DRAFT OpEd on Need for Better Outdoor Stewardship Funding in Indiana

A suggested title – A Solution is in Sight to Build Up our Parks and Wild Places

(Word Count = 527, Ideal length 500-700 words depending on newspaper)

Indiana’s beautiful natural areas may well be the state’s least-touted economic development asset. Worse, they are woefully underfunded, degrading the experience for the Hoosiers who visit state parks, preserves and recreation areas.

First, take note of the estimated $100 million backlog of maintenance projects at our state parks --our most visible natural places. The Indiana Department of Natural Resources owns and manages hundreds of outdoor spaces — state parks, state recreation areas, state forests, nature preserves, and state fish and wildlife areas. The buildings, picnic shelters, restrooms, inns, and trails at these sites must be constantly maintained for the enjoyment of the millions of visitors who use them every year. Yet state funding has not kept pace with the need. If Indiana does not address this need, the backlog will only grow and may result in many of DNR’s historic buildings and facilities being lost.

Second, recognize the serious underfunding of the President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust, named for one of America’s most conservation-minded presidents. It provides funding for the state to purchase new properties to set aside for recreation and wildlife conservation. But sadly, it has not received a meaningful state appropriation in nearly a decade, and revenue from the sale of the environmental license plate that partially funds the trust has considerably declined due to increased specialty plate competition.

Last, there’s the State Wildlife Action Plan and the Wildlife Diversity Program which support DNR efforts to protect and restore wildlife habitats and populations. Neither program receives dedicated state funds, apart from the funds taxpayers voluntarily contribute on their tax return for non-game and endangered wildlife. Dedicated state funding will allow Indiana to receive increased matching funding from federal wildlife programs, resulting in a significant funding boost for wildlife conservation in our state. The need for these improvements is great, but the competition for state funding is intense.

We encourage legislators to pursue creative ways to make meaningful investments in our state’s wildlife funding. The time is right. Lawmakers will develop a new two-year budget this year and we have a proposed solution to significantly boost needed funding without raising taxes. In particular, we encourage state legislators to dedicate the share of existing sales tax revenue that comes from the sale of outdoor equipment and sporting goods – things like camping equipment, hunting and fishing equipment, hiking equipment, and bicycling equipment — to state land, water, and wildlife conservation programs. That would mean a more reliable stream of funding—as much as $60 million annually on average—for programs that are vital to protecting Indiana’s wildlife and natural spaces. It makes sense: People who purchase outdoor gear to enjoy outdoor recreation in Indiana will get to see a portion of their purchases go toward protecting the natural places they enjoy.

If you love the outdoors, enjoy camping, bird watching, hiking, or any of a host of wonderful outdoor recreation opportunities, let your state lawmakers know that. Tell them these places matter to you and your family. Tell them it makes sense to invest in these places and the wildlife that call them home with revenue that comes from the sale of outdoor equipment. It’s a Hoosier common sense solution that will benefit Indiana now, and hopefully, for generations to come.

Signed,

Indiana Conservation Alliance and its member organizations:

Hoosier Environmental Council

Indiana Parks Alliance

Indiana Division Izaak Walton League

Sierra Club Hoosier Chapter