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## **Sixteen residents, small business owners, local organizations across PA Wilds earn awards**

*PA Wilds Planning Team recognizes outstanding efforts in sustainable tourism development*

April 18 – A small group of business owners, citizens and organizations from across the 12 ½ county Pennsylvania Wilds region have earned awards for their contributions in sustainable tourism development.

The PA Wilds Initiative, a state-local collaborative effort, aims to grow the nature and heritage tourism industry across 12 ½- counties of rural Pennsylvania as a way to help diversify local economies, revitalize communities and improve quality of life.

Each year, the PA Wilds Planning Team, a guiding body for the Initiative, gives out a small number of “Champion of the Pennsylvania Wilds” awards to recognize outstanding efforts related to the Initiative’s main components -- economic development, planning, community revitalization, community character stewardship and conservation.

The Planning Team consists of more than 50 partners and stakeholders from across the PA Wilds, including county governments, economic development organizations, state and federal partners, and heritage and tourism organizations. The region includes the counties of Warren, McKean, Potter, Tioga, Lycoming, Clinton, Cameron, Forest, Jefferson, Elk, Clearfield, Clarion and northern Centre.

Award winners were recognized with a wooden plaque at the Planning Team’s annual luncheon, which was held in St. Marys on April 28. In addition to these award winners, county commissioners from around the region were recognized for their ongoing support for the PA Wilds Initiative.

### **2011 CHAMPION OF THE PENNSYLVANIA WILDS AWARD WINNERS**

#### **Michelle Bogacki, Ridgway Main Street Program**

*Elk County*

Attend one of the PA Wilds Planning Team’s bi-monthly meetings and you’d probably mistake Michelle Bogacki, Ridgway’s Main Street Manager, for a core member. She’s not. She’s just taken it upon herself to get involved in the Pennsylvania Wilds Initiative in a major way. She regularly speaks up about issues, offers to take on assignments, and gives thorough reports on whatever new project she’s helping with. Michelle has the same reputation as a Main Street Manager. It is not unusual to find her sweeping sidewalks to keep downtown Ridgway pristine; or pulling her wagon behind her in the summer watering plants; or escorting the PA Wilds

Small Business Ombudsman from business to business to explain the latest grants available. Michelle is a shining example of what one person can do to make a difference in their community and region. She wholeheartedly embraces the PA Wilds concepts and understands how attracting visitors to our area can help diversify our economy and revitalize our communities. Most recently, Michelle has developed a line of merchandise utilizing the PA Wilds logo to meet demand and further brand the region, and is helping to create a larger merchandising plan for the Pennsylvania Wilds. Be sure to check out her t-shirts, tote bags and hats at the Ridgway Welcome Center.

### **Kurt Smith, Sq. Spaces One, Ltd.**

*Warren County*

Downtown revitalization is something we work on a lot in our region. The Pennsylvania Wilds has many historic downtowns with incredible architecture. These structures are part of our history and help define us as a unique place in America. Like many downtowns across the country, ours have struggled as jobs moved to China and tenants moved to strip malls. State programs and local efforts, such as Main Street and Elm Street, have gone a long way at revitalizing our downtowns, but at the end of the day it takes regular people with good ideas reinvesting in their downtowns to really bring them back to life. It takes guts, passion, discipline and faith to look around at a glut of empty rental spaces and say: I am going to buy one of these buildings, invest a tidy sum to make it energy efficient and up to code while protecting its historic character, because I know in the long run, this is a good investment for me and my community. Someone has to go first, to take that leap that shows others what is possible. In Warren, one of those firsts was Kurt Smith. Not only did he transform three derelict downtown buildings with an uncertain future in a way that is in step with the PA Wilds Design Guide, he went out of his way to collaborate with young entrepreneurs (all outdoor tourism businesses!) to fill his commercial spaces. He met them half-way so they could get their businesses off the ground. "I believe that by providing support and flexibility to these tenants, so they can operate their business successfully, is what has been key to making it work," Smith said recently. "It really becomes a partnership – their success becomes my success." Kurt has filled all of his completed commercial and residential spaces downtown. Kurt has willingly shared his story with us and "lessons learned" so others could benefit from his experience. We wish him the best of luck and can only hope he's got other projects in mind.

### **Rick Henrich, Rock, River & Trail Outfitters**

*Clinton County*

Early studies on the PA Wilds stressed that if we wanted to grow nature tourism here, we had to improve access to the many wild places in our region. Two million acres of public land and thousands of miles of land and water trails can be daunting to an outsider. For the last seven years, Rick Henrich has helped meet this challenge. Since opening his Lock Haven outfitting business and outdoor gear store in 2004, Rick has helped unlock the Pennsylvania Wilds for hundreds of residents and visitors. An experienced guide, Rick services an area from the West Branch to Pine Creek Valley to elk country and beyond. Rick often partners with state park and forest managers to offer outdoor programming to the public, and encourages all of his customers to be good stewards of the natural areas they visit. Rick was one of the first business owners in the region to embrace the concept of the PA Wilds and to utilize the PA Wilds logo in his advertising, and he has gone out of his way to collaborate with tourism stakeholders to move the PA Wilds Initiative forward. Rick partners with other businesses for his trips, helping to pass his foot traffic their way. We are fortunate to have Rock, River & Trail Outfitters operating in our region and wish Rick and his staff the best of luck for many years to come.

## **Brenda Adams Weyant**

*Elk, Forest, Jefferson and Clarion counties*

Partnerships and collaboration are hallmarks of the Pennsylvania Wilds Initiative. You can't grow nature and heritage tourism across 12 ½ counties without working together -- and working hard. Brenda Adams Weyant knows something about it. For four years she has held a critical role helping to support the Clarion River Municipal Partnership. The CRMP brings together four counties and multiple stakeholders at the state and federal level to coordinate recreational investments along the Clarion River. The project was launched with the recommendations of the Clarion River Recreation Assessment completed in 2007 by Fermata, Inc. under Brenda's leadership. Two of the most significant aspects of the effort are the development of two color river trail maps and an "Access Improvements and Sign Plan" for the 78 mile water trail from the headwaters in McKean County to upper reaches of the Piney Reservoir in Clarion County. Brenda was hired as a contractor for the project but went above and beyond by donating many hours to the cause. Assisting CRMP municipal leadership, she continues to coordinate the involvement of many partners in the CRMP and to give generously of her time and expertise even though her formal contract on the project has concluded. We applaud the continued accomplishments of the CRMP and want to thank Brenda for her dedication to the project.

## **Julia McCray, Northwest Great Outdoors Visitor Bureau; Forest County IDA**

*Forest County*

Forest County is one of the least-populated counties in the Pennsylvania Wilds, yet it is making tremendous gains in sustainable tourism development. Pull back the curtain and one of the key people you'll find is Julia McCray. Julia works for both the Northwest Great Outdoors Visitor Bureau and the Forest County Industrial Development Authority. She has been instrumental in many projects, including working with her employers, PA DCNR and her county commissioners to create an in-county tourism promotion presence by refurbishing and staffing a visitor center in Tionesta. The new center is something the county has been working to establish for several years and its success is already evident. Visitation has steadily increased since it reopened in 2009. Julia has also strengthened relations with the U.S. Forest Service, a major stakeholder in the area, by becoming a vendor for various permits and passes visitors need on the Allegheny National Forest. Julia also helped manage an important county-wide Tourism Assessment Study funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission, and today is helping implement its findings along with key partner the Northwest Regional Planning Commission. Most recently this included assisting with the creation of a new county website, and leading a team from Forest County to the "Balancing Nature and Commerce in Communities that Neighbor Public Lands" workshop at the National Conservation Training Center in Sheperdstown, W.VA. We look forward to seeing more great projects come out of Forest County.

## **James V. Brown Library**

*Lycoming County*

The James V. Library made one of the most fun and creative contributions to the PA Wilds Initiative last year when it unveiled a new, permanent "PA Wilds Collection" at its library in Williamsport. The collection, in the works for two years, includes books, DVDs and magazines for adults and children; as well as maps, trail guides, backpacks, fishing poles and tackle boxes – all dealing with PA Wilds and outdoor activities. The collection is set up in the library's Rotunda Room under a sign that reads "Call of the Wilds." Backpacks affixed with the PA Wilds logo hang nearby on an antler coat rack, and reading chairs are set up around a tent. All items in the collection can be checked-out. On Friday afternoons, a story time is held in the tent, bringing the wonders of the PA Wilds to children who may not have had a chance yet to experience them first hand. By engaging children in the outdoors at a young age, the library is helping develop our future campers, hikers, and stewards of the PA

Wilds. The PA Wilds team was delighted to hear of the new exhibit. It demonstrates how libraries can be a partner in sustainable tourism development and educating the public on what the PA Wilds is all about; and also serves as an excellent model that could be used in other educational settings. The collection was made possible by a Community & Economic Development Grant from former Sen. Roger Madigan and a Library Services and Technology Act grant from the Office of Commonwealth Libraries. Be sure to visit the library in Williamsport and check it out!

### **Peggy Durant, PA Wilds Vacation Rentals**

#### *Clearfield County*

The success of the Pennsylvania Wilds Initiative is tied to the idea that residents will take initiative. State agency partners like DCNR and DCED have made investments in visitor infrastructure and helped us create useful, voluntary resources (the PA Wilds logo, the PA Wilds Design Guide) to help us grow our region's nature and heritage tourism industry in a responsible way, but it is up to us – the people who live and work in the region -- to put these resources to work in our own communities. Peggy Durant has done an incredible job at this. Peggy owns and manages three rental properties – a cabin, a bed and breakfast, and a downtown suite. She uses the PA Wilds logo in her print and online marketing campaigns and goes out of her way to promote the region's assets and relay visitation information back to her visitor bureau so others can learn from it. Peggy also serves on the Clearfield Revitalization Committee and the Clearfield County Recreation and Tourism Authority Hotel Tax Committee. She was instrumental in creating a system to ensure that every local business working on façade or signage improvements was introduced to the PA Wilds Design Guide; and to having Design Guide use be a requirement for the organization's façade and signage grants – a first for the region!

### **Curt Weinhold**

#### *Potter County*

Curt Weinhold is a PA Wilds Juried Artisan. He is also an avid outdoorsman who wholeheartedly believes in the PA Wilds, environmental stewardship and community service. When he applied to the PA Wilds Artisan Initiative program, he summarized his artistic approach this way: “My philosophy is to encourage preservation and wise usage of scenic and natural resources and to provide those who view my work with a sense of wonder and appreciation of our region's natural beauty.” This idea – of promoting an area while also encouraging better stewardship of it – touches on some of the core ideas behind the Pennsylvania Wilds Initiative. Suffice it to say Curt's photographs live up to his philosophy. Fortunately for us, Curt is always volunteering his camera and time to support the PA Wilds and other community organizations. He has supported the PA Wilds Artisan Initiative in many ways including taking professional photographs of other artisans work so they would have high-quality photographs to use for marketing purposes (see their work and Curt's at [www.PAwildsArtisans.com](http://www.PAwildsArtisans.com)). Curt also volunteers for dozens of groups in Potter County and often provides them with photographs of their events for use in marketing, promotion and reporting. We hope he never puts down his camera.

### **Jersey Shore High School Outdoor Club**

#### *Lycoming County*

The Pennsylvania Wilds team is always looking for new ways to engage our region's youth about the outdoors, to help them understand how our natural assets are related to jobs, stewardship, and personal health and well-being. A group of students and teachers on the eastern side of the region created an excellent model for this type of work when they launched the Jersey Shore Area High School Outdoor Club five years ago. Health and physical education teacher Eric Hess and social studies teacher Jim Smith founded the effort and remain its

advisors. The main goal of the club is to get kids outside so they can form a connection to the land and become its next stewards. The club also aims to promote life-long, outdoor recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, biking and kayaking. A Future Fisherman Foundation grant helped the group get started, allowing them to purchase nine kayaks, one canoe, 10 fly fishing outfits and 10 fly fishing kits. That funding was augmented by a \$5,000 grant from the PA Fish & Boat Commission. The club has proven to be very popular – about 130 students have joined. And best of all, the club advisors say it is working. They report seeing kids years after graduation with kayaks or bikes strapped to their vehicles, heading for local trails. We can only hope similar clubs pop up in other places around the region!

### **Keystone Elk Country Alliance**

#### *Elk County*

The Keystone Elk Country Alliance ([www.ExperienceElkCountry.com](http://www.ExperienceElkCountry.com)) is a non-profit wildlife conservation organization that was formed in December 2009 to assist DCNR in completing the new Elk Country Visitor Center in Benezette. Under this robust public-private partnership, DCNR has an agreement with KECA to manage the state-owned Center with operations and educational programming support from DCNR. In a very short period of time, KECA managed to raise funds and provide leadership to bring the project to fruition. The life blood of their organization is a personally committed active Board of Directors lead by John Geissler (the “Sheriff”) and enthusiastic President and CEO Rawley Cogan. Board officers and their families were at the Center every weekend this past fall greeting visitors and doing whatever needed doing to make the facility’s launch a success. KECA is supported by incredibly passionate and dedicated volunteers who greet visitors, direct traffic, work the cash register and rove the Center grounds to ensure the safety of elk watchers on the Center’s trails and viewing areas. KECA is also the energy behind annual fundraising banquets to support Center operations and improve elk habitat. With a small and mighty staff, the organization reaches out to a broad array of audiences including school districts, who have found the Center to be an excellent outdoor classroom. Since it opened its doors, more than 800 students have visited to experience an array of conservation education programs, some offered with support of the PA Game Commission. KECA has also worked hard to pass the center’s robust foot traffic – some 52,000 people in its first 8 months of operation – to local businesses. They have made a strong effort to incorporate locally-crafted artisan products and local vendors into their gift shop whenever possible. We are fortunate to have a premier elk watching and conservation center in our region, and even more fortunate to have such a talented and dedicated organization partnering with the state to assure its future sustainability and success.

### **Sylvan Heritage Council**

#### *Cameron County*

Several years ago, the PA Wilds hosted a “Balancing Nature & Commerce” workshop; small teams from different communities were invited to attend and work on a community “vision to action” project with some of the country’s leading experts in sustainable tourism. The Sylvan Heritage Council was born out of that experience, and they have gone on to do incredible things in Cameron County. They’ve worked with the Emporium Borough to purchase new welcome signs; worked with PennDOT to incorporate the Design Guide into a local bridge project; and have donated time and resources to numerous local beautification and clean-up efforts. The Sylvan Heritage Council was also instrumental in the recent Cameron County Canvas Project, which brought muralist Michael Pilato to Emporium to paint pictures of thirteen inspiring local residents (chosen by the community) on buildings around town. The project brought people together, created pride of place and established a new public art tourism asset for the region, which will no doubt be enjoyed by residents and visitors for many years to come.

## **Steve Kronenwetter, Wapiti Woods Guest Cabins**

### *Elk County*

Establishing a region as an authentic outdoor tourism destination doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to get tourism assets in place, to plan for increased visitation, and to establish branding. A lot of effort is put into encouraging small business start-ups, but the reality is, in the very beginning, they are few and far between because of the uncertainty involved. Everyone may buy into the big picture of where things will be in 10 years, but it takes a special kind of person to go first and help us get there. Steve Kronenwetter was one of those firsts. He and his wife, Coleen, opened Wapiti Woods in 2003, when many people were just beginning to hear about the Pennsylvania Wilds. A need for lodging in elk country was noted in various studies and the Kronenwetters rose to the challenge, building six modern cabins on a beautiful 40-acre spread not far from Winslow Hill, where the new elk center sits today. The Kronenwetters built their business the old fashioned way: through hard work and perseverance. Their signs and buildings are models of good design in the region, and they continue to go above and beyond to unlock the wonders of the PA Wilds to visitors and residents alike. Steve has donated time behind the scenes to numerous business and tourism development efforts. The pride the Kronenwetters take in their business and in the region inspires it in others. They deserve all the success their cabins bring.

## **Ross Porter, Mansion District Inn, Smethport mayor**

### *McKean County*

The Pennsylvania Wilds is not just known for its tremendous natural assets; heritage tourism is big here, too. Visitors appreciate our rich oil and lumber history and our incredible architecture. Ross Porter, a former high school history teacher and mayor of Smethport, has gone above and beyond to improve heritage tourism locally. He helped secure and execute two grants, from the Lumber Heritage Region and PA DCNR, for local heritage projects. The first led to the creation of Smethport's "Mansion District Walking Tour" brochure, which showcases significant historical mansions and structures within the Borough. The second led to the creation of 10 historical site signs, which have been placed at various locations throughout the Borough. Ross used the PA Wilds Design Guide in creating the signage. Ross was also instrumental in helping Smethport to become the first Heritage Community in the state. Ross and his wife, Jovanna, share a passion for history and a love for the area that two years ago led them to convert their private home into an exceptional bed and breakfast, The Mansion District Inn, allowing visitors to experience what it was like to live as a lumber or oil baron of the late 1890s-early 1900s era. We can't wait to see what they do next!

## **Sandy Mateer, Redbank Renaissance, Inc.**

### *Clarion County*

New Bethlehem, Clarion County and the entire Redbank Valley area is on the move. Look behind the scenes and you'll find Sandy Mateer. Through the creation of Redbank Renaissance Inc., Sandy has helped galvanize community volunteers and local businesses around a multi-faceted revitalization agenda that includes establishing a vibrant Main Street Program; a façade program that embraces the PA Wilds Design Guide; and forming an Artists' Cooperative to provide a cost-effective central location for area artists and crafts persons. Renaissance Inc. is also responsible for new welcome signage in New Bethlehem that ties them into the PA Wilds. Sandy and her committed group of community leaders and volunteers have also keyed in on the economic potential of water and land trail opportunities that exist along the Redbank Creek and rail trail corridor. With the help of the Allegheny Valley Lands Trust (AVTA), who assisted with corridor acquisition and organizational development, they've formed the Redbank Valley Trails Association to advance a 42-mile tri-county rail trail project that parallels Redbank Creek from the Allegheny River in Southern Clarion County,

touching on northern Armstrong County and continuing east to Brookville in Jefferson County. Under Sandy's leadership, a trail town study is also underway to position New Bethlehem as a demonstration Trail Town. The trail group has made tremendous progress in a short period of time. We salute these incredible efforts and thank Sandy for her role in helping make them happen.

### **Lycoming College Clean Water Institute**

#### *Lycoming County*

Stewardship of the region's natural assets is a key aspect of the Pennsylvania Wilds Initiative. Dr. Mel Zimmerman and his students at the Lycoming College Clean Water Institute have been excellent stewards of one of the region's key assets, the Pine Creek, by conducting a significant stream assessment project on the creek and its tributaries. In Pennsylvania, there are roughly 45,000 miles of stream that have never been assessed by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission for trout habitat. The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission is increasing efforts to assess these streams, prioritizing them based on the likelihood wild trout would be found and the risk the stream faces from human degradation and other uses such as gas extraction. Beginning in 2010 the PA Fish and Boat Commission (PAFBC) worked with Lycoming College to train the professors and students in the protocols used by the Commission. Over a three month period, Lycoming College completed 39 assessments. One of the assessments provided critical data that led to changes in the way a proposed gas pipeline could cross the stream so as to have less surface impact (instead of crossing the stream, the pipeline had to go underneath it). In 2011 Dr. Zimmerman and interns from Lycoming College will be working with the PAFBC to assess the remaining streams in the Pine Creek basin. We applaud their efforts; their research will help people in many different fields better understand this important watershed and how best to manage and protect it.

### **Marsh Creek Greenway Partnership**

#### *Tioga County*

This project is a collaborative public-private partnership effort to connect the current Northern terminus of the Pine Creek Rail Trail at Wellsboro Junction to downtown Wellsboro via a greenway corridor that can provide watershed restoration, local business development and recreation benefits. The effort has specific goals and objectives: to connect Pine Creek Rail Trail with the Borough of Wellsboro; to provide flood mitigation to Stokesdale; to restore Marsh Creek; and to enhance Wellsboro-Corning & Tioga Central Railroad. Establishing this greenway corridor for the future is important and a priority referenced in the Tioga County Greenway Plan. The project has been a challenging one, becoming more so recently given pressures from the developing natural gas industry that is very active in Tioga County. Despite this, the partner group has remained dedicated to their mission, meeting monthly, to continue to move their vision forward. These partners include Grant Cavanaugh representing the Stokesdale Community; Mary Worthington and Julie Van Ness representing the Wellsboro business community; Tom Myles, Tioga Central Railroad; Mark Hamilton, Tioga County Commissioner; PA DEP Northcentral Region; PennDot District 3; PA DCNR Tioga State Forest, Renee Carey, North Central PA Conservancy and Jim Weaver, Tioga County Planning. The PA Wilds Planning Team appreciates your dedication and hard work on this important project.

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