



Preserving the Back Country Area of the Morgan-Monroe/Yellowwood State Forest as a High Conservation Value Forest

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I am writing on behalf of the Sierra Club Hoosier Chapter to encourage you to preserve the Back Country Area (BCA) of the Morgan-Monroe / Yellowwood State Forest as a High Conservation Value Forest. Designating this area as a HCVF would allow a large area of forest to be returned to old growth condition and would provide a future reference for other forest areas that are being actively managed in order to assess the ecological impacts of timber harvesting, invasive species, and climate change on both managed and unmanaged tracts of forest.

Primary old-growth forests provide many benefits, yet their presence in Indiana is rare and they occur only in small, isolated patches. While much of Indiana's state forest area is maturing, these older successional stages are not well represented. The benefits of such areas include climate change mitigation, carbon sequestration, biological diversity, and resiliency (Bishop et al, 2021).

Climate Change Mitigation & Carbon Sequestration

In light of the recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which highlights the urgency we now face in the midst of the climate crisis, we must take immediate action to lower carbon in our atmosphere in a myriad of ways. One way to begin mitigating the impacts of climate change is to use forests - particularly old growth - to sequester carbon. While much attention is given to tropical forests, temperate and boreal forests of the United States remove enough atmospheric CO₂ to reduce annual net emissions by 11%. Further, intact and/or older forests have a much higher potential for atmospheric CO₂ removal and carbon sequestration. "Growing existing forests intact to their ecological potential—termed proforestation—is a more effective, immediate, and low-cost approach that could be mobilized across suitable forests of all types." (Moomaw et al., 2019)

Biological Diversity and Forest Resilience

Between the years of 2014 and 2018, the Indiana Forest Alliance organized an "Ecoblitz" in order to document the biological diversity present in an over 900 acre tract of land within the BCA. Over 3000 species were identified in the forest including 40 rare, threatened, or endangered species and over 80 that had not been found in Indiana previously. The average

age of dominant trees were found to be around 110 years old, with some over 200 years old. They determined that the BCA is an ideal space to be restored to “old growth” condition because it has a large number of large older trees, standing dead trees, and woody debris that are typical of eastern old growth hardwood forests.

Old growth forests have a higher level of resilience due to the complexity of their structure and ecology. As it stands, Indiana’s State Forests currently contain areas where some trees are over 100 years old, but many of these trees have the potential to live for several hundred years. By allowing 10% of these forests to mature into old growth forests with a wide range of tree ages, the State would increase biodiversity and resilience to overcome the increased instances of weather extremes and pests that we will see as the climate continues to shift (O’Hara et al, 2013; Seidl 2014).

Due to all of these reasons, we at the Sierra Club Hoosier Chapter urge you to preserve the Back Country Area (BCA) of the Morgan-Monroe / Yellowwood State Forest as a High Conservation Value Forest for the benefit of all Hoosiers - present and future.

REFERENCES

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