

— CONSTITUTIONAL ACTION TO PROTECT STATE LANDS —

To Honorable Co-Chairs Kissel, Mushinsky, and Members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee,

Living in New Haven, CT, I am delighted for the opportunity that nearby Sleeping Giant State Park affords residents to step away from the urban landscape and temporarily immerse themselves in wilderness tranquility. As author Zane Grey wrote, "It is here that I find the happiness that dwells in wilderness alone," a quote that certainly describes the wilderness-in-microcosm found in the Sleeping Giant. Indeed, seeing the grandeur of the Giant's trap rock ridges as they tower above the surrounding landscape and hiking atop its many rocky crags is good for the soul. The reputation of the Giant extends well beyond surrounding towns. In hiking through the Park, I continually meet people from out of state, all of whom come to take advantage of and enjoy the Park's 32 miles of rugged hiking trails. In fact, people from as far away as Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York visit the Park on a regular basis.

As a member of the Board of Directors of the Sleeping Giant Park Association (SGPA) and the Chair of its Hiking Committee, I am intimately familiar with Park and its extensive trail system. Like many people who frequently visit the Park, I take comfort in the longstanding work of the SGPA, whose ongoing efforts on behalf of Connecticut residents continue to help safeguard the Park against a multitude of threats while ensuring a positive experience for Park visitors. The Association, of course, was originally formed to protect the Park from wanton quarrying operations that threatened to consign the Giant's head to oblivion. As a direct result of the nascent SGPA's efforts, which were instrumental in putting a stop to the quarrying operations, Connecticut residents can now enjoy this rugged geological wonder as one of the premier parks in the state.

However, the integrity of this spectacular wilderness setting continues to be imperiled by a variety of ever-present dangers, including increased pollution levels, the continued spread of invasive plants and animals, and the ongoing threat of urban sprawl. As of last summer, we now know that the emerald ash borer (*Agrilus planipennis*), an invasive and highly destructive jewel beetle, is also present in the Park, significantly threatening the health of the Park's many ash trees. If something isn't done, the impact is likely to be significant. However, as dangerous as these threats to the Park may be, the most pernicious threat in recent years may be the continued downward spiral of available funding. As the level of funding dwindles, so does the ability of both staff and volunteers to maintain the Park's overall ecological health and the safety of its many hiking trails. The impact of decreased trail maintenance will be felt widely, most notably in the increased hazard potential that it presents to hikers and other Park visitors.

The SGPA boasts more than 1,700 dues-paying members, a reflection of the Park's significant impact on members of the community. And this represents only a small portion of the kindred souls who routinely seek out the peace and tranquility of the Giant's quiet forest setting. That the Park continues to touch a sympathetic chord in such a large number of people attests to its uniqueness and affirms the foresight shown by both the founding members of the SGPA, who worked so diligently to see this wilderness setting designated as a State Park, and the members of the Connecticut State Legislature, who saw the wisdom of granting that designation almost a century ago. This year marks the 90th anniversary of the Sleeping Giant Park Association. I can't think of a more meaningful gift from the state than an ironclad promise from the State Legislature guaranteeing adequate funding and protection for the Park as we journey forward through the first century of the new millennium.

Because I am most familiar with the Sleeping Giant State Park, I have used it as a focal point for consideration. However, a myriad of other locales have been designated as Connecticut State Parks, and many have Friends groups that are every bit as active as the Sleeping Giant Park Association. As such, these

sites represent important areas for recreation, places possessed of singular beauty and unique geological features, or invaluable habitats for a wide range of plants and animals (including a host of migratory species that depend on these ecosystems for their very survival).

Each of these distinctive State Parks must be preserved inviolate and protected from the ravages of time and the greed of human expansion. They should not become the objects of a 21st century brand of manifest destiny. The protection of State Parklands is a moral and ethical responsibility that we must bear as stewards of the land. It is also a debt owed to the citizens of Connecticut, especially those of generations yet to come. In this regard, I would urge you to pass legislation to this effect. Moreover, this must be done in tandem with legislation that will ensure adequate funding for the State Parks ... now and in the future. Volunteer efforts in Connecticut State Parks have been estimated at 7,000 hours per year, amounting to a net worth of approximately \$2.2 million annually. Based on my own experience, I consider this to be a conservative figure that falls far below the actual one. The efforts of Friends groups represent an invaluable service provided to the park system and, by extension, to both the public and the state. However, funding for State Parks should be based on actual need and not on the availability of volunteer labor; the Parks' budgets cannot and must not be balanced on the backs of their volunteers. A first best place to start is the passing of binding resolutions permitting parks to retain all revenues generated on site, allowing park managers to recycle these resources into their own general operating fund, and preventing public or private enterprises from encroaching on these landscapes. State Parks must remain sacrosanct entities.

Because of their distinctive qualities (natural beauty, unique geological features, irreplaceable natural habitat, historical importance, recreational potential), State Parks are like living organisms, breathing life into the community. However, in considering the accuracy of this metaphor, a closer approximation to the truth would be a comparison to rare and endangered species. And like an endangered species, the State Park, as a living organism, can easily vanish from the face of the Earth if not nurtured and cared for. Facing a plethora of potential threats, State Parks exist today on the brink of extinction. Connecticut's State Parks exist as a living part of our cultural heritage, a vibrant echo of our past, and a critical link to our ecological future. The living landscape cannot be cloned anew; the land as a bridge to the peace and solitude that can only be found in wilderness settings cannot be replaced ... Extinction is Forever!

To carry the metaphor of the land as a living entity forward, consider the words of the great American naturalist William Beebe, who wrote, "The beauty and genius of a work of art may be reconceived, though its first material expression be destroyed; a vanished harmony may yet again inspire the composer; but when the last individual of a race of living beings breathes no more, another heaven and another Earth must pass before such a one can be again."

Respectfully,

Danny A. Brass
Chair, Hiking Committee
Sleeping Giant Park Association

