

# Laurel Highlands Conservation Landscape Initiative

## Fast Facts



The Laurel Highlands is one of Pennsylvania's most notable and breathtaking natural treasures. Interspersed with small, historic communities, the region features magnificent mountains, rushing streams with breathtaking waterfalls, and rolling hillsides with picturesque farmlands.

### Counties:

Somerset, Fayette, Westmoreland and parts of Cambria and Bedford

### Sub-Landscapes:

Laurel Ridge, Chestnut Ridge, Great Allegheny Passage, Stonycreek-Quemahoning,

## What is a Conservation Landscape Initiative?

The Conservation Landscape Initiative is a place-based strategy for natural resource stewardship and advocacy in key landscapes across our state where there are strong natural assets and local readiness and support for land conservation, locally-driven planning, and community economic revitalization efforts.

## Vision

By 2015, the unique character of the Laurel Highlands is protected and the region and its communities are recognized as world-class heritage/recreation destinations as well as wonderful places to work and live.

## About the Laurel Highlands

Located an hour east of Pittsburgh, the Laurel Highlands is defined by the Allegheny Mountains geologic region encompassing the Chestnut, Laurel and Allegheny Ridges as well as Negro Mountain which includes Pennsylvania's highest point, Mount Davis, at 3,213 feet above sea level. These ridges, once as tall as the Andes Mountains, have been carved into deep and scenic gorges, including two of the deepest gorges in the state where the Youghiogheny and Conemaugh Rivers cut through the Laurel Ridge. The rugged terrain limited development and following the clear-cutting of the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a rich, diverse forest has grown which holds an abundant array of plants, wildlife, amphibians and birds and includes eight state parks and two state forests.

The **Laurel Ridge** includes seven of the state parks, Forbes State Forest and significant parcels of game lands which total over 100,000 acres and create a myriad of public recreational opportunities including hiking, mountain biking, hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching. Recreational resources include the 20,500 acre Ohiopyle State Park encompassing 14 miles of the Youghiogheny River Gorge, and offering dramatic overlooks and waterslides along with some of the finest whitewater opportunities east of the Mississippi River. Laurel Ridge State Park boasts the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail, one of Pennsylvania's three National Scenic Trails, that extends over 70 miles and traverses the highest elevations of any long-distance trail in the state.

The **Chestnut Ridge** and its foothills include Keystone State Park, Laurel Caverns Geological Park (Pennsylvania's longest and largest cave) and the Quebec Run Wild Area of Forbes State Forest.

The 150 mile **Great Allegheny Passage**, is part of a biking/hiking trail system that extends from Washington, DC to Pittsburgh. The trail passes through six trail towns within the Laurel Highlands each with their own unique history and charm.

The **Stonycreek-Quemahoning** includes a newly constructed whitewater park along the Stonycreek River with features to allow kayakers and kids on rafts to play even at low flow, the Flight 93 National Memorial and the Clear Shade Wild Area of Gallitzin State Forest.

## Resource History

The vast resources of raw materials in the Laurel Highlands, including iron ore, coal, clay, timber, fertile soils, waterpower and stone, served as catalysts for tremendous economic growth in industrial manufacturing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the 1900s small towns built by the coal companies sprouted around every mine. The 1910s and 1920s were very active decades for coal mining; more than 16 million tons of coal was produced per year in Cambria County alone. While the 1930s saw a major decline in bituminous coal production, the mining industry remained an important part of the region's economy through the 1980's and mining continues today.

Along with coal and steel other early industries included logging, grist mills and glass. Virtually the entire region was clear-cut in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the resulting environmental degradation helped to give rise to the conservation movement. Grist mills, used for processing grain, appeared in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and were found throughout the area, but relatively little grain is produced in the region today.

The area's factories also produced a variety of glass products, but little of the industry survives today. These rich natural resources that helped to fuel the industrial revolution are the same as those that we are conserving and promoting today. Ultimately these resources and our management of them will determine the region's long-term sustainability.

The juxtaposition of some of the state's most dramatic scenery, best recreational assets and proximity to Pittsburgh has made the Laurel Highlands a traditional vacation and tourism area. Increasingly the area attracts visitors from Washington D.C., Baltimore and Ohio and has growing appeal to a broad array of cultural and recreational visitors.

## The Plan

With the decline in its manufacturing base the Laurel Highlands has undergone dramatic change in the last century. While the region's towns have lost population and lag behind much of the state in economic development, the area is also impacted by un-planned development, second home development, and resurgence in resource extraction (coal mining, natural gas development). In spite of these challenges, the Laurel Highlands with its vast natural resources, magnificent mountain landscapes, rich historical and cultural assets, and proximity to major metropolitan areas is well positioned to benefit from sustainable tourism and industries that capitalize on the region's natural assets. These assets make the Laurel Highlands an exciting place to live, creating a broad economic development potential for attracting new businesses, young entrepreneurs and professionals to grow the asset connected communities.

The Laurel Highlands Conservation Landscape Initiative seeks to raise region's appeal and quality of life while crafting a model of sustainable development tied to the natural and cultural assets of the region. The initiative engage communities and partners in the area with state agencies and funding partners to conserve and protect the high quality assets and enhance the region's economic viability.

**Resource Protection:** The initiative seeks to conserve, restore and improve the ecological, cultural, historic and recreational resources of the region. Projects include: highlighting the Youghiogheny River through the development of a water trail; conservation of key lands adjacent to state parks and forests for watershed protection, wildlife habit and recreation; implementation of a comprehensive interpretive plan to enhance the visitor experience and infrastructure improvements for state park and forest amenities.

**Community Development:** The initiative seeks to revitalize core communities and expand local and regional economies through sustainable resource use and development. Projects include: a joint plan/implementation strategy between Ohiopyle Borough and Ohiopyle State Park, including strategic economic investments in borough businesses and infrastructure; visioning sessions in local communities to help these communities move toward implementing their vision of the future; and the Trail Town Program which seeks to connect the Great Allegheny Passage and the towns along the way to encourage visitors to enjoy these towns as part of their adventure, and to help local businesses benefit from the biking/hiking boom.

**Building a Constituency:** The initiative seeks to build capacity and constituency in the region to implement and maintain the community revitalization and sustainability efforts of the ecological, cultural, historic, and recreational resources. Projects include: strategy sessions with local government, business leaders, and residents; a region-wide summit; and raising general awareness of the issues important to the region; and engaging with communities to ensure the long-term viability of the Laurel Highlands.



### Project Partners include:

- Allegheny Trail Alliance
- Benedum Foundation
- Heinz Endowments
- Katherine Mabis McKenna Foundation
- Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau
- Lincoln Highway Heritage Corridor
- McCune Foundation
- National Road Heritage Area
- PA Department of Community & Economic Development
- PA Environmental Council
- PA Historical and Museum Commission
- Richard King Mellon Foundation
- Stonycreek-Quemahoning Initiative
- Trail Town Program - Progress Fund
- Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

### More Information

#### For more information please contact:

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