

Photo team gets award for work about forest

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WHITEFIELD -- A Whitefield couple has been recognized for its photo documentation of the proposed Maine Woods National Park & Preserve at the heart of the largest undeveloped forest in the eastern United States.



Lee Ann Szelog and her husband, Tom, of Whitefield, won an award for their Maine Woods National Park Photo-Documentation Project. Staff photo by Andy Molloy

Thomas and Lee Ann Szelog, a wildlife and natural landscape photography team, received a Restoration Leadership Award from the conservation group RESTORE: The North Woods "for their quiet but profound commitment to protecting as well as teaching us about Maine's natural environment."

"Every year we have an annual members gathering and give out few awards and this year wanted to recognize the work that they've done to bring attention to the proposed Maine Woods National Park proposal," said Jym St. Pierre, director of the Maine office of Restore. "Tom has spent a good deal of time roaming the Maine north woods and taking remarkable photographs of wildlife and we wanted to recognize him for that."

The proposed national park is top forestland in northwestern Maine and includes Aroostook, Somerset, Penobscot and Piscataquis counties. Roxanne Quimby, founder of the company Burt's Bees, has proposed to donate approximately 70,000 acres of her private land to the National Park Service to form the new national park. Her land lies to the east of Baxter State Park and is adjacent to the Penobscot River. In support of Quimby's proposal, state Sen. Cynthia Dill, D-Cape Elizabeth, formed a nonprofit organization in August that will work for creation of the park and accept donations. "This is a no-brainer for Maine," Dill said. "Acadia National Park was hard-fought when it was first introduced but, thankfully, people stayed the course, resulting in 3,100 jobs attributable to the park. The Friends of the Maine Woods plans to do the same."

Lee Ann Szelog said the photo documentation educates, inspires and motivates people through photographs and words to learn about this fragile ecosystem. Their project puts a face on the 3.2-million-acre proposed park, she said.

Thomas Szelog said the first step in moving the process along is a feasibility study. But several people and groups either oppose the study or have expressed skepticism about Quimby's plan, including Maine's two U.S. senators, Republicans Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe; U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud, D-East Millinocket; Gov. Paul LePage and the Maine Snowmobile Association, among others.

"If Congress says no to a feasibility study, then we'll just wait for another Congress (to take office)," Thomas Szelog said. "This isn't like a flavor of the month. It's something we'll be fighting for a long, long time."

His wife said there are very few unprotected wilderness areas in the country and for people to "turn their backs on such a magnificent ecosystem is shameful." "It's an ecosystem worthy of protection," she said. "If we don't protect it, it will get lost to commercial exploitation and private individuals. It's on the verge of destruction."

Thomas Szelog, a lifelong advocate for the protection of wildlife and its habitat, is the recipient of the Philip Hyde Award. The annual award is presented to photographers who work to preserve the condition of the natural environment through their photography.

Lee Ann Szelog spent 28 years as a marketing and training executive until 2008 when she founded Simply Put, a company specializing in presentations and programs to help people "live life rather than react to it by providing a refreshing focus on subjects including human relations, and wellness of the plant and ourselves."

Their first "dream home," Marshall Point Lighthouse in Port Clyde, is documented in their award-winning book, "Our Point of View -- Fourteen years at a Maine Lighthouse." Their second home, a log cabin in Whitefield, was featured in "By a Maine River -- A Year of Looking Closely." The book explores the natural beauty found in their own woodland backyard. Both books are published by Down East Books.

They said the photo documentation is still a work in progress. "We started it in 2007 and our goal is to have it published in 2016 for the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service," Thomas Szelog said.

People can see how the project is progressing through Szelog's photographs and journals at www.mainewoodsnationalpark.com. The couple also is working on a traveling art exhibit and multimedia presentation for businesses and organizations.

"This is a national issue," he said. "When you save a swath of land it impacts the planet. It doesn't stop at borders. You're saving a complete ecosystem."