

## Testimony for Members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee

Chairman Schaffer and members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee thank you for the opportunity to share my concerns regarding funding for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

My name is Karen Raymore. I am a resident of Logan, Ohio located in the Hocking Hills region of our state. I am the Executive Director of the Hocking Hills Tourism Association. We consider ODNR to be our most important strategic partner in the work we do. Our local state park staff are the hardest working people I've ever known. If there is any doubt, just visit Old Man's Cave on a Saturday.

Visitation to the Hocking Hills State Park has grown exponentially over the past fifteen years with the greatest rate of growth happening over the past three years. In March *Forbes* issued their list of fifty places to visit in 2023. This list is fifty places on the planet. Eleven destinations on the list are located in the United States. One destination on the list is in the Midwest, Hocking Hills. The article specifically mentions Ash Cave and Old Man's Cave. *Forbes* reaches 150 million people every month.

Our parks, forests and nature preserves are being discovered by travelers around the world. In the Hocking Hills, the Hocking Hills State Park is the number one attraction. There are more than 1500 lodging units, hundreds of small business owners and thousands of jobs dependent on continued management and preservation of the park.

In addition to the Hocking Hills State Park, we direct travelers to Lake Hope State Park, Tar Hollow State Park, Strouds Run State Park, Hocking State Forest, Zaleski State Forest and several State Nature Preserves. All these ODNR properties support small businesses in a region of the state where most of the counties are distressed or at risk. Where mining and manufacturing were once job creators, tourism is now the best hope for economic development.

In order for Ohio to continue to provide its citizens with world-class recreation, health and wellness opportunities, nature education for all ages and economic development, funding for ODNR needs to increase. Reducing Ohio's investment in natural resources would be a disservice to all Ohio residents. Due to inflation, the investment needs to be restored to levels from the Governor's as introduced version of the budget bill.

I respectfully request the Committee consider the importance of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' work which benefits all Ohio residents and recommend an increase to their funding.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Karen Raymore, CDME  
Executive Director  
Hocking Hills Tourism Association