



BACKPACKING IN PENNSYLVANIA - SEMINAR SYLABIS

I will concentrate on what I and other active conservationists have termed the Northcentral Pennsylvania Wild Woodlands Complex. This constitutes the area bounded by U.S. 6, U.S. 15, U.S. 219 and U.S. 220. Some of the most remote, roadless and diverse biomes in Penn's Woods are found therein.

Five areas in this bioregion offer the most outstanding opportunity for wilderness recreation in the Keystone State. I will describe them and their associated biota in outline form as follows:

A. Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania

1. This is the most spectacular natural feature in the Mid-Atlantic. Carved by runoff during the Pleistocene from an ancient glacial lake; it has some of the most vertical topography in the Appalachians.

2. Forest type

a. Mixed mesophytic hardwoods with white birch dominating the rims. White pine and hemlock intersperse and become dominant in the drainages.

3. Vegetation

a. Mountain laurel and rock oak form the succesional stands where timber operations have occured more recently. These are currently experiencing defoliation by Gypsy Moth.





b. The wildflower displays are some of the best in the state. Columbine, trillium, jack-in-the-pulpit, angel fingers, etc. proliferate. They bloom later and are more "spread out" time wise; so they can be observed quite late.

4. Fauna

a. deer, black bear, porcupine, bobcat, coyote, bald eagle, red-tailed hawk and kestrel, to name a few.

5. Backpacking opportunities

a. West Rim Trail *Grand Canyon of Pa*

i. this 30 mile trail offers a truly unique way to see the canyon. It winds it's way along the rim; providing numerous spectacular panoramas of this magnificent gorge

b. Pine Creek trail

i. still under development, this trail will run 62 miles along Pine Creek from Jersey Shore to Ansonia. It follows the abandoned Conrail right of way and is part of the rails to trails initiative. It will be covered with crushed limestone and suitable for bicycles.

6. Best time to go

a. winter, spring or fall

7. Further Information

* Chuck Dillon of Pine Creek Outfitters in Ansonia, Pa has written an outstanding guide to the West Rim trail. Call him at (717) 724-3003. He also has info on Pine Creek trail and offers raft trips



B. Black Forest-North Link-Susquehannock-Southlink Circuit

1. This 28 mile circuit goes through some of the most diverse woodland on earth. I have yet to find a more impressive display of fall foliage, anywhere. The Link trails can be hard to follow if you're not watching for blazes and the South Link is wet. But, I've never seen another party on the Links. The Black Forest trail is heavily used, however, and those seeking solitude will not want to camp on it. The Susquehannock section is short.

2. Forest type

a. The northern hardwoods kiss their southern counterparts here. I've never, outside the Great Smokies, seen this variety of hardwoods in one place. Birches, tamaracks and sugar maples mix with beeches, oaks and some magnolias. Hemlock rounds out this stunning mosaic. A bit of Vermont meets a bit of Tennessee.

3. Fauna

a. same as Grand Canyon minus eagles and kestrels

4. Location

a. Susquehannock State Forest and Tiadaghton State forest off Pa 44 at the Potter-Lycoming County line.

5. Information

* a. Chuck has written a hiking guide to the Susquehannock Trail that includes the Link trails. He also sells the Tiadaghton Forest Fire Fighters Guide to the Black forest Trail.





C. Hammersley Wild Area

1. At 20,000 acres; this is the largest roadless area in the state. It is a series of wooded vallies; with the main watershed being the Hammersley Fork itself, which drains into Kettle Creek. These are prime trout streams.

2. Forest type

a. this is the eastern edge of those great stands of black cherry. Some truly majestic specimens grow in the Hammersley. The Beech Bottom Hemlocks natural Area just south of the wild area is a stand of ancient hemlocks.

3. Fauna

a. same as above except add the fisher, a large member of the weasel family which preys on porcupines.

4. Backpacking opportunities

a. The Susquehannock trail goes through the Hammersley. From that, many side trips either on old, sometimes faint RR grades or bushwacking is possible. Twin Sisters Mountain has many areas with outstanding scenery. Many of the drainages are sublimely beautiful. This area caters to the more advanced wilderness traveler seeking solitude and challenge.

5. Location-off PA 144 past town of Cross Fork near village of Hammersley Fork.

6. Chuck Dillon's guide to the Susquehannock Trail.





5. Information- Chuck Dillon also sells the Maps and guide to the Mid-state Trail. Also available from the Mid-State Trail Association, P.O. Box 167, Boalsburg, Pa 16827. The MST is an outstanding experience end to end and in my opinion is the finest long distance hiking trail in the state (172 Miles it begins at Water Street off US22 near State College.)

* E. Quehanna Wild Area *State Bure of Forestry has a map available (free)*

1. In spite of the man-made obscenities heaped upon it- AND the tornado that shredded it on May 31, 1985- the Quehanna Wild Area remains one of the wildest, most unique biomes in Pa. When I speak of the QWA I'm actually speaking of the plateau west of the Quehanna Highway, north of the Quehanna Trail ~~Trail~~ ^{SUIT}, east of the Quehanna Crossconnector west, and south of the Quehanna Trail North.

2. Forest type, geology, characteristics

a. Huge stands of black cherry produce a fine, diverse forest interior. This is a major haven for neo-tropical migrant songbirds. White Pine is returning slowly. The largest stands of tamarack south of the Adirondacks grace the uplands. Open meadows complete with conglomerates of Pottsville sandstone give a northern feel. The headwaters of the West Branch of the Susquehanna are here and the river originates in the many wetlands. The openness creates a scale rare for PA.





D. Mid-State Trail

1. The 50 miles of the MST from the Woolrich outlet to the junction with the West Rim Trail offer some of the finest long distance backpacking in Pa. Add on the West Rim Trail and you have roughly 80 miles of backpacking.

2. Forest Type

a. similar to Grand Canyon except ridges are full of sugar maple and beech

3. Fauna

a. same as above

4. Backpacking opportunities

a. Although linear requiring shuttles (Chuck Dillon does this as well) this is a fabulous hike. "The Gates of Pine Creek" segment is very strenuous (Woolrich to ^{Little} Pine Creek) but beautiful with eye-popping vistas of Pine Creek. The descent to Little Pine State Park harkens you to Maine or the White Mountains in it's steepness. The dark hemlocks of Little Pine are subliminal in their appeal. The segment from Little Pine to West Rim is known as the 25-mile wilderness and is some of the wildest country in Penn's woods. Also very strenuous, it offers a sense of trackless solitude indeed rare in this part of the world. An outstanding vista is found at Gillespie Point the matterhorn of the Keystone State. This, in my opinion is the finest viewpoint in the state.





3. Fauna

a. A small Elk herd reintroduced from the Yellowstone herd survives in the areas north of the wild area. Coyote, deer, great blue heron, great horned owl, barred owl, red-tailed hawk, bear, porcupine, fisher, mink, beaver and bobcat grace this area.

4. Many folks consider this the finest backpacking area in Pennsylvania. It is also a superlative spot for backcountry skiing. Located south of Bradford in Elk and Moshannon State Forests it gets more than it's share of snow and that lake effect machine tends to be reliable that far north and west. This is a wonderland for the experienced backpacker who is also a misanthrop. It tends to require orienteering skills as the trails only visit a small part of the plateau, so bushwacking is usually in order. I offer my winter backpacking school here because conditions are usually optimal (i.e. snow, cold). The plateau is flat, so the going is easy and other than the dense white pine stands, the forest is typically open.

5. Information-Bureau of Forestry in Harrisburg

"Once we were happy in our country and we were seldom hungry, for then the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds lived together like relatives, and there was plenty for them and us. But the Wasichus came, and they have made little islands for us and other little islands for the four-leggeds, and always the islands are becoming smaller; for around them surges the gnawing flood of the Washicu; and it is dirty with deceit and greed."

-Black Elk (Lakota)

COYOTE COMES TO RECLAIM OUR APPALACHIAN WILDERNESS

It's late March. I'm walking across the Eastern Continental Divide in the far northern reaches of what people like to call Dolly Sods. I've decided to rename it the "Potomac Highlands Wildlands Complex". As I stand gazing southward, I can make out ^{THE BIGGER OUTLINE OF} Mt. Porte Crayon, which is on southern periphery of my wildlands complex. My plans? Public ownership of the ground I stand on, closure of FS 70, 75, and 19, removal of the campground and all other "developments". The houses and ski resort on Cabin Mountain are in my "critical area" and are also slated for removal.

It's Friday morning and a beautiful day. I revel in how great it is to be alive. I give thanks to whatever force, spiritual or otherwise, that lead me to this place at this time. There's a couple of inches of snow on the ground and in spots, drifts accumulate to a couple of feet. What's this? In the snow right in front of me; the biggest canid ^{TRACK} I've seen east of the Rockies. By the time I reach Dobbins Slashings Bog I've determined it's a female coyote, about 4 years old, and maybe 50-60 pounds in weight. The pressure release is impeccable, indicating an individual who is purposeful, and uses great stealth and guile to survive. (I'm sure many would just as soon see her dead) I've named her the Coyote Queen.

I've seen 30 or so deer today. I visualize the Coyote Queen on a deer. Smashed bone, ripped flesh, and the merging of prey with predator.

I've decided to track her across the bog (there's a distinct game trail she's followed). It's only about a quarter-mile across so I remove my boots and walk barefoot. The mossy layer is thawed; but the spaghnum is frozen solid. The channels of the Red Creek, a half-mile from it's source, are nearly waist-deep and heart-stopping. Within 15 minutes I'm across; feeling more exhilaration than pain. ~~but I~~ lost her trail.

I set up my simple camp at a nearby beaver pond, and watch a pair of ducks fly across this magnificent ~~ecosystem~~ ^{ecosystem}. I walk over to a sand bar to get a better view of the whole bog, when I see it again. Those familiar tracks. I follow her trail into a jungle of rhododendron on a semi-steep hillside. Suddenly, I'm at a junction of several coyote runs. There's several piles of canine scat; filled with hair and bone fragments. I follow the largest run dead ahead and straight uphill until I come to a small plateau in what seems to be the middle of this tangle and there in front of me is a deer boneyard. I count three skulls. Two of them have the nasal section chewed off (for phosphorous), and they are all small specimens. The adrenaline flow makes me momentarily lightheaded. Then I left that place, sacred as a shrine, and retreated to my spruce-dominated camp.

In my subsequent visits to this place, I've learned much more about the Coyote Queen. She hunts beaver in the headwaters of Left Fork and deer on Raven Ridge (where she has another boneyard) and in Dobbins Slashings. I've seen no evidence that she ventures south of Dobbins Grade.

The notion of coyote conjures ~~of~~ ^{up} images of the American wilderness. In the Papago cosmos we find I'ittoi Ki, the coyote-like character respon-

sable for that people's emergence into this world. He is said to reside in a cave at the base of the cliffs which forms the wall of Baboquivari Canyon. When the coyotes of Baboquivari cry out; it is the voice of I'ittoi Ki speaking to the Papago, reminding them to thank the moon for Jujkiabig Mamsad (rainy season). The watermelons they grow they share with coyote. And because Baboquivari Peak towering over I'ittoi Ki's cave can be seen from every village in the Papago country, it is literally and figuratively at the center of the Papago universe.

It's early May and the Quehanna is aflame with it's spring colors. The trillium are prolific in the riparian areas. We're negotiating the Mosquito Marsh. It is a huge montane freshwater swamp. Like a giant sponge, which the Susquehanna River is squeezed out of, it presents a formidable obstacle.

The Quehanna is a rich biome of upland forest, muskeg, and tamarack marsh; extremely remniscent of the Five Ponds area in the Adirondacks. It supports a stable elk herd of about 50 individuals; which were reintroduced from the Yellowstone herd in the 30's and followed by a supplemental reintroduction in the 50's (the population was around 400 in 1960 and has since tapered off; probably due to habitat fragmentation). In spite of the human-induced obsenities heaped upon it, the Quehanna is the largest, healthiest forest ecosystem in Pennsylvania.

We're camped off-trail in Mosquito Creek Canyon at an old homesite. All that's left is the wall and the apple trees. We ~~took~~^{take} to our tent early as a another in a continuing series of downpours, characteristic of the Alleghenies at this time of year, passes overhead.

A few hours after we doze off we're abruptly awakened by the sound of a large animal running through camp followed by 2 or 3 yipping canines. The sound is quickly drowned out by the creek's roar. After what seemed like minutes; it dawned on us that it was a deer being chased

by coyotes.

The following day, while negotiating a dense white pine stand, we stumbled upon a deer carcass. It was a yearling doe. A gift from coyote to bear, raven, vulture, slug, worm and fly.

The abundance of **deer and** beaver has brought coyote to our bio-region. In return for sustenance and strength coyote will help us reclaim our Appalachian wilderness.

More coyote will mean less deer, which will mean more trees, which will mean a potentially larger habitat for neo-tropical songbirds, which will mean more vector-dispersed plants, which will mean a richer and more diverse biota, which will result in a healthier wilderness ecosystem.

This discussion of the ungulate-canine predator-prey relationship is just a small thread in a larger biological fabric. Yet, the top of the food chain is dependent upon what goes on at the bottom and in the middle. This dependence of everything on everything else; so recently embraced by modern wildlife ecology, is something Native Americans understood thousands of years ago through their mysticism. We observers of wild nature must learn from this mysticism.

Looking at the biological fabric of an ecosystem comes from ~~one~~ oneness with the country itself. One must be willing to meet the elements on their own terms; to mingle unabashedly with nature.

Often many wilderness visitors seek recreation, not enlightenment. To them wild country is a temporary diversion from civilization. The backpacker looks for "scenery", the rockclimber wants challenge, the hunter or fisher wants sport, or worse. Few wilderness users look to understand or just feel the ecosystem of which they've temporarily become a part. Humans buffer themselves from the natural world with modern lightweight equipment, well-maintained trails, signs, ~~and~~ mileage markers and guidebooks.

Don't misunderstand me; I'm not decrying any of the above. I'm thankful to be able to occasionally avail myself of these amenities.

But, every so often at least, we ought to accept wilderness on it's own terms, without civilization's buffers. We ought to occasionally sleep on some high, exposed ridge, to hike off-trail through a tangled forest laden with deadfall; to navigate through the desert at night by the stars, to explore that blank spot on the map. We ought to revel in the floods of a May downpour rather than run off to the security of cover. We ought to travel alone. We ought to explore rather than just look, discover rather than just photograph and study rather than just memorize the names of plants, animals and places. Most important, we ought to let the flow of the wild, unaltered universe of nature penetrate our very being.

I'm on the old Bear Rocks Jeep Road in late April. It's warm and the humidity is high. Another thunderstorm is in the offing. I'm less than a mile from my vehicle, temporarily on my way back to civilization. To my south, 400 feet beneath me, is a series of beaver ponds. The lodge is plainly visible. Suddenly I see the movement of several deer across the glade; their white tails bobbing. Two yearlings are left behind at the edge of the largest pond. Panicstricken, they opt to swim across rather than go around. Once they emerge on the far shore, they shake off like dogs and immediately disappear into the red spruce.

I think about the Coyote Queen. How she's put fear into ungulate hearts hereabouts. I bow to the four directions and thank the Coyote Queen for coming here and helping us reclaim our Appalachian wilderness.

Lee Mercer