

# Saving A Wild Cathedral

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Mike Myer , The Washington Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

It was like a cathedral, once, a place of worship only God could have created.

It was a large grove of hemlock trees, so tall and with branches so dense their tops couldn't be seen from the ground. Even at high noon the needle-carpeted forest floor under them was illuminated only by a sort of twilight, broken here and there by shafts of sunlight that had managed to filter through the tree branches.

Many of the trees were centuries old. Some were mature when Columbus stepped aboard the Santa Maria. They were magnificent - beautiful, majestic treasures among which it was a gift to stand.

I've been there many times, starting about 35 years ago when I first visited the grove in Shenandoah National Park, which runs down the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. The place had a name, "The Limberlost," given it, as I recall, by the rich woman who convinced her husband to save the hemlocks from timbering.

Now they are gone. All of the big ones have been taken by a tiny insect called the woolly adelgid.

It happened in the wink of an eye, as the ancient hemlocks themselves might have experienced it. Park rangers knew for several years that something was damaging the hemlocks, but theories such as acid rain were discussed even as the adelgid, an import from Asia, was killing the magnificent grove. Suddenly, they had been wiped out.

It is too late to save The Limberlost.

But there is still time to preserve an equally precious grove of centuries-old hemlocks here in West Virginia.

They are in the appropriately named Cathedral State Park, just off U.S. 50 in Preston County. If you've never been there, you really should go. It's less than a three-hour drive from Wheeling.

Some of the trees in Cathedral are 90 feet tall and 21 feet in circumference. Like The Limberlost, the hemlocks in Cathedral once were owned by a man who understood their importance. When he sold his land to the state, he stipulated the hemlocks were never to be cut.

That will be no protection against the woolly adelgid, however. It has come to the Mountain State and is sucking the life out of at least some of the hemlocks in Cathedral. No one really knows how much damage has been done.

I'm told some work has been done to protect a few of the hemlocks, but no campaign to preserve the entire tract at Cathedral is underway. There are chemicals available to kill the woolly adelgid, but applying them is expensive, time-consuming and difficult.

If you've ever been there, or in another stand of hemlocks predating the European immigration to North America, you understand this is something that has to be done. This isn't a movie you can catch on DVD if you miss it in theaters.

This is a place of worship. It is, in some ways, a test of how seriously we humans take God's charge to be stewards of the earth.

Again, if you've ever been there, you understand. Write the governor. Call your state legislator. E-mail members of Congress.

This can't wait, tell them. It's not just important - it's critical. If you don't understand that, take a trip to Cathedral. Then, you will.

Myer can be reached at: [Myer@news-register.net](mailto:Myer@news-register.net).