

LAST CHANCE TO SAVE THE SMOKIES WILDERNESSINTRODUCTION

Although oral testimonies for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park Wilderness Hearings have now been concluded, the official record remains open until July 15. Much can still be done for the preservation of maximum wilderness in the Smokies. Since this is the first national park to be reviewed under the Wilderness Act, it is imperative to make the voice of conservation loudly heard. In this way we can act not only to save the Smokies but set a precedent that will help protect wilderness in all the other national parks to be reviewed later.

HISTORY OF THE HEARINGS

Under the terms of the Wilderness Act of 1964, the National Park Service is required to review all roadless areas of at least 5000 acres as to their suitability for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. When the National Park Service proposal was published in April, conservationists were dismayed to find that it designates 6 scattered wilderness areas covering only 247,000 of the park's 512,674 acres. Only one of the areas (in the eastern half of the park) is of any appreciable size; the rest are small, two of them being barely above the 5000-acre minimum. The most objectionable feature of the Park Service proposal is that it splits the western part of the park by a wide corridor (5 miles at its narrowest point) for a new transmountain road, first publicly proposed in September, 1965. A large area north of Fontana Lake is also excluded, possibly for other roads.

Shortly before the hearings, the Park Service made public its 10-year, \$30,000,000 Master Plan. This includes in addition to the road, a hotel on the crest of the Smokies in the western half, a ski run, a large number of new campgrounds and picnic areas, several "motor nature trails", a number of helicopter landing sites, etc., etc. It became clear that the Park Service proposal for wilderness areas was made in terms of what wilderness would be left after this 10-year master plan was completed and not in terms of the wilderness existing now.

Alternative proposals were made by the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club and by the Wilderness Society, after careful study of presently existing wilderness areas. These proposals include 350,000 of the park's 512,674 acres in two large units. A large number of organizations (National Audubon Society, National Parks Assn., Sierra Club, Nature Conservancy, Wilderness Society, etc., etc.) opposed the transmountain road in their publications prior to the hearings. It was pointed out that roads around the margin of the park, now under construction (e.g. I-40) or potentially improvable, would do much to alleviate the traffic problem.

SUMMARY OF THE ORAL TESTIMONY AT THE HEARINGS (Gatlinburg, June 13; Bryson City, June 15)

Speaking for the Park Service proposal and particularly for the transmountain road were state officials of Tennessee and North Carolina (Governors, state highway departments, U.S. representatives of adjacent districts) and local officials of surrounding towns and counties (mayors, chambers of commerce). The recurrent themes in their testimonies were as follows:

- a. The National Park Service has been very good and has never harmed the park. We can trust them implicitly in their present proposals.
- b. The present road is becoming inadequate for the large numbers who want to visit the park by car. We must make provisions for them. "The park is for all Americans, not just a handful of hardy hikers."
- c. The new road would bring more tourist dollars to East Tennessee and North Carolina.
- d. The Park Service is supposedly obligated to build a road under a 1943 agreement with Swain County, North Carolina.

Speaking on the side of conservation were a great majority of organizations and individuals from all over the country. At Gatlinburg, the ratio of oral testimonies "against" vs. "for" the road was 26:12 for organizations, and 60:2 (!) for individuals. It is also known that the great majority of those listed for oral testimony but unable to attend were for maximum wilderness. The audience provided enthusiastic applause for the conservation speakers.

Unfortunately, most of the politicians left after their own testimonies (which came early in the day) and, as one of our speakers put it, "didn't get a chance to feel the pulse of the active voters."

The most encouraging thing about the pro-wilderness testimonies was their quality. They were varied, intelligent, imaginative, and highly individual. Among the positive suggestions for solving the projected tourist onslaught on the park were the following:

- a. Develop peripheral areas, both through private enterprise and through the Federal Government (surrounding National Forests, TVA lands, etc.), but leave the park wild. This can best be done through regional planning for the entire area surrounding the park.
- b. Use a more imaginative approach than the short-term alleviation but not solution of a growing traffic problem. It may, for instance, become necessary to restrict or prohibit private vehicular traffic in the park and substitute park-managed public transportation.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Local politicians and newspapers, while conceding that the majority present at the hearings were conservationists, are making it sound as though interests represented were only those of a group of eccentric hikers. This impression must be counteracted by getting a broad group of citizens from all over the country on record.

1. The hearing record remains open for written testimony until July 15. This is a permanent record for all times that will be submitted to Congress. Send your testimony, however short, to HEARINGS OFFICER, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Gatlinburg, Tennessee 37738. Introduce it by the specific statement that you wish it included in the official records of the hearings.
2. Write to Dr. STANLEY A. CAIN, Assistant Secretary for Parks, Department of the Interior, Washington, D. C.
3. Write to your Congressman, to the President, and to Mrs. Johnson.
4. Urge as many friends as you can persuade to do the same (points 1, 2, and 3). Testimonies from organizations carry extra weight.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE SAID

1. This is a National Park and should not be spoiled merely to satisfy local commercial interests.
2. A broad spectrum of citizens is interested in wilderness preservation, not just rugged hikers. (If you can give some sort of scientifically or professionally slanted testimony, that would be superb.)
3. The proposed road might take care of traffic for a few years, but what then? We cannot keep "accomodating." There must be a cutoff point now. (This is the message of the Wilderness Act.) We must not destroy what future generations will long for.
4. The park was established as a wilderness park and not as the margin for a highway. It represents a tiny fraction of the area of the U.S.A. It cannot be all things to all people.
5. The rights of the minority who want to get out into the wilderness must be protected. The minority becomes large when you add future generations.
6. Regional planning may be the best positive approach to establish as minimum wilderness the areas proposed by the Wilderness Society.
7. The park should be enlarged by inclusion of adjacent areas.

PROJECT OF THE TENNESSEE CITIZENS FOR WILDERNESS PLANNING

If you want extra copies of this newsletter, need additional information, or want to request speakers, contact R. A. Lorenz, 203 Villanova Road, Oak Ridge, Tennessee 37830, telephone 615-483-4742.