedure would be that a consulting forester would mark 50 acres, advertise the project and welcome bids from loggers or procurement foresters. I pushed him on it, and he said, 'I'm gonna decide who comes in and gives me bids.' You can't do that on public property. That should be a public process in order to maximize the outcome for the public and township."

LAWER'S CREDENTIALS came up at the May 13 township supervisors' meeting. FWW member Andrew Davis, an attorney, noted that the forester does not hold a bachelor's degree.

The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources publishes a [list](#) of more than two dozen foresters in Indiana County who have received a degree in natural-resource management and who have acquired other professional certifications. Lawer's name is not on the list.

An agency spokesman said the listings are largely voluntary.

"Pennsylvania does not have stringent laws on who can call themselves a forester," Ryan Reed, a spokesman for the agency's Bureau of Forestry, said in a May 20 phone interview. "Pretty much anybody can go out there and call themselves a forester."

The agency's philosophy is to let the market decide and the buyer beware.

"Indiana County has a pretty good number," Reed said. "It wouldn't be wise to not be on the list. It gets more name recognition."

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative, which Lawer lists as his certifier, gets Larkin's approval. But it has [come under fire](#) for practices that are more in line with its timber-industry origins than in maintaining forests meant for public recreation.

"SFI is the logging and paper industry's PR scheme that tries to convince people that large scale clear-cut logging is good for our forests, wildlife, and communities," writes Lisa Graves, of the Center for Media and Democracy, in a compendium of statements criticizing the SFI's "[greenwashing](#)" practices.

AMONG THE less-than-sustainable risks of the current plan are a reduction in air quality and rampant stormwater damage, said Ruby, the IUP biology professor and FWW member.

She said she was perplexed by the township's move to reduce the number of trees at a time when their presence is key for the health of Indiana's population.

"We have a lot of pollutants around," she said. "The air pollution is offset by having those trees. They provide a layer of protection."

Especially during the pandemic, she said, the woods have provided a much-needed oasis.

"There have been so many people in the woods, and it's wonderful to see," Ruby said. "There's plenty of space for everybody. We can maintain our physical distancing, we can do something for our physical health and mental health. Why they would want to compromise that, at this time, is beyond me."

Ruby also pointed to a recent [study](#) examining the economic and health benefits of green spaces.

"They did this mathematical model of Philadelphia, saying if they increase the tree canopy to 30 percent of the land, they estimated they could prevent 400 deaths per year," Ruby said. "But they also said it would yield economic benefits in the hundreds of millions."

Stormwater damage is another concern for Ruby, as it was for the Indiana Borough Council. At its May 19 meeting, council members discussed the township's lack of an erosion and sediment plan for the woods. Councilor Gerald Smith [stated](#) that "any plan for woodlot management involving 25 or more acres requires state approval."

"When you have a steep slope that we have in White's Woods, with all the houses around the base; if you remove a lot of these trees, as they are planning on doing, I think it's going to lead to pretty widespread erosion," Ruby said.



Christina Ruby, Ph.D., professor of biology, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

“I think it’s going to lead to stormwater damage to homes, and probably other properties as well, some public areas. Those tree roots go deep into the hill. They stop the hill from falling down.”

THE HAWKEYE ENLISTED an independent, out-of-state lumber expert to review the township’s forestry documents. Tom Kane, head of procurement at Johnson Brothers lumber in Cazenovia, NY, said removing invasives was “an environmentally sound practice.” But he had deep reservations about the logging section of the plan.

“By definition, a [shelterwood cut](#) is not sustainable,” he wrote in an April 23 email. “If the goal is ultra-long-term timber production — 100 years or more — it probably is the right choice. That being said, this is a park, and undoubtedly, the goals are not ultra-long-term timber production. The goals are multi-use, and this cut will not promote that. It will look like a bomb went off. This park will literally never be the same. There will be a lot of tears.”

Sara Stewart is a freelance journalist who writes for the New York Post, CNN.com and other publications. For The HawkEye, she has covered domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic and White’s Woods. She lives in Indiana and is a member of the Indiana Borough Council.

David Loomis contributed reporting.

Sidebar: For more information/To get involved

For more information about this story or to engage in the issues addressed, contact the following sources:

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Forest management plans, April 2020: <https://www.friendsofwhiteswoods.org/mgmt-plans>

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2 Responses to *White's Woods logging: 'There will be a lot of tears'*

 **William Edmondson** says:
May 22, 2020 at 4:39 pm

Quality forestry means taking out sick or invasive trees so the healthy one can survive. On a small scale that's why you weed your garden. Always stirring up trouble.

[Reply](#)



bobnvera says:

May 22, 2020 at 5:05 pm

This isn't a "weeding of a garden". Removing more than half the trees is like digging up your tomatoes to help the peppers. And the article says that the invasive species look like they will come back in spades with that much area disturbed and the method chosen. Find a forester with credentials to truly give an evaluation of selective cutting with preservation of the park the primary purpose. Not the creation of a revolving lumber yard and revenue source. Great article.

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