

A Pristine Peninsula is in Peril in North Virginia; as development encroaches, U.S. declines to give Crow's Nest protected status

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Copyright The Washington Post July 19, 2002 Pg. B. 03

Full Text (1130 words)

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There is a place in Northern Virginia where the only cul-de-sac is a swirl of water lilies a few paddle strokes down a creek from a beaver lodge; where rare tree habitats stand for miles and where homeowners include bald eagles, great blue herons, deer, ducks and other wildlife. (Part-time residents include 57 species of migratory birds.)

It is also a place beset by change. One needn't have the perspective of a bald eagle circling overhead to see that suburban development has spread to the edge of Stafford County's Crow's Nest peninsula. New houses are popping up across from its southern shore, and a 67-home development is being built on its northern edge by the developer who owns most of the pristine property.

Local conservationists fear that 3,800-acre Crow's Nest is next.

Two years ago, the land's future seemed assured when a regional office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommended that it become a national wildlife refuge. But this month, the agency reversed itself, saying that Crow's Nest lacks the number of rare and endangered species necessary for federal protection.

Suddenly preservation is no longer a sure thing. With federal plans suspended, environmentalists fear the landowner -- McLean-based K&M Properties -- will grow impatient to make something of its investment in real estate valued at about \$18 million. They worry that the company will rush to clear much of the land and turn it into a habitat for exclusive people, not wildlife.

Kamel Tabarra of K&M said his firm has no immediate plans to log or develop the land, but "nobody is willing to wait forever."

The federal change of heart has left politicians and residents not only fearful but fuming. Efforts to make Crow's Nest a refuge appear to have run aground on a change of agenda between the Clinton and Bush administrations.

Instead of buying and protecting as much land as possible -- a tenet of the Clinton administration -- the Bush administration has shifted federal funding toward maintenance and operation, said Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Mitch Snow.

That has made for increasing competition among sites aiming for federal protection.

Crow's Nest "doesn't have the significance to important species that other properties have," said Nancy Gloman, chief of the division of conservation planning and policy for the Fish and Wildlife Service. "We're not saying [Crow's Nest] shouldn't be protected. . . . Basically we're saying because we have to pick areas for national wildlife refuges, even though it is valuable, it doesn't rise to the level of something that needs to be protected as a national wildlife refuge." That appraisal runs counter to an earlier federal description of the area as "one of the finest examples of a habitat that is largely in short supply along the Atlantic Coastal Plain" and one that supports "rare and threatened plant species."

The thousands of acres of Crow's Nest, dipping down deep slopes and clinging to the edges of cliffs that overlook the Potomac River, form an imperiled calcareous ravine forest complex. It is a nesting habitat for migratory tropical birds and a home for fox, otter and mink, among other animals. Three bald eagle nests and a great blue heron rookery also call it home, and at least two endangered plants in Virginia -- the ginseng and river bulrush -- live there.

The peninsula is surrounded by 700 acres of freshwater tidal marshes -- rare for the Chesapeake

Bay -- including a ring of more than a mile of water lilies on Accokeek Creek.

Residents who have tried to save the peninsula said they were told it was the fear of high operations costs -- not a lack of biology -- that caused the federal reversal.

To that end, they have launched a campaign to raise \$200,000 -- the estimated cost of operating the refuge for a year. That, they hope, will convince the Fish and Wildlife Service that the refuge could be run with private funds. The Trust for Crow's Nest has raised almost \$160,000 in four months, including \$100,000 from Stafford County and \$261.66 in pennies from a group of local sixth- graders. John Mitchell, head of the trust, said supporters are prepared to raise money every year it is necessary.

"I'm still very hopeful that it will become a wildlife refuge," said Stafford Supervisor Kandy A. Hilliard (D-Aquia). "I believe it's too valuable of a property to allow it to become anything else."

Hal Wiggins, an environmental scientist for the Army Corps of Engineers who has taken a personal interest in preserving the peninsula, was incensed at the federal reversal, particularly because, he said, officials from Washington haven't seen the property.

"We're going to make the decision makers come down somehow, some way to explain better why they don't feel [the land] makes the cut," Wiggins said.

Rep. Jo Ann S. Davis (R-Va.), a fervent Crow's Nest backer, said that is her newest mission. "I find it very interesting that they would deny something that they never bothered to go down and take a look at," she said.

Virginia Sens. John W. Warner (R) and George Allen (R) are also backing the preservation efforts, and all three plan to ask for the \$18 million needed to buy the land if they can get the refuge authorized.

But lovers of the land think the time to save it is running out as they watch development rise nearby. They also point to the blue streaks painted on trees in Crow's Nest, marking the ones that were to be logged three years ago before the developer held off, pending a potential sale to the government.

This isn't the first time a developer has had designs on Crow's Nest. More than 30 years ago, it was to have been the site of a new town, much like Reston or Columbia. Later, other developers, including the Marriott Corp., wanted to transform the peninsula into a bedroom community and weekend getaway.

In intervening years, other plans for the land have come and gone -- a continuation of the peninsula's checkered economic history. Settled in the 17th century by the Daniel family, Crow's Nest was named for a schooner called The Crow that the family used to trade its crops for European goods.

During the Civil War, the Daniels lost the property, and their estate was burned. Today's Daniel descendants have joined the fight to save the land.

Backers have taken some solace in the preservation of a 70-acre heron rookery as part of a deal to offset wetlands destroyed by the construction of the Stafford Regional Airport. But that is only a small slice of what they consider to be a precious piece of land and local history.

"This is a unique property," Mitchell said. "This is the chance of a lifetime."

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Subjects:

Locations: Stafford County Virginia, Crows Nest

Companies: Fish & Wildlife Service (NAICS: 924120, Sic:9500)

Article types: Feature

Section: *METRO*

ISSN/ISBN: 01908286

Text Word Count 1130

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