



For Immediate Release

April 13, 2018

**Champions of the Pennsylvania Wilds Award Winners Announced**

*Winners to be recognized at April 26 PA Wilds Annual Dinner & Awards in Williamsport*

Each year, the PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, Inc. (PA Wilds Center) recognizes outstanding individuals, organizations, programs, communities and places that exemplify the great work being done across the region to develop nature tourism and the outdoor recreation economy in a way that creates jobs, diversifies local economies, inspires stewardship and improves quality of life. More than 250 businesses and community leaders from across the Pennsylvania Wilds, along with state partners and officials from Harrisburg, will gather to celebrate the Champions of the Pennsylvania Wilds award winners at the 2018 PA Wilds Annual Dinner & Awards, to be held on Thursday, April 26 at the Pajama Factory in Williamsport, Lycoming County. The region's 12 county governments, visitor bureaus and many local organizations and businesses participate in the Champions of the Pennsylvania Wilds Awards, along with PA's Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (DCNR) and Department of Community & Economic Development (DCED). The theme of this year's PA Wilds Annual Dinner & Awards is "Celebrating 15 Years – The Wilds at Work."

"We're thrilled to honor such an inspiring group of award winners this year; their work and dedication is making a powerful impact in the region that will be felt for generations to come. I encourage everyone to join us in celebrating these leaders, while also commemorating the important anniversary of 15 years of the Pennsylvania Wilds work, region, and mission!" said Ta Enos, Executive Director of the PA Wilds Center.

**The 2018 Champions of the Pennsylvania Wilds include:**

**Outstanding Leader Award Winner:** Tom Kase – Kane, McKean County

Tom Kase, Kane Borough Council President, will receive the Outstanding Leader Award for his Work as founder of TAMED (Trail Association of the McKean/ Elk Divide), his community advocacy and





leadership for expanding the outdoor recreation economy, trail creation and restoration, and for leading an initiative to acquire a vacant train depot along Route 6 with plans underway to develop it into a Welcome Center and Trailhead for the Knox / Kane Rail Trail. Tom is also being recognized for his volunteer work with the PA Wilds Marketing Team, and for helping champion a recent request by the PA Wilds Center to The Collins Companies Foundation. That request resulted in a \$25,000 award to help the Center establish an incubator/accelerator space to grow its commerce platform and get more local products and services to market.

**Great Places Award Winner:** Dr. Colson E. Blakeslee Memorial Recreation Area, Benezette Township – Elk County

The Dr. Colson E. Blakeslee Memorial Recreation Area is the recipient of the Great Places Award. This multi-use recreation area was named in memoriam to Dr. Blakeslee, a long-time champion of the restoration of the Bennett Branch, which had once been a dead, red-stained stream. This sustainable natural asset and destination consists of 24 acres along the Bennett Branch Sinnemahoning Creek, with more than 2,400 feet of stream frontage. This property helps to ensure public access to the Bennett Branch for fishing, boating, and other outdoor recreation, and to promote public support for maintaining the remediation facilities in the watershed. This property also provides opportunities for wildlife viewing along State Route 555, one of the most heavily traveled sections of the Elk Scenic Drive. The opportunity to fish a stream that has been dead for decades provides a powerful environmental stewardship message for how local people and diverse partners can work together to restore and protect our natural heritage and in the process, transform a site into a highly valued asset for tourism and improve quality of life for residents.

**Conservation Stewardship (Individual) Award Winner:** Bekki Titchner - Elk County

Bekki Titchner will receive the Individual Conservation Stewardship Award for her creation of “The Factory Song,” and for her tireless commitment to conservation stewardship and recycling. “The Factory Song” is music in an educational format that tells the story of past and present factories, providing historic and economic dialogue about our ancestors, land usage and challenges of life in the





region. As Elk County Recycling/Solid Waste Coordinator, Bekki successfully navigated an innovative recycling program to success, when so many others have struggled to do so. She and the team at the Recycling Center have taken the lessons learned from our rich industrial heritage and put them into practice with an aim towards conservation. This recycling program now operates as a shining example of what a rural recycling program can deliver in a place where no one thought it could.

**Conservation Stewardship (Group) Award Winner:** PA Firefly Festival, Inc. - Tionesta, Forest County

The PA Firefly Festival, Inc. (PAFF) will be honored with the Group Conservation Stewardship Award for their work in bringing worldwide attention to the need to protect the unique firefly population (*Photinus carolinus*, also known as the Synchronous Firefly) located in the Allegheny National Forest. Founded in 2013, PAFF is an organization dedicated to the science of fireflies, the identification and conservation of firefly habitat, and educating the public about these magical beetles. Fireflies are an indicator species: their presence tells us about the health of their habitat. Their annual PA Firefly Festival brings in thousands of visitors to the Pennsylvania Wilds from across the USA and abroad. PAFF is being recognized as a Champion of the PA Wilds for their multi-faceted conservation work, which includes innovative partnerships, training and education, youth involvement, the usage of grant funding to support conservation initiatives, educational marketing and events, collaboration with conservationists and researchers, habitat preservation, and more. These tireless advocates launched, and have continued to sustain and grow, a wholly unique conservation stewardship initiative in the Pennsylvania Wilds with global and regional impact that will carry for generations to come.

**Great Design Award Winner:** Good Growing Gardens, Smethport – McKean County

Good Growing Gardens (3G) in Smethport is our deserving recipient of the Great Design Award. The Good Growing Gardens site and project exemplify a wide range of best practices from the PA Wilds Design Guide, including the enhancement of an area's rural and regional community character,





historic preservation, conversion of historic sites to modern-day use, agriculture, farmers' markets, protection and enhancement of natural assets, public art, trails and outdoor recreation development, innovative community partnerships, and much more. Good Growing Gardens transformed the 1884 barn and associated acreage into a valued community asset and an oasis of conservation, education and rehabilitation. This innovative project is a unique adult probation program coordinated by McKean County with 300 to 400 men and women fulfilling court appointed community service hours growing their skillsets as well as vegetables at the barn. The property, owned by McKean County, serves as a trail head providing visitors an opportunity to explore the local trail system, or enjoy the trout fishing opportunity offered by Marvin Creek. Locals, tourists and passer-byes are enticed to visit when they see the cheery display of seasonal items and open barn doors of 3G. At the barn they will find for purchase in-season produce and fresh-cut flowers raised on property as well as a wide variety of wooden products from lawn furniture to bookshelves and birdhouses made on-site in the wood shop and indoor studio space. This McKean County property has been transformed from "the old county barn on Rt.6" into a well-manicured site bustling with year-round activity, and a unique probation program. This creative program and multi-use site can serve as a model for other counties, showcasing a range of best practices from the PA Wilds Design Guide, as well as innovative community partnerships.

**Member of the Year Award Winner: Jan Hampton, Emporium - Cameron County**

The PA Wilds Center and our partners are humbled to recognize Jan Hampton with a posthumous Member of the Year Award. Jan was a tireless and upbeat advocate for conservation and youth outreach, working for 23 years in the Cameron County School District, and serving for 18 years as the Cameron County Conservation District manager. Jan was a former chair of the Pennsylvania Wilds Planning Team, and endeared so many with her testimonial that "The Pennsylvania Wilds is a gentle sharing of the things we hold most dear." During her time as Conservation District Manager, Jan expanded both environmental stewardship programs and staff. Her youth outreach was also significant; small steps of teaching in classrooms about birds, bats, elk and of course, frogs, paved the way for more advanced activities we have today, such as the Wild About Nature Field Day, The Wild





Envirothon and Trout in the Classroom. In 2017, the Cameron County fair hosted a Jan Hampton Youth Conservation Night in her memory. Her great love for the outdoors, conservation stewardship and youth education made a lasting, multi-generational impact on the region. A great singer - Jan once broke out into song, unscripted, at one of our awards dinners! Jan Hampton's enthusiasm, friendship, sense of humor and leadership are missed, and we are grateful to honor her legacy with the Member of the Year Award for 2018.

**Artisan of the Year Award Winner:** Kyle Yates, Brookville – Jefferson County

Kyle Yates will be honored with the Artisan of the Year Award for going above and beyond to use his talents and creativity to promote the Pennsylvania Wilds through his medium of photography. An award-winning photographer, Kyle captures stunning, unique shots of the region's natural landscapes. He frequently volunteers his captures to be shared by the PA Wilds Center and the Wilds Cooperative of Pennsylvania to help promote the mission and work, to elevate the visual promotion of the region as a high-value nature tourism destination, and to enhance regional pride among residents. As noted in his award nomination, "his photography makes you want to come here and explore the Wilds." Kyle was a contracted photographer for the Second Edition of the PA Wilds Design Guide, capturing examples of authentic community character in multiple counties. Kyle was also selected as the photographer for the "Always More to Explore" regional marketing campaign launching May 2018, which showcases unique pairing of assets from across the Pennsylvania Wilds.

**Business of the Year Award Winner:** Alabaster Coffee Roaster & Tea Co., Williamsport – Lycoming County

Alabaster Coffee will be honored with our Business of the Year Award for their innovative and forward-thinking business model. Alabaster Coffee is a high-quality destination providing a premium, authentic service for visitors and residents alike. The business is a family-owned, award-winning micro-roaster and coffee bar that takes bold steps to grow their business while making a difference locally, regionally in the Pennsylvania Wilds, and globally. Alabaster Coffee specializes in ethically sourced specialty grade and direct trade coffees. Their commitment to growing the business through a





community oriented strategy shows in the beauty of their location, and the creative partnerships they have made with local schools and community organizations. Alabaster Coffee is a business that inspires regional and local pride for their leadership, community and global-mindedness, excellent products, atmosphere and customer service.

**Inspiring Youth Award Winner:** Olivia Hanna, Millbrook Playhouse, Clinton County

Olivia Hanna, a volunteer with the Millbrook Playhouse, is the recipient of our Inspiring Youth Award for her dedication, work and commitment to the playhouse and children's camps. At the age of 15, Olivia is aware of how rapidly the world is shifting with technology and does her part to build others up with positivity and the power of encouragement. A believer in the need for a space for be creative and be yourself, Oliva has spent countless hours involved with the Millbrook playhouse as a volunteer. She is passionate about the positive impact that live theatre and the arts have had on her life, and can have on the lives of youth, members of the community and visitors to the Pennsylvania Wilds.

**Event of the Year Award Winner:** Pennsylvania State Flaming Foliage Festival, Renovo – Clinton County

The Pennsylvania State Flaming Foliage Festival will receive the Event of the Year Award. We are pleased to honor this quality, signature PA Wilds event in its 70th year of operation for the positive social and economic impact it brings to the region. The only fall festival so designated by the state legislature, this three-day event swells the tiny Susquehanna River town of Renovo, Clinton County, from a population of 1,200 to an estimated 30,000 people. The Flaming Foliage Festival attracts queen contestants who compete for scholarships from nearly 30 high schools in the PA Wilds counties of Clinton, Lycoming, Centre, Potter, Tioga, Cameron, McKean, and Elk...and beyond. This authentic event draws visitors to its large arts and crafts festival and parade, and to explore our natural assets for scenic fall leaf views and outdoor recreation. An all-volunteer effort, the community of Renovo comes together for a well-organized, time-honored tradition, full of small-town charm and hospitality that's embraced by newcomers and those who come back year after year.





**Best Brand Ambassador Award Winner:** Katie Weidenboerner - Elk County

Katie Weidenboerner will be honored with the Best Brand Ambassador Award for her outstanding work to promote and develop the Pennsylvania Wilds brand through written and visual storytelling, and place name recognition. An accomplished journalist and Assistant Editor at the Courier-Express & Tri-County Sunday in Dubois, Pennsylvania, Katie is a regular contributor to the Pennsylvania Wilds blog, helping to tell the stories of the region and our incredible assets, inspiring regional pride and encouraging visitors to come explore. A long-time contributor and supporter of the Pennsylvania Wilds mission, Katie Weidenboerner traveled thousands of miles last year to photograph 22 artists in their creative spaces for the Wilds Cooperative of Pennsylvania's Creative Makers Exhibit, a traveling art show that has now been on display in three galleries so far across the region. This photojournalism exhibit will be on display at the State Capitol Building East Wing in 2019.

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Said Ta Enos, Executive Director of the PA Wilds Center, "Our Board of Directors was inspired and energized by the incredible slate of nominees we had this year, spanning so many impactful projects and initiatives across the Pennsylvania Wilds. These winners are truly "champions" of the PA Wilds, and demonstrate the strong regional pride and commitment we have to preserving our natural assets and communities for generations to come. Selecting winners in each category was tough, with so many deserving nominees. It's important that if your nomination didn't win this year, please submit it again next year!"

Please join us to celebrate these extraordinary award winners, and the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pennsylvania Wilds! Don't delay in securing your ticket; the PA Wilds Dinner & Awards Banquet is always a sell-out.

The 2018 PA Wilds Annual Dinner & Awards will be held on Thursday April 26. The April 26 Annual Dinner & Awards will open at 3:00 PM with networking opportunities during a reception of the Creative Makers Exhibit, on display at Gallery Works. This year also marks the launch of the new





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Creative Entrepreneur's Conference, taking place on Friday April 27th. The location for the dinner and conference is the Pajama Factory in Williamsport, Lycoming County.

Earl Gohl, former Federal Co-Chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), will deliver a keynote speech during the PA Wilds Annual Awards Dinner. Gohl, who served as Federal Co-Chair from 2010-2018, oversaw hundreds of ARC investments in community-based projects contributing to the economic growth of the Region – including in the Pennsylvania Wilds. Earl Gohl will be introduced by Sheri R. Collins, Deputy Secretary, Office of Technology & Innovation, PA Department of Community & Economic Development.

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The PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship (PA Wilds Center) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. The official registration and financial information of PA Wilds Center may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.

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