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'The People's Forest': WMNF celebrates 100th birthday

Tom Eastman May 18, 2018



Forest rangers visit the exhibit at the Museum of the White Mountains in Plymouth. From left: Brooke Brown (Pemigewasset District), Tim Pohlman (Acting Deputy Forest Supervisor), Clare Mendelsohn (Forest Supervisor), Jennifer Barnhart (Androscoggin), Jim Innes (Saco District). (COURTESY PHOTO)

PLYMOUTH — Often called the “land of many uses,” the White Mountain National Forest also is known as “the People’s Forest.”

That's because of the attachment people have to the nearly 800,000-acre gem surrounding Mount Washington Valley.

A recreational draw, the WMNF is visited by 6 million-7 million people a year, and is within a day's drive of 70 million Northeasterners.



Yet it's more than a scenic playground — it's a national forest, not a national park. Thirteen million board feet of timber are harvested each year. Wildlife and habitat management and conservation also are part of its mission.

Balancing those interests is a challenge, but one the WMNF has never ducked in the past 100 years.

In fact, it reached its century mark this month.

Receiving its designation in May 1918 by proclamation of President Woodrow Wilson, the forest's centennial will be celebrated with a summer full of special events.

That celebration kicked off this week at Plymouth State University's Museum of the White Mountains with the opening of "The People's Forest: Centennial Exhibit of the White Mountain National Forest," an exhibit that will run through Sept. 12.

The WMNF and the museum also have lined up a series of workshops, discussions and hikes (see accompanying story).



“The exhibit is about the partnerships between the White Mountain National Forest and their many organizations and volunteers, which play such a key role in the forest,” said Cynthia Robinson, the museum's executive director.

“My biggest goal was to illustrate that collaboration — I am hoping this will serve not only as a look back but also as a launch pad for activating people to be part of the next 100 years,” she said.

The exhibit includes interactive touch screens on a variety of subjects, including history, trails, topography and careers in the Forest Service.

One of Robinson's favorite artifacts is a 1914 map of the forest; other treasures include lantern slide transparencies that have been converted into digital images.

Also highlighted: works created by the WMNF's Artist-in-Residence program, dating back to 2011, and a forest fire exhibit that simulates being in a fire tower.

Helping provide context to the artifacts is retired WMNF forester and historian David Govatski, who co-curated the exhibit.



Govatski said WMNF stands out for a variety of reasons.

"The diversity of use sets this one apart — here on the White Mountain National Forest, we have every single conceivable use you can think of: six federally designated wilderness areas, timber harvesting, hiking, skiing," he said.

"The thriving economy we have in Lincoln and the Mount Washington Valley, in Littleton and Gorham ... these are gateway communities that in many ways benefit from having a national forest."

WMNF Public Affairs Officer Evan Burks and Saco District Ranger Jim Innes agree, saying that along with heavy use comes a commitment to protect that beauty for future generations.

"These are public lands owned by everybody, but with ownership comes responsibility," said Burks. "For our centennial, we are working on three themes: reflect, create and engage."

That means encouraging the public to "think about what the forest will look like at the bicentennial in 100 years," and engaging them to 'get involved with the forest's stewardship," he said.

According to WMNF Forest Supervisor Clare Mendelsohn, while the centennial "is a reminder to look back on where we've come from ... we still have work to do to ensure this land is protected for future generations, and now, more than ever, we need the public to join us."

Challenges from climate change, increased use, budgetary hurdles, changes in forestry technology and management priorities are all part of a discussion the Forest Service will engage in this centennial year.

Innes believes the WMNF works because so many are so passionate about it.

“The people around here make the forest what it is — it has a long legacy, and people care about it deeply,” he said in a recent interview.

One recent instance where public passion butted against the rights of adjacent landowners was at Diana’s Baths swimming area off West Side Road near the Conway-Bartlett town line.

The popularity of the site led to efforts by those towns, state government, the Mt. Washington Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Forest Service to come together to improve the parking situation on West Side Road.

“That (the Diana’s Baths discussions) was the most collaborative effort I have seen in my 18 years as selectman,” said Conway Selectmen's Chair David Weathers, retired from what was then the U.S. Soil and Conservation Service, which, like the USFS, is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Weathers — a member of Conway Fire and Rescue — said local fire departments work closely with the forest on rescues and fighting fires.

Bartlett Selectman's Chair Gene Chandler, who once worked on a trail crew for the Saco District under legendary Saco District Ranger Verland “Swede” Ohlson, said: “I have a lot of faith in the local folks — I guess my issue is with the higher-ups who don’t have a true feeling for what the national forest was established to do, who are trying to make it a national park versus a working forest. There used to be a lot more timber work.”

Chandler initially opposed the implementation of user fees by the Forest Service in the 1990s as a way to raise funds for projects on individual forests.

“I still am,” he said, “because it’s not a national park, so you shouldn’t be charged to go in.

“But the pilot fee program has changed a lot over the years, and it is my understanding that it provides money for betterment projects on the forest that they might not otherwise be able to do,” said Chandler whose hometown is 78 percent national or state forest, part of which is the WMNF’s Bartlett Experimental Forest, established as a research site in 1931.

As for local communities feeling a connection to the forest, Chandler and Weathers both said the forest is a huge benefit to the region.

"It certainly is our area's greatest asset," said Chandler, noting that despite differing opinions on timber harvesting, recreational use and habitat management, all agree on the value of the forest.

Chandler quipped, "There's no question that everyone (nationwide) has ownership of the White Mountain National Forest — but folks in our area just have a little more ownership."

People's sense of ownership of "their forest" dates back to May 16, 1918, when President Woodrow Wilson signed Executive Order 1449, creating the White Mountain National Forest.

By that time, 360,638 acres had been acquired, of which 27,860 were in Maine and 332,638 in New Hampshire.

It all started with the Weeks Act.

In an interview from his Jefferson home, Govatski said that at the turn of the 20th century, much of the mountain landscape was denuded by the clear-cutting practices of logging barons.

The public outcry and the interests of mill owners downstream led in 1911 to the passage of the Weeks Act, which resulted in the creation of the White Mountain National Forest.

Sponsored by U.S. Rep. John W. Weeks (1850-1926), R-Mass., who had a second home in Lancaster, the act stemmed from the government's intent to buy lands in the eastern United States, where it had no large conservation holdings. Western lands also were later acquired.

It authorized federal purchase of forest lands at the head of navigable streams and also provided for cooperation in fire control between federal and state authorities. Congress passed the bill on Feb. 15, 1911, and was signed into law the following month by President William Howard Taft.

On March 27, 1911, the White Mountain area received tentative approval by the National Forest Reservation Commission on March 27, 1911, pending a report on the management of forest lands and protection of streams.

That winter, the U.S. Geological Survey conducted research around the headwaters of the Pemigewasset River, Govatski said. The report indicated that logging methods common at the time, and the forest fires resulting from them, were detrimental to water flow.

Weeks used the Interstate Commerce Clause in the Constitution to get government backing to purchase the logged-over lands.

Govatski said support from an array of groups, including the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests and Appalachian Mountain Club was key to passing the Weeks Act.

"Weeks used the clause to show that the federal government had the right to buy private land to protect them at the headwaters of navigable rivers," Govatski said. "That was key, because the rivers were flooding and also going through dry spells due to the erosion caused by the extensive logging."

Industry concerns from mill owners in Manchester and Lowell were central to the act's passage, according to Carl E. Lindblade of Stow, Maine, who teaches at the University of New Hampshire.

"The president of the Amoskeag Manufacturing Co. (of Manchester) testified there was so much dirt and silt coming down from those mountains, it was impairing our hydro power and our ability to manufacture cotton and wool," he said.

The first purchase was in January 1914, a 7,072-acre tract in Benton that was acquired for \$13.25 an acre, followed by the acquisition of 30,296 acres in the Northern Presidential Range, Wild River and Cherry Mountain regions.

Prior to its forest designation, the area was referred to as the White Mountain Purchase Unit.

"A reasonable and manageable acreage was needed before a formal designation of national forest would be made," Govatski noted.

During the 1930s, FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps cut many trails and created public viewing areas.

Today, it's one of the most popular national forests in the country.

Most of the 4,000-foot mountains available for peak-bagging in New Hampshire are within its boundaries. Over 100 miles of the Appalachian Trail traverses it. It lies within parts of four counties: Grafton, Coos, and Carroll in New Hampshire and Oxford in Maine.

The main body of the National Forest includes the Presidential Range along with, notably, the Franconia, Twin, Bond, Sandwich, Willey, and Carter-Moriah ranges.

It encompasses 12,000 acres of wetlands, 4,750 miles of streams, 67 lakes and 35 watersheds.

It has 1,200 miles of hiking trails, 400 miles of snowmobile trails, 160 miles of the Appalachian Trail and 22 developed campgrounds, six ski touring areas and several alpine areas operated under special-use permits from the WMNF.

The WMNF is divided into three districts: the Saco in Conway, Androscoggin in Gorham and Pemigewasset in Campton, home to the forest headquarters.

The completion of the Kancamagus Highway (U.S. Route 112, now a National Scenic Byway) to Lincoln in 1959 opened up the forest to motorists, and scenic areas such as Lower Falls and Rocky Gorge, both of which have recently been enhanced.

The 100-mile White Mountain Trail provides a scenic motor loop for connecting the Conways to Lincoln, Franconia and Bretton Woods.

After Congress passed the Wilderness Act of 1964, the WMNF designated six wilderness areas: Great Gulf, Presidential Range-Dry Wilderness, Pemigewasset, Sandwich Range and Caribou-Speckled Mountain, and Wild River, totaling 149,500 acres in all.

Perhaps Susan Arnold, vice president for conservation of the 1876-founded Appalachian Mountain Club, puts the significance of this centennial year best, saying: "With the establishment of the national forest, and the work of so many to conserve it, these essential forest lands are once again vibrant, providing cleaner air and water, recreation, economic opportunity, scientific discovery, wildlife habitat and access to spectacular scenery for generations of visitors from near and far."

For more information, go to fs.usda.gov/whitemountain or call (603) 536-6100.

For about the Museum of the White Mountains, go to plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains or call (603) 535-3210. Hours are 10 a.m.- 5 p.m. Monday-Friday and 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays. The museum is located at 34 Highland St. on the campus of Plymouth State University, an hour west of Conway.

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Reporter