



# Lehigh River Watershed CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT PLAN

Wildlands Conservancy 2003



## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF Wildlands Conservancy



*T*his *Lehigh River Watershed Conservation Management Plan* is a gift to the communities of the Lehigh River watershed – its people, its institutions, its businesses.

It is presented in the spirit of cooperation by Wildlands Conservancy and its many partners, sponsors, and friends, as well as by the principle funders of the effort: Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and The William Penn Foundation. This

document provides many benefits, one of which is that it is the lens through which the state, and others, will look when asked to fund projects relating to the natural, ecological, cultural, recreational, and historical assets of our beautiful watershed.

You might wonder who is “responsible” for the quality of this watershed. What entity cares for its precious natural and recreational aspects? What governmental department is watching over its parks and trails, its wetland and woodlands? What agency monitors its mountains, valleys, rivers, and open spaces? Who is charged with teaching the next generation – not to mention the current one – about its responsible stewardship?

The answer is not simple. Beyond our personal responsibilities in these matters, and beyond our personal reach, there remains an enormous amount to be dealt with. Some of these tasks are covered by various agencies of federal, state, county, and local governments. It’s interesting – and perhaps even alarming to some – to realize that not everything is covered by such agencies. One might also argue that government should *not* be involved with every issue. In any case, not everything that needs attention is getting it.

It occurred to the leadership of Wildlands Conservancy several years ago that, if there is to be a coordinated effort to maintain – or remedy, where needed – the health of the Lehigh River watershed, we will need a comprehensive plan. “Oh, good,” we heard, “just what we need: another plan.” Skepticism notwithstanding, we set about to create one ... and this plan is it.

Many plans, we are told, just look nice sitting on a shelf. Wildlands Conservancy is an organiza-

tion of doers. Our long-term goal is to implement this plan ... starting right now. It will take all we have – and more – to do it. As I said before, this plan is a gift to the community, and indeed it is. There is so much to do, so many needs, that it will take the entire watershed community to complete it.

In one sense, it will never be completed – certainly not just by Wildlands Conservancy alone. Among the plan's many valuable aspects is that it assembles, in one place, several useful tools. It provides a fundamental reference or orientation, as well as a platform from which one can view the larger needs. It is a compendium of assets, problems, and solutions. It is a motivator, providing impetus to tackling issues and problems.

The staff and board of Wildlands Conservancy are willing to do whatever our abilities and resources permit. Beyond that, we are willing to help foster and facilitate action among others. If you have read this far, perhaps you are one of those who will work with us – or independently of us – in implementing the recommendations of this plan. This is important work. The health and well-being of this community, this region, this state and country is dependent upon action of the type described in this plan.

Thanks to the many who worked to put this document together over the last three years. Many from Wildlands Conservancy staff and elsewhere spent untold hours helping to shape the document. The visionaries at The William Penn Foundation have for years been willing to invest in forward-looking projects like this one. The personnel at the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have been creatively supportive of this project from the outset. We appreciate the opportunity to work with these talented and progressive people.

*Tom Kerr*

*December 2003*

# Introduction



## ***THE LEHIGH RIVER***

The Lehigh River has been used and enjoyed by countless generations. From the first Native Americans to settle upon its banks, to the developers of the canals, locks, and dams which harnessed the power of the river, to the many industrialists who brought us iron, cement, and steel, to the many recreational users, to the resident wildlife – all of whom did – or do – depend on this important resource. The Lehigh River is part of our lives, part of our community. Over the span of years, this great resource has served us well. This plan and its recommendations, along with the support of the watershed community, will help us return the favor to our wonderful river and its unique watershed. While it may never again be labeled “pristine,” it can be returned to its former glory as the life-blood of our communities.

The Lehigh River watershed drains 1,345 square miles, encompasses 108 municipalities, and drains portions of ten counties in eastern Pennsylvania, including Lehigh, Northampton, Berks, Bucks, Carbon, Monroe, Luzerne, Schuylkill, Lackawanna, and Wayne in eastern Pennsylvania. The Lehigh River is approximately 103 miles long and is the second largest tributary to the Delaware River. The headwaters of the Lehigh River are located at Lehigh Marshes just north of Gouldsboro, Wayne County. The mouth of the river is located in the city of Easton, Northampton County.

The reach of the Lehigh River encompassing the Francis E. Walter Dam to Jim Thorpe has been designated a Pennsylvania Scenic River. This 32-mile section includes the Lehigh Gorge State Park, which is one of the most popular Class II and Class III whitewater-boating sections in the country. This attraction provides annual economic benefits to the state and local economy, and offers recreational opportunities to tens of thousands of people each year. The Lehigh River is also used as a raw water supply for hundreds of thousands of watershed residents in four river-side communities.

The river has historically functioned as a transportation route to markets in Philadelphia, New York, and elsewhere, for the coal from the Eastern Middle and Southern coalfields of Carbon and Luzerne counties. America’s Industrial Revolution was cradled in the valley of the Lehigh River, which is the only river in America to be privately owned. From 1827 to 1966 it was owned by the Lehigh Coal & Navigation Company. Since then, it has largely emerged from its industrial past to become much more naturally beautiful. Now, along the banks of the river, mountain

bikers and hikers are seen where there were once mules and canal boats hauling coal and other material to fuel the Industrial Revolution. Where dams once contained the mighty Lehigh, fishermen in great numbers are now seen reaping the harvest of a more-healthy stream. Since the passage of the Clean Water acts in the early 1970s, the water quality of the Lehigh River has dramatically improved, and our communities are starting to develop a sense of stewardship for the resource.

However, today the river still faces many challenges. Rapid growth – know as “suburban sprawl,” non-point source pollution, loss of critical wildlife habitat, loss of open space, loss of productive farmland, and abandoned mine drainage all impact the watershed adversely.

## **PROJECT GOALS**

In 2000, with funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and The William Penn Foundation, Wildlands Conservancy and its project partners began a three-year process to develop the Lehigh River Watershed Conservation Management Plan. In the broadest sense, this work will be the focus of Wildlands Conservancy and its many partners for the next decade, at least. In this sense, the plan will be a community asset. The ultimate goal of the project is the official acceptance of the plan by DCNR, and for the Lehigh River to be listed on the Pennsylvania Rivers Conservation Registry, making the entire Lehigh River watershed eligible for additional state funding to carry out the recommendations made in this plan.

Generally, the Lehigh River Watershed Conservation Management Plan:

- identifies the cultural, natural, biological, historical, and recreational resources of the Lehigh River and its watershed;
- identifies problems, as well as solutions to these problems; and
- provides a listing of prioritized recommendations that will preserve, protect, and enhance this important natural resource.

More specifically, the plan will guide the watershed community in:

- identifying and preserving critical natural habitat and open space;
- identifying and developing recreational features and corridors;
- assessing and addressing the region’s most critical environmental problems; and
- educating its citizens.

The plan is a result of several years of work and public interaction. The public input component included four public meetings, three steering committee meetings, three partnership meetings, and countless meetings and interviews with individuals, committees, municipalities, watershed organizations, watershed specialists, and agencies involved in the Lehigh River watershed.

With Implementation of key aspects of the Lehigh River Watershed Conservation Management Plan, the watershed community can work towards the future protection, preservation, and enhancement of the Lehigh River and its watershed.

## **REPORT LAYOUT**

The Lehigh River Watershed Conservation Management Plan is divided into several separate, but integrated, sections. They include an introduction, descriptions of the various components of the watershed including physical, cultural, historical, aquatic, land, biological, and recreational. These sections constitute the main body of the document, and characterize the resources within the watershed.

In addition, the report contains a section on conservation resources and tools, which outlines programs, funding, and tools available to help the watershed community implement the plan. The final section of the plan, entitled "Recommendations," details future projects and activities designed to enhance and protect the valuable and unique resources of the watershed.

