

### **Focus on rare plant and insect species missing from dialogue**

The Rockview land slated for divestment is one of the most ecologically important areas in Centre County. Some of the property's many conservation values are well known and understood—its value as a wild brown trout fishery, its recreational potential, its pockets of prime agriculture soils, its value as wildlife habitat for birds and mammals, its more visceral value as open space between Bellefonte and State College—while other conservation values are less publicly known, such as the site's rare terrestrial plant and insect communities. These rare communities resulted in a portion of the property being designated as a Biological Diversity Area of "exceptional significance" in the Centre County Natural Heritage Inventory.

According to the Natural Heritage Inventory, this site "contains some of the most intact examples of limestone-dependent natural community types to be found anywhere in Centre County, and these communities host a number of plant and animal species which are extremely uncommon in Pennsylvania, several of which are also globally rare." The Natural Heritage Inventory, while not bestowing protection to any of the areas listed, acts as a tool to increase informed and responsible decision-making regarding rare, threatened, and endangered species by our local decision makers.

Since 2005, when the public first became aware that a legislative process was underway to divest 1,800 acres of Rockview land north of I-99, ClearWater has been trying to inform the community about the exceptionality of the site. We are referring specifically to the limestone cliff plant communities, the barrens plant communities, patches of seven other rare forest types, and the rare butterfly species that are ecologically dependant on these plants. Ensuring the protection and continued viability of the Rockview land's rare plant and insect communities has been ClearWater's highest priority throughout our involvement in this process.

That is our reason for asserting that any transfer of these Rockview lands to new owners should have some mechanism in place that will periodically monitor these rare resources in order to ensure their continued protection through time. A conservation easement is a widely-recognized and time-tested tool used by the land trust community to accomplish this goal. ClearWater Conservancy is the local land trust that focuses on water and biodiversity conservation issues, and we have 30 years of experience using this conservation tool to protect over 1,500 acres of ecologically significant lands in central PA.

Differences of opinion on how to most appropriately manage and protect the rare species of this property have unfortunately divided this community. We have spent the last month or so exploring several potential avenues of compromise to gauge what might work and what might not, and we have gotten much constructive feedback that has helped to shape our thinking. The Board of Directors' official statement of January 14 can be read on our website at [www.clearwaterconservancy.org](http://www.clearwaterconservancy.org). Yet we remain open to creative and positive ways of solving this community challenge.

There are many important conservation aspects to this property, but the rarity of the site's resources is what makes it a community treasure. Regardless of the ownership and conservation easement decisions, the rare plant and insect communities should drive the ecosystem

management on this site. They deserve the local community's attention and meaningful protection.

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