

Citizens unite to protect a spectacular forest.

by Nancy Sorrells

The 72-mile-long Shenandoah Mountain situated on the eastern front of the Allegheny Mountains in the 1.1-million-acre George Washington National Forest (GWNF) ranks as one of the most biologically diverse places in the entire United States, including Hawaii. The mountain, located in western Virginia between Routes 33 and 250, has five roadless areas, one of which is the largest roadless area on national forest land east of the Mississippi—the Little River Roadless Area at 29,000 acres. The North River Gorge, which slices through the land, is eligible to be a National Scenic River. It is a place so special that its diverse and sometimes seemingly incompatible users have found common ground atop that place they call Shenandoah Mountain, and together, they have created a unique plan to collectively cherish and protect it.

The mountain, rich in both human and natural history, is a land of many faces. Mountain bikers love its single-track adventure; birders

search for more than 250 species and perch upon the mountain spine to watch the autumn raptor migration. Hunters tramp the steep slopes seeking black bear, turkey, grouse, and whitetail, while fly fishermen wade the coldwater streams that are among the last bastions of native brook trout in Virginia.

But timber interests also find the mountain alluring, as do wilderness advocates who want to protect the integrity of the old growth forest. Tourists enjoy walking the Civil War breastworks educational trail along the mountain top, while backpackers prefer the isolation of Ramsey's Draft Wilderness. And thousands of people in the Shenandoah Valley, many of whom have never set foot on Shenandoah Mountain, turn on the tap each morning and drink the clean water that this special area protects. The headwaters of both the Shenandoah and the Potomac rivers arise here.

Some might think that the sheer diversity that is Shenandoah Mountain might doom it to extinction, as groups with opposing interests draw battlelines to defend what is important to them. The siren's call is intoxicating for all those constituents, including the Ruffed Grouse Society, the Wilderness Society, turkey hunters, mountain biker groups, nature and plant societies, roadless advocates, and the timber industry.

But a few years ago, those groups found common ground and forged an unprecedented



Augusta County farmer Dave Horn heads up a steep slope on Shenandoah Mountain to hunt for grouse.

agreement that recognizes the importance of all that is special about Shenandoah Mountain and several other special wild areas. Groups that don't ordinarily work together and that are often in opposition were able to come together, compromise, and support each other's goals for how the larger GWNF should be managed. It was not easy, but the end result could serve as a model for the nation. This unusual collaboration resulted in an agreement signed by 14 groups that was submitted to the GWNF as joint comments on the draft management plan in October 2011.



Elkhorn Lake on the North River was built to provide municipal water for Staunton and serves as a popular fishing spot for warm- and cold-water angling.



Above, cerulean warbler populations are declining faster than any other warbler species; the bird requires old growth forest habitat. Background photo ©Lynn Cameron



Shenandoah Mountain offers some of the most challenging mountain biking in the East.

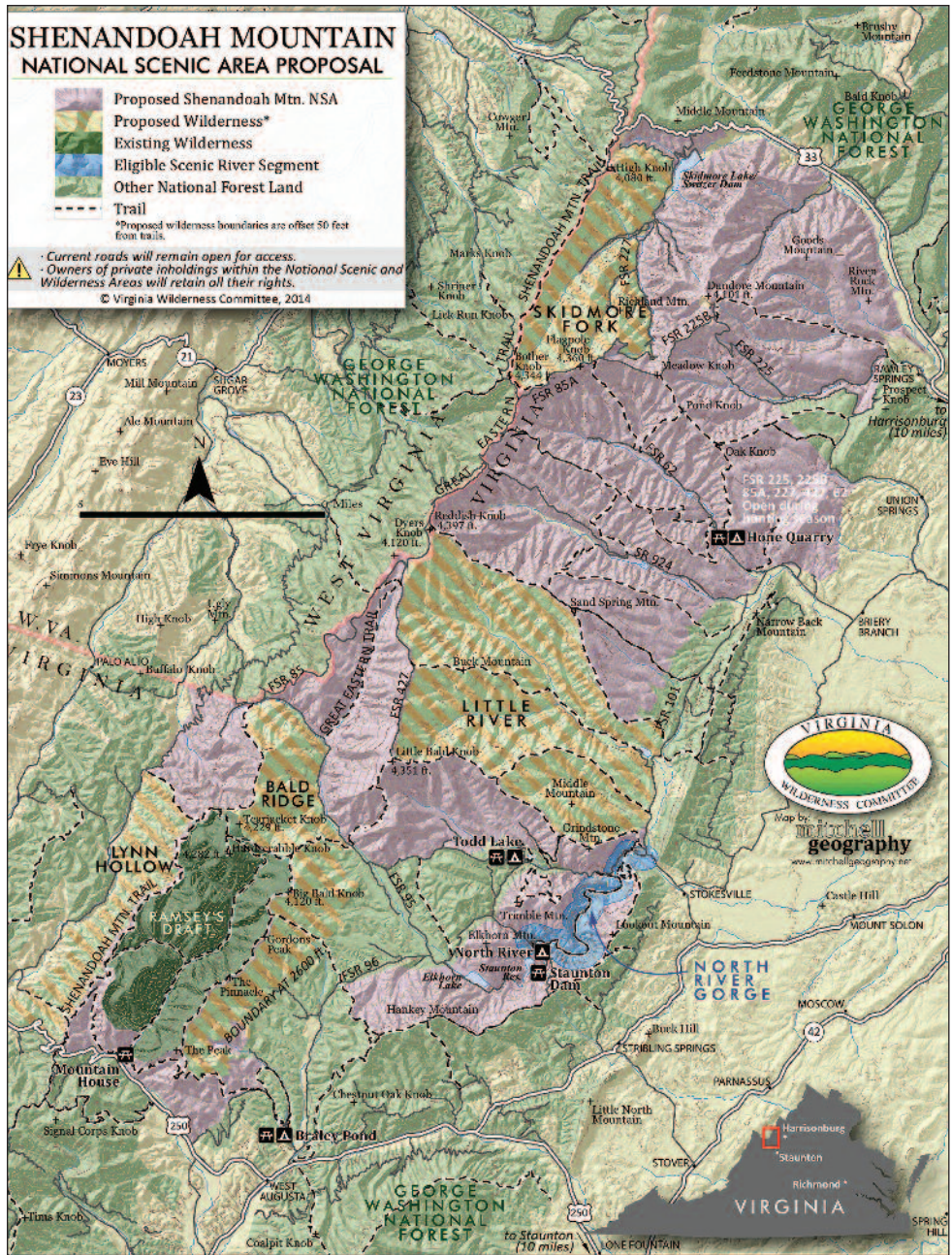
The GWNF stakeholders' agreement—among the first of its kind in the eastern United States—would protect 90,000 acres of Shenandoah Mountain as a combination of National Scenic Area and Wilderness, Beech Lick Knob as Wilderness, and allow for several additions to existing Wilderness Areas. It espouses large-scale landscape planning using a “tiers of management” approach. Protected old growth wilderness and the unique flora and fauna that flourish there sits at the center of the map. As one moves toward the perimeter, more levels of active management

are supported, including mountain bike trails as well as commercial timber harvesting and prescribed burning—both of which increase wildlife habitat for many species.

The various groups see this collaboration as a win-win, helping each to achieve goals that are difficult or even impossible to accomplish alone. But how did this all come together?

Several years ago a number of forest users and activists attended an event hosted by the George Washington National

Finding Common Ground



The proposed National Scenic Area, with four embedded Wilderness Areas, will protect core wild spaces while supporting active forest management, timber harvest, and prescribed burning in other areas. The plan was crafted by stakeholders representing diverse interests.



© Marek Smith

Forest stakeholders' group. The Shenandoah plan is one of nine mega-projects that, together, form the overall GWNF management plan. In addition to forest users and activists, the GWNF stakeholder process included review and comment by federal and state natural resource agencies—including this Department.

Each national forest is required to have a management plan outlining specific planned uses and unique places and situations of that forest. Like all government planning documents, the Forest Service plans are required to be periodically updated based upon public input and research. To a number of forest users along all points of the spectrum, each iteration of the plan designed to appease certain user groups contained “poison pills” for other groups. The various plans, they thought, would divide, not unite, and the result would be continuous argument with no solutions.

This lose-lose scenario became particularly obvious to Mark Miller, field director for the Virginia Wilderness Committee, and John Hancock, a timber industry executive and Virginia Forestry Association board member. They began talking with other forest users—mountain bikers, wildlife managers, wilderness advocates, hunters and equestrians—and decided they had enough in common to try to work together on something that was a win-win based on identifying shared goals.

And so they began meeting, and meeting, and meeting. “Nobody thought it would work,” remembers Miller. “We met for 18 months, poured over maps, hashed out agreements, wrote a draft that most of the group accepted with a minority report as well. The plan went through 16 different iterations!”

When they were finished, they had a groundbreaking landscape management plan that called for tiers of management ranging from hands-off roadless wilderness, to areas designated for commercial timber harvesting. It was unprecedented. When the diverse forest users stepped back and looked at their fellow planners, they realized that they were in a room full of friends. “When we started, the air was thick with tension,” remembers Miller. “Now when we meet we laugh and joke. I think part of the reason that we have been successful is that people were committed to making this work. We are the most pragmatic people that I have ever worked with. Everyone is willing to listen and admit that the others have issues that are just as valued as their own.”

In the end it came down to talking *with* and not *at* each other, and coming to the realization that on a forest of 1.1 million acres there is plenty for all. The GWNF, within a two-hour drive of ten million people, can meet the needs of almost everyone. There is the ability to engage in permanent protection that creates wildlife habitat in old growth areas, as well as active management for timber harvesting and the wild animals and birds that require early successional growth forests. It is worth noting that some 65 species of birds and mammals are in significant decline due to an imbalance of forest age classes where older forest currently dominates the Appalachians.

Finding common ground relies upon trust and compromise. On Shenandoah Mountain, perimeter wilderness lines were pulled back slightly to allow mountain bikers and game carts access to the mountain. In the final proposal, no roads will be closed, and no new roads created within sections that are proposed as wilderness areas, and more perimeter areas are now designated as timber management areas.

Once the stakeholder agreement had been created and signed by all groups, it had to be submitted. Despite 18 months of progress, distrust sometimes crept into the act of implementation. Which would come first: protection and preservation, or timber management? Each side worried that they might support the other and then be left without support for their cause. Finally the wilderness advocates stepped up and proffered to get the ball rolling by publicly supporting timber management and the creation of young forest if forestry groups would support expanded wilderness and scenic area legislation before Congress. Agreed!



Hikers marvel at a waterfall near Hone Quarry Recreation Area.

© Lynn Cameron



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Shenandoah Mountain has 150 miles of trails, many with scenic vistas like this one at Cliff Trail on Hone Quarry Recreation Area.

“The most difficult thing for all of the groups in this process was keeping our eye on the prize, because we all sometimes fall back into our shells and speak of our own needs,” Miller acknowledges. But the success in this project was the recognition by us that there are many needs and the forest can meet most of those needs.” In addition to the stakeholder signatories, over 200 civic, religious, and business groups have signed on to support permanent protection of Shenandoah Mountain.

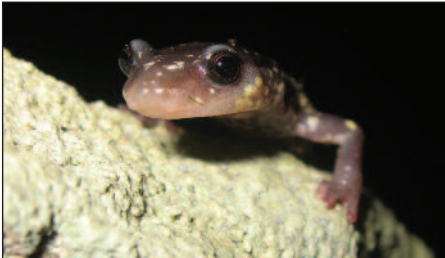
A part of the collaborative process has been the collective recognition that there are some uses of the forest that will never be compatible with the stakeholders’ aims. As the Forest Service plan awaits approval, there are still threats to Shenandoah Mountain and to the forest in general. At the top of the list is the specter of hydraulic fracturing for natural gas. Much of Shenandoah Mountain sits over Marcellus Shale deposits, where natural gas deposits lie. Fracking, as the process is called, could destroy habitat in both the old and the new growth forests, endanger wildlife, create erosion in streams, threaten ground water, and insert a non-traditional and harmful use into the nation’s largest non-fragmented Eastern forest. Unfortunately, fracking is also under consideration by the Forest Service as a use alongside the Shenandoah Mountain proposal in the soon-to-be released plan.

The content of the final GWNF plan will reveal whether the agency took the collaborative work of the Shenandoah



© Richard Hottel

Wake Robin trillium illustrates the great biodiversity found here.



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Cow Knob salamander, at high risk for extinction, is found almost exclusively on Shenandoah Mtn.

Mountain stakeholders and other public groups seriously. Either way, the grassroots movement has created a united citizen effort to protect and maintain a place that is universally recognized as important and remarkable. Shenandoah Mountain is not a common place; in fact, it is a globally unique place. As such, it has provided common ground upon which citizens from all walks of life can rally.

Outdoor writer Nancy Sorrells lives on 10 acres in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley with her husband Randy, two dogs, and two cats.