

Pigeon River Country Association Newsletter

Summer 2017



Scott Whitcomb of DNR, Stewart Smith of PRC Association, John Walters of PRC Advisory Council, and Randy Smith of Vasa cross country ski trail group of Traverse City discuss road inventory at hearing in Gaylord.



Public meeting in Gaylord June 21 about opening and closing forest roads to off-road vehicles.

Forest survives first round of fight over its sanctity

Pigeon River Country, the only Michigan forest with legally and historically protected solitude, survived the first round of a threat to open its 170 square miles to off-road vehicles (ORVs). A period of statewide public comment ended July 15 with all but one responder supporting a continued ORV ban for the remote state forest northeast of Gaylord.

“Good job restricting” ORVs from the Pigeon. “We don’t want them in there,” were typical comments.

The battle is now in a round two as the Department of Natural Resources continues firming up regulations in response to a new law (PA 288) that calls for most roads in Michigan to allow the ORVs day and night access to even the most remote and sensitive public lands. Another statewide public comment period will occur in the fall after the plans are ready to be finalized for the northern Lower Peninsula and Upper Peninsula.

The law, signed by the governor in September 2016, required the DNR by 2018 to allow motorized use on forest roads unless otherwise marked closed. It further required a DNR inventory of all state forest roads to provide information to the public and allow for individual decisions on specific roads. With that inventory completed, DNR staff has recommended the ORV ban remain in effect in the Pigeon.

A statement by its chief sponsor, Rep. Triston Cole, admits ORVs are “considerably” more “erosive” to state lands than are pack or saddle animals. He didn’t address other impacts, such as sound, speed, or access to remote and sensitive areas. Nor did he address how erosive ORVs are compared with hunters carrying out their kill without help from a machine.

Cole’s district includes the Pigeon River Country (PRC). His statement September 28, 2016, reads:

“This change increases recreational opportunities by giving ORV users the right of entry statewide, while also reauthorizing huntsmen rights to retrieve game in an alternative method, by use of pack or saddle animal, which is considerably less erosive on state land.”

A spokesman from Cole's office, asked on July 25 to clarify the reference to "considerably less erosive," called back to say the intent of the quotation was to say hunters would be able to use either ORVs or animals to retrieve game. He declined to discuss what the representative's quote meant by "considerably less erosive."

Cole has said recently he accepts leaving PRC roads closed to ORVs, but wants to allow hunters to use ORVs even in the PRC to retrieve game. Motorized retrieval off road into the forest is contrary to existing DNR policy. That agency policy has been forged by wildlife biologists through decades of experience. The state legislature has not spelled out whether it is dictating new policy based on any scientific study or field experience. It is known to be responding to a few determined advocates for unrestricted off-road activity.

The whole PRC currently is closed to ORV use except for the shoulders of Cheboygan and Presque Isle county roads. Until now, in the Lower Peninsula forest roads were considered closed unless signs indicated otherwise. The new law seems to establish a reversal of signage policy in the PRC, requiring signs if the road is closed. It will apparently satisfy state law going forward to post the closed road signs at PRC entry points, rather than requiring signs on every roadway in the forest. Snowmobiles may be operated in the PRC only on roads open to vehicular traffic, while outside the PRC, snowmobiles are not restricted on state land except on any hiking pathway.

Motorized vehicle access has been a key management issue in the PRC since its borders were established in 1973 and a Concept of Management adopted by the state mandating protection from overuse and misuse of the forest. The Concept, updated twice since then, emphasizes conserving the wild feeling of the PRC. Court documents from the hydrocarbon exploration days of the 1970s and 80s decreed further protections for the forest.

The Pigeon is the only state forest with a vehicle access plan.

In a July 12 letter to Keith Creagh, DNR director, from John Walters, Pigeon River Country Advisory Council chair, the council declared that "it remains our opinion that retrieval of harvested game in the PRCSF is prohibited by way of ORV or Pack & Saddle Animal" based on the

Concept of Management. In a second July 12 letter to the director, Walters noted: “There are now regularly occurring illegal ORV activities within the PRCSF boundaries that are degrading the sand based roads” and causing erosion. He added:

“The Pigeon River Country State Forest supports tremendous fish and wildlife, bountiful forestlands and wetlands, profitable industry, and vastly diverse quiet recreational opportunities. People seek this special place to find peace, tranquility and their inner soul. To be one with nature is extremely cleansing ... The quiet recreational experience of these activities would be greatly diminished if ORV users were permitted in the PRCSF. The multitude of quiet recreational activities abounds throughout the year. There is not another place in Michigan like the Pigeon River Country State Forest.”

One plea for solitude free of ORV traffic

This newsletter editor wrote the following to the DNR in July asking that the PRC ban on off-road vehicle traffic remain in place. It refers to an interview 40 years ago with Ford Kellum, a key figure in our history. Some of that interview will be part of the displays in the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center opening soon.

A plea to keep some places quiet and remote

Motorized travel is our way of life today. We need places to go where traffic is light, where the scenery is natural, even when we bring the sound of our own machine. A family shouldn't have to ride together down the shoulder of a highway. It's not safe, and it's not rewarding to the spirit.

Fortunately, there is opportunity for riding off road—and more of an abundance coming.

Unfortunately, there is almost no opportunity for that more challenging activity of venturing into remote woods without a motorized vehicle. There is hardly a place anywhere that is free of motor traffic and the sound that it brings.

Walking or snowshoeing alone in a woods is an act of courage that engages our senses for keeping track of where we are, what is around us, how it all smells and sounds—beyond what we can experience when riding a machine. It surely must be part of what we protect and hold dear in a free society.

There is great and deep public support for setting aside some areas that allow for such solitary activity in a noisy, busy world. Away from motors, away from noise, and away from vehicles on or off the road.

Forty years ago I talked with a man who retired early from the Department of Natural Resources so he could advocate on behalf of Pigeon River Country as a special place, the best we've got in the lower peninsula. The last big wild. Here's what he said:

“Speed. Everything is motorized. You want to see the back country. It's easier riding a machine than it is walking. But it isn't long-lasting in your life.”

He said that when you get back there where there are no man-made noises, you hear wild sounds, and you never forget it.

That thought is what's behind a phrase like “protecting environmentally sensitive areas.” It means more than finding a threatened mushroom to avoid stepping on. It means more than finding a quiet place and keeping it quiet. It means more than we sometimes appreciate in this busy, speedy world.

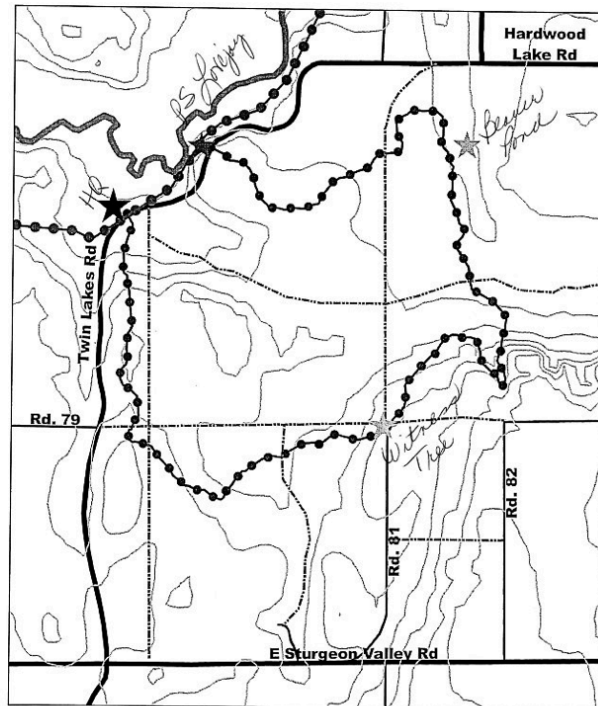
It certainly at least means not running ORVs in Pigeon River Country, which is a very small place on our planet.

--Dale Franz

Towerman's Watch Pathway displays a variety of features

The following article was written by Joe Jarecki, who with his wife, Judi, cleared the pathway, a new addition to the Pigeon River Country. AmeriCorps volunteers Tara Buehler and Emily Vogelgesang and the Glen Lake football team helped them brush out the Middle Fire Tower loop on July 21.

Towerman's Watch Pathway

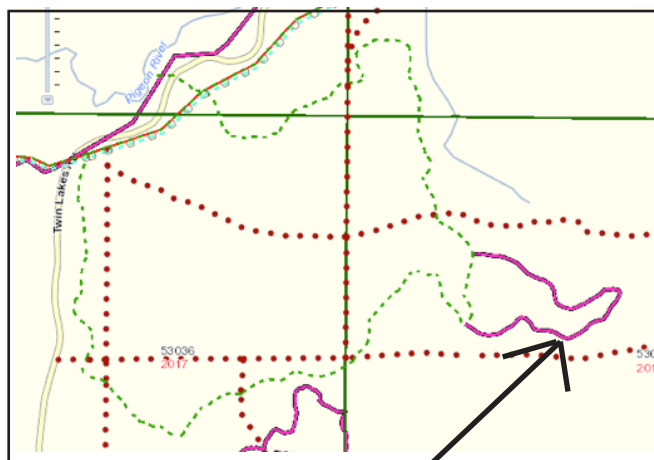


Length: 2.9 Miles

Legend

- ★ Beaver Pond ★ Witness Tree ●●● Shingle Mill Pathway
- ★ P.S. Lovejoy ★ Headquarters ●●● Towerman's Watch Pathway
- Equestrian Connectors

The new Middle Fire Tower loop is not shown above, but a rough sketch below locates it as "Old Fire Tower Loop."
Sketch courtesy Tara Buehler, AmeriCorps volunteer.



Old Fire Tower Loop

The main 2.9 mile loop of the Towerman's Watch pathway starts at the PRC Headquarters/Discovery Center and includes the Witness Tree, the P.S. Lovejoy monument, a beaver pond, and a variety of forest plant communities. It was completed in 2016. A 0.75 mile loop recently completed goes to the site of the former Pigeon River Middle Fire Tower.

The Witness Tree was blazed in 1850 by surveyor William Burt (who Burt Lake was named after) to "witness" the stake placed nearby marking the quarter section corner. If the stake was removed, the tree would be used to locate the corner so it could be restaked. At the time, the red pine tree was 8" in diameter and perhaps 40 to 60 years old, making it about 215 years old today.

P. S. Lovejoy, a conservationist of national stature in the early 1900s who created the then Department of Conservation's Game, Fire Control and Lands divisions as well as the Institute for Fisheries Research, called the Pigeon River Country the "Big Wild." The P.S. Lovejoy monument was placed at one of Lovejoy's favorite spots to overlook the Pigeon River valley. Lovejoy died on January 20, 1942, and the monument was dedicated in his honor on June 7, 1942.

The former Pigeon River Middle Fire Tower was part of a web of fire towers throughout the northern Lower Peninsula that were the primary system for detecting and locating wildfires until the 1950s or early 1960s when small aircraft took over. At the former fire tower site, a hiker can see the ends of the tower's three galvanized steel anchor legs sticking about 6" out of the ground. The oak and red maple forest is now taller than the fire tower was, so it is difficult for a hiker to imagine the vista the towermen saw as they spent their days scanning the horizon for forest fire smoke. There are plans to develop an interpretive display at the site.

In addition to a view of the abandoned beaver pond and lodge, a hiker will pass through forest communities of mature red and white pine, young aspen and jack pine, mature jack pine, oak, red maple, and upland brush. No matter the season, next time someone visits the PRC Headquarters and/or the Discovery Center (due to open in September), there is an opportunity to check out the Towerman's Watch pathway, though cross country skiing is not recommended due to some sharp curves on steep slopes.

‘Tubes’ to be replaced, maybe with timber bridge

Plans are underway to remove the failing concrete and earth structure at Pigeon River State Forest Campground and install a timber bridge over the river. The spot has been known for decades as “the tubes,” for the three culverts that the Pigeon flows through beneath the road structure connecting the nearby campground with Ford Road.

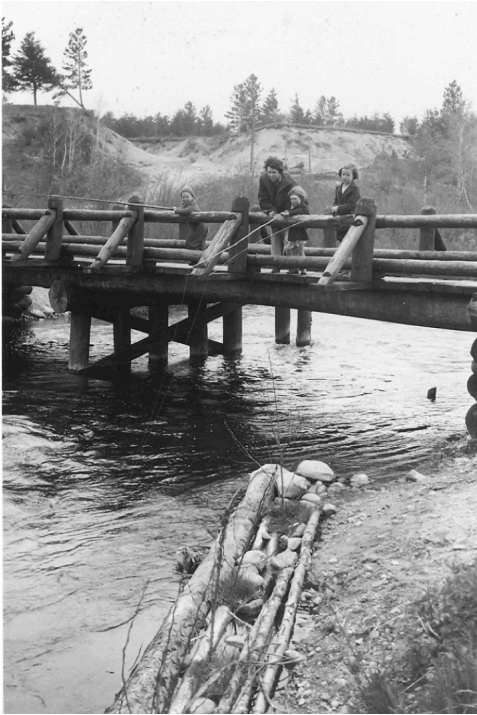
The tubes would be removed. The plan is in its early stages, so specific designs and placement are still being evaluated.

It’s an Otsego County road and also part of the Shingle Mill Pathway. With the Golden Lotus dam removed, this is the next priority for Fisheries Division efforts to enhance the quality of the river by removing impediments to natural flow. Among the questions being pursued is whether the plunge pool could or should be somehow retained. People use it for swimming. The higher velocity flow at that point is considered less than ideal for river health.

The timber bridge would be single lane and designed to support standard traffic weights. Holes have opened in the current structure, temporarily filled with bags of concrete. The tubes are believed to date from a previous bridge failure in the 1950s.



“The tubes” in the Pigeon River under Ford Road near Pigeon River Campground.



**A previous bridge at “the tubes”
on the Pigeon, in the 1940s.**



**Another view from the 1940s.
*File photos.***



**An even earlier bridge at “the tubes” site, likely in the 1930s.
Looking southerly with river flowing from right to left.
The road behind the children goes up the hill to the
former headquarters site at the corner of
Twin Lakes (Osmun) and Ford Lake roads.
*Photo courtesy Lyle Horsell.***

Now it's just Dog Lake—not Dog Lake Flooding

Brian Mastenbrook reported to the Pigeon River Country State Forest Advisory Council on July 20 that a bulldozer was poised to finally take out the dam at Dog Lake as the DNR restores the natural conditions around the remote site.

Those seeking out the site can now walk the old railroad grades that had been covered by the flooding. Brian predicted that vegetation will grow so rapidly that in three years the old grades won't be easy to find. Interlocking mats are being installed temporarily to provide access for restoration work and a timber sale, then will be removed.

A two-track into the area will continue to be a challenge to navigate with a vehicle. The dam was installed in 1958 or 1959. The flooding will be gone, but the lake will remain. Tara Buehler, the AmeriCorps volunteer, has been visiting the site almost every day this summer to clear barriers to allow natural drainage. Water flow will be restored to its pre-dam path.

A centennial for elk in Michigan

Next year, 2018, is One Hundred Years of Elk in Michigan. The DNR is ramping up to celebrate. Elk hunters will choose a favorite from among five posters to be made available widely. There will be a calendar done in cooperation with Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC). For a few years, the Michigan loon license plate will go away and be replaced by an elk plate in limited run.

Seven elk were released in the Pigeon in 1918 that survived and grew into what for awhile was the largest elk herd east of the Mississippi and is now sustained by management and hunting at about 900 animals whose range is centered in Pigeon River Country.

“We're trying to make people appreciate that elk are here and what a success story it's been,” Brian Mastenbrook told the PRC Advisory Council. Elk calves born in spring will start to come out of hiding now in August. There will be an elk orientation meeting August 28 at Corwith Township Hall in Vanderbilt at 1 p.m. with information gathered about original holding pen locations and 100 years of elk history. The elk hunting season starts the next day.

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation is participating in the celebration and partnering with the Discovery Center for display information.



Elk cross Sturgeon Valley Road. Photo believed taken in late 1920s or early 1930s looks west toward Dudd Road and Vanderbilt.
Photo Courtesy Lyle Horsell.

Deer aplenty face increased hunting

Antlerless deer hunting quotas have been raised to 1,800 from last year's 200 in Otsego and Cheboygan counties because mild winters the last three years have resulted in increased deer population. The increased quotas are expected to stay in place for three years unless something unexpected occurs. Hunting licenses are issued each season until the total reaches the quota for the area.

Check our website <http://www.pigeonriver.org/> soon for links to Discovery Center display videos posted on YouTube.

Membership renewal reminder

Membership dues help provide a scholarship to a student intern who assists the forest manager in the summer, and help us protect the wild character of the PRC. Your membership expiration date is on your mailing label or email sending this newsletter. Please keep your membership current.

Thank you!

Visit our website at www.pigeonriver.org.

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