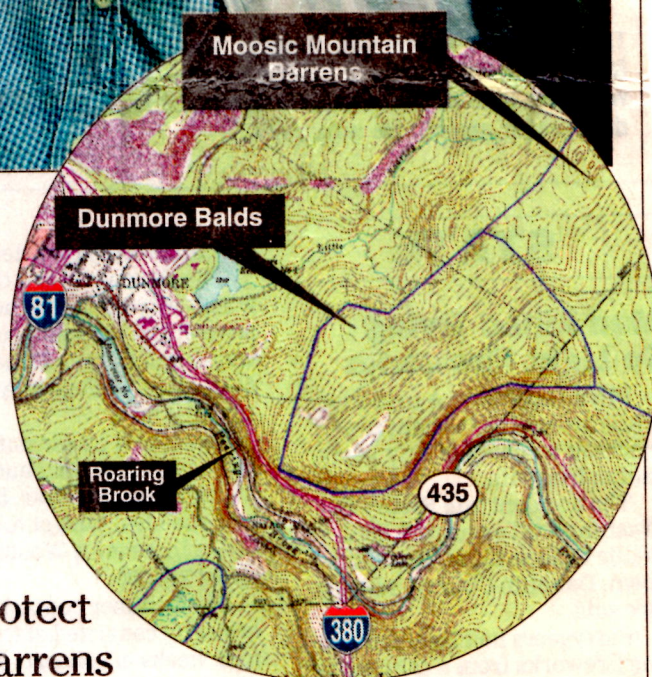




Bernie McGurl, Lackawanna River Corridor Association, talks about the rare plants, animals and insects that live in the barrens.

Battle *for the* Barrens



Conservationists Fight to Protect Fragile Moosic Mountain Barrens

BY MAUREEN MANZANO
THE SUNDAY TIMES

As he picked his way along a coal- and rock-strewn path across the Moosic Mountain Barrens, Bernie McGurl turned onto another trail and pointed to a large, stone-covered slope where a small stream trickled.

"People ask me where the Lackawanna River begins," said the executive director of the Lackawanna River Corridor Association. "It starts right here. This is one of a billion places."

At 6,000 acres, the Moosic Mountain Barrens may be one of the largest — if not the largest — contiguous barrens in

the state, said Tony Davis, director of the Nature Conservancy's Pennsylvania Science Office in Harrisburg.

He said he hopes it stays that way.

"These ridgetops are a unique assemblage of plants, species and special insect fauna that don't occur anywhere else," he said.

The barrens is as its name sounds: an expanse of unproductive land, with dry, shallow, rocky soil and stunted vegetation. It is home to a dwarf-tree forest of "scruffy" pitch pine and scrub oak trees, as well as the knee-high shrubs known as heath, Mr. Davis said.

These shrubs, including

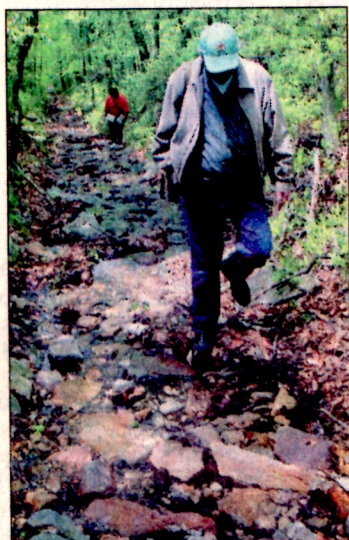
huckleberry and blueberry, survive in an area with thin soil and little moisture.

In the 1800s, people set fire to the heath barrens so the area would produce a better crop of blueberries. Fires enable the plants to reseed and regenerate.

The barrens stretches from a narrow band at the summit of Moosic ridge from Salem Hill, Wayne County, southwest to Interstate 84 in Dunmore.

"Those barrens are there because of the features — the lack of soil, the high winds," Mr. Davis said. "I've been up there when it's 50 degrees. It would be 70 or 80 degrees in the valley."

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MICHAEL J. MULLEN / THE SUNDAY TIMES

Mr. McGurl hikes a steep section of the former Gravity Railroad.