



Lawmakers threaten peace and quiet of Pigeon River Country



The forest in the fall.

Pigeon River Country is being threatened by moves in the Michigan Legislature that would undermine the very existence of the forest as a special place protected from misuse and overuse.

Already, the legislature has passed and the governor signed a new law that turns off-road vehicle (ORV) policy upside down. PA 288 of 2016 conflicts with long-standing practices, regulations, and perhaps other existing state law.

More bills working their way through the legislature attack forest protections such as berms that restrict vehicle access. These bills would also cripple the ability of the Department of Natural Resources to consolidate holdings in the forest through land purchase. Ironically, the trust fund established to compensate for hydrocarbon industry intrusion into our natural areas would become unavailable for such land purchase.

Regarding the crisis over access to the remote forest:

“Any limit of the Department’s ability to manage road access will seriously hamper efforts to manage the forest for its wild character, scenic values and quiet recreational experiences,” John Walters told Keith Creagh, DNR director, in a Sept. 20 letter. Walters chairs the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council.

The council voted unanimously on Oct. 20 to recommend that the DNR oppose any legislation or elements within legislation that conflict with the Concept of Management specifically as it relates to use and access.

ORVs are not currently allowed within Pigeon River Country except on a few Cheboygan County roads in the northern part of the forest. Berms are in place and existing law specifies that ORVs can only be used where a road is posted open to ORVs.

The law just enacted allows ORV use everywhere on state forest roads except where it is posted as closed to ORVs. The difference is critical, because violators could simply remove a sign, then claim the road is open to ORV use.

“We’re riding our ORVs in the Pigeon starting tomorrow, and we’re tearing down the berms.” That was how Walters paraphrased the heavy traffic of Facebook postings that followed enactment of the new law.

The initial directive from the DNR was that nothing yet has changed, but then questions of interpretation have arisen. “It’s potentially changing,” Scott Whitcomb, unit manager, said. He has been charged with gathering detailed information about forest roads throughout the state so that the DNR can issue guidelines within the next several months. The roads are to remain closed until after the inventory that is to be completed for the Pigeon area by Dec. 31, 2017, according to state Rep. Triston Cole.

The impact of legislative actions remains unclear, but the threat to the Pigeon River Country was obvious to everyone attending the quarterly advisory council meeting at forest headquarters Oct. 20.

“This is a nonstop drip that’s going on,” Paul Rose said. “If there’s an interpretation that this does not include the Pigeon, the next one will.” Rose follows legislative activity closely, as do several other council members.

PA 288 rules are expected to go into effect by the end of 2017 in northern lower Michigan. A primary motivation for enacting such laws has been the idea that state forests are a detriment to local areas because of fears about loss of taxes. Expanded ORV use is seen as generating local revenue. Missing from this perspective is an understanding of the value in the forest to all citizens and any appreciation for the special qualities of such places as the Pigeon River Country.

And, in fact, all taxes except the 6 percent state education assessment continue to be paid on properties purchased as new forest land. Under Michigan law, the payments are made from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund by the Department of Treasury for land purchased with the trust fund money.

The advisory council discussion emphasized the need to educate the public about the forest’s values. Immediately following the legal description of the “Big Wild” in the Concept of Management are these words:

“Because of the absence of dwellings, cultivation, commercial enterprises and other signs of human activity, visitors to Pigeon River Country can enjoy a feeling of escape from today’s fastmoving society. A flavor of wildness and peaceful beauty remains, and people are only occasional visitors. Loud, unnatural noises generally are infrequent and man-made constructions are scarce. True escape is possible here, and its therapy can be enjoyed by people of all ages.”

Council members noted in particular the usefulness of the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center in sharing with the public what the forest is all about. Expected opening for the center is fall 2017.



Tom Alison does cabinet work.



Eugene Horan cuts a length of trim.

Enthusiasm grows for getting Discovery Center into shape

When you know Tom Alison was once a banker at First National in Gaylord, it's easier to notice the precise care he uses in painting the Discovery Center kitchen cabinets. And it's easier still when you know in retirement he's been making toys for kids, and that he's been a do-it-yourselfer for 50 years.

"I enjoy it," he says. "Right now I'm out of projects, so this is handy."

He shows up regularly at the center, climbs a ladder or leans his tall frame in close to a cabinet, applying his precision to the many tasks needed to ready the building for the public. He's been in Gaylord for 30 years. "It's a great place to live."

Eugene Horan likewise loves the location, in particular the forest he lives alongside. He has been finding many projects that need attention to prepare the log building for an opening in late 2017. A tool and die maker by trade, Eugene has been an officer in the Pigeon River Country for years, currently as vice president.

"It's kind of how I grew up," Eugene says. "Just fix things at home" in Muskegon, where he was raised in a big family that did what was needed around the house. When he and his wife moved up in 1980, buying the Pigeon River Motel just outside the forest boundary on Sturgeon Valley Road and then the store in 1984, "I had things to fix all the time, so if you didn't know how, you had to learn it." They closed the store after nine years. "We didn't want to move, so you can't sell it if you don't want to move. Or if you don't want neighbors. That's why we moved here." He worked until his retirement at Standard Products in Gaylord, now Cooper-Standard, an auto parts manufacturer.

Eugene buzzes through a piece of moulding with a table saw sitting on the ground just outside the log building, then goes in to show where the piece fits in a frame around a window in the back door. "This was a real ragged edge. I squared that up this morning." Tom offers some one-inch drywall screws to secure the window.

“It’s the details that kill you,” Tom says. “Yesterday,” Eugene says, he patched a hole left when a doorway was widened to meet ADA standards. Trimming up the new opening “was a whole day’s work,” Eugene said, “that little bit of floor, the trim, the baseboard.”

He points to windows that now slide open and shut with ease, thanks to John Jenkins, mayor of Gaylord. John cleared the channels that contain ropes and weights, removing mouse nests from dozens of windows. One window channel was full to the top with the mouse fixings. John has been Gaylord mayor since 2010. Before that, he was with the Michigan State Police for 26 years, then became a Gaylord city councilman for a year, and then local police chief 13 years.

John talks about the “community of Gaylord” as a broad idea. “We’re a friendly, giving lot. It’s one of our biggest and best features.”



Windows freed of mouse nests

Eugene recalled how the late Gerald Myers and others in the association and then many in Retired Senior Volunteer Program did work for the forest, including keeping a desk open on weekends to answer questions from visitors to the Pigeon. “That was 20 years ago,” he said. It’s still happening.

A first draft of an exhibit plan is being revised. Once plans for placement and content are completed, the Discovery Center’s steering committee will call on volunteers to

help prepare the exhibits and the structures to hold them. “Volunteers are saving the Discovery Center thousands of dollars and we couldn’t get the project done without them,” Rudi Edel, steering committee chair, said.



Deer prints in the snow.

Quotes to inspire visitors

We’re gathering quotes that we might use in the Discovery Center. Here are some of them:

Pigeon River Country: “It’s the last big wild down here close to so many millions of people. And if we can control it and put some guidelines down so we won’t ruin it we can maintain something pretty nice for posterity. I feel we owe the next generation something besides taking everything for ourselves and leaving them nothing.”

--Ford Kellum

Engagement with nature ... offers a chance to ... explore our deeper longings ... an opportunity for respite, contrast, contemplation, and affirmation of values for those who live most of their lives in the workaday world.

--Joseph L. Saks

Wonderful it is to see the footmarks on the snow—beautiful ropes of rabbit prints, trailing away over the brows; heavy hare marks; a fox, so sharp and dainty, going over the wall; birds with two feet that hop; very splendid straight advance of a pheasant; wood-pigeons that are clumsy and move in flocks; splendid little leaping marks of weasels, coming along like a necklace chain of berries;

odd little filigree of the field-mice; the trail of a mole—it is astonishing what a world of wild creatures one feels round one, on the hills in the snow.

--D. H. Lawrence

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

—Aldo Leopold

There comes a little space between the south side of a boulder and the snow that fills the woods around it. Sun heats the stone, reveals a crescent of bare ground: brown ferns, ...acorns, a patch of moss

...I sank with every step up to my knees
...until by accident I found the stone,
with its secret porch of heat and light,
where something small could luxuriate, then
turned back down my path, chastened and calm.

—Jane Kenyon

The crossing of great rivers is that whereby inner nurturance and outer effectiveness is accomplished...detached from biases and extremes, stopping in unknowing...

--from Hexagram 26, *The Taoist I Ching*,
translated by Thomas Cleary



Mounting block erected at Elk Hill campground.

A cautionary tale of unintended consequences

What is a massive new equine structure doing in the Pigeon River Country, where the management concept dictates that recreational use “should have low impact, leaving minimal footprint”?

An examination shows a string of seemingly reasonable ideas culminating in what the forest’s guidelines are trying to prevent: a permanent structure that is contrary to the “unspoiled, undeveloped” character of Pigeon River Country. It offers a case study as the DNR contemplates a “recreation plan” for the forest and raises the question whether such a plan will allow the latitude for someone to stop an inappropriate project even when it appears by that point to be inevitable.

The 5-foot-wide by 42-foot-long ramp was not what anybody seems to have had in mind when the DNR proposed to place a “mounting block” near the public toilets at the Elk Hill equestrian campground, part of a request from equestrians.

A typical mounting block is a two-or-three-step box that a rider stands on next to the horse to more easily place left foot in left stirrup to then swing into the saddle.

Marsha Putnam, president of Sleepy Hollow Trail Riders near Lansing, stood looking at the mounting block at Elk Hill. It was her first visit to the Pigeon and she was clearly skeptical about such a large structure. Who would use it? she asked. Her preference was to stand on a concrete ring around a fire pit as a mounting block. The ramp was not only excessive in her view, but the supporting posts would keep the horse too far from the platform, creating a space that even the most athletic rider would find a challenge when trying to step across it onto a horse.

She asked where the money came from to pay for such a ramp. It was from an equine trust fund. She guessed correctly that it was built to meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards for accessibility.

The ramp as built never came to the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council for review. A “mounting block” without elaboration was mentioned in the proposed Elk Hill upgrade brought to the advisory council in 2011. The upgrade was described as an expansion to improve “the camping situation for equine uses.” It was considered on July 13, 2011, by two advisory council committees, but the Standards and Limitations Committee “decided that no action was appropriate at this time.” Paul Rose, committee chairman, recalls there were no descriptions of a mounting block size or design. John Walters, advisory council chairman, suggested the committee continue to take part in the overall proposal, but plans for the mounting block itself never returned to the advisory council.

The Elk Hill upgrade had already been proposed by the time the Michigan governor assigned the DNR’s Parks and Recreation Division (PRD) a role in the Pigeon management in 2011. The division has in fact mentioned that it was only carrying out what had already been put in place. That was the premise when Keith Cheli of PRD actually drew up the mounting block design that followed federal accessibility standards, the so-called “brown book.” He says it was not his role to consult the Pigeon’s Concept of Management—that question had been supposedly raised by others. He says the mounting block was what equestrians wanted.

Kelly Kinser of PRD likewise worked with equestrians to help decide where the mounting block would be placed and what posts would guide access to the block. Neither did it seem to be her role to question whether the size or design was consistent with the Concept of Management—that had presumably been decided elsewhere.

Likewise Anna Sylvester of PRD recalls the whole proposed upgrade was already in place when she came aboard in 2012, and that her division then reduced the scope of the upgrade by eliminating the boulders that had been proposed to line trails in the campground. She said eliminating the boulders was done in consultation with equestrians, who thought they might obstruct horse trailer maneuverability. But no one questioned the massive expansion of a simple mounting block into a 42-foot ramp. The equestrians, she said, “were thinking it would be a small little thing that you climb on” to mount your horse. But her division simply by then followed federal rules for accessibility and made it big.

Is there the latitude for someone to say, ‘This is clearly problematic for a forest managed to reduce manmade structures to the minimum’? If no such latitude exists, unintended consequences may result. Unless someone planned all along to put a massive ramp into the campground, it seems to have been precisely an unintended consequence. It remains a question whether that might happen again in the course of “recreational planning.”

It also raises the question of how decisions are made regarding permanent structures being added to the remote forest. Anna Sylvester said she heard “mixed messages” about that. She is the northern Michigan field operations chief, with an office in Roscommon. She said, “One day” the advisory council says “you can’t have any structures in,” but when she raises the question of how many toilets to install at campsites “they say toilets don’t count.” It’s the same with a mounting block you need to get on a horse, she said. “Does that count? I don’t know.”

Chuck Fanslow, current equestrian representative on the advisory council, says riders he knows about would be happy with a simple three-step block and he doesn’t know if any equestrian has actually used or needed the ramp. Couldn’t riders bring their own block to the forest if they need one? They do, he said, but can’t carry it while riding from their campsite to the toilets, where a permanent block would allow a dismounted rider to remount.

By the same token, it might be asked, should a railing be installed from the parking lot down into the river so an unsteady person could walk down into the stream to fish? How do we answer that question? “Welcome to my world,” Anna says.

Meanwhile, the ramp stands at Elk Hill as the only one of its size in a Michigan forest or park. In Brighton, there are essentially two of them joined at the upper end, so they can be accessed from either end, making the ramp twice the size of the Elk Hill ramp. They are the only such mounting blocks erected by Parks and Recreation Division in the state.

A recreation plan for Pigeon River Country drafted by PRD is being circulated for comments within other DNR divisions and revision before it will be brought to the advisory committee for input, which is not expected for the next several months. It has not been made public.



Marsha Putnam's horse Sundance seems to have a question about the mounting block at Elk Hill. They don't have anything that big downstate.



Stove in cabin on Pigeon once belonging to Ernest Hemingway's sister has now been moved to the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center kitchen as an historical display.



Back door before walkway was discovered this summer at Discovery Center.



Stone walkway uncovered at Discovery Center back door. It was placed there by the first forester to live in the building, Bill Horsell, circa 1936.

Membership renewal reminder

Your membership dues help make it possible to provide a scholarship to a student intern who assists the PRCSF unit manager in the summer with many projects that would otherwise not be completed due to limited staffing. Your dues also help us participate in important activities such as the Song of the Morning dam removal project and the discovery center project at the former PRC unit manager residence.

Your membership expiration date is on the mailing label of your newsletter or in the email message sending this newsletter. Please keep your membership current.

Thank you!

This newsletter can be seen with photographs in color on our website, www.pigeonriver.org.

Writer & Editor & Photographer: Dale Franz

Layout/Copy Editor: Julie Feldpausch