While Hoosiers are increasingly aware of rampant logging occurring in our state forests, few may know that the Indiana Department of Natural Resources is also logging the forests around our state reservoirs, certain to impact wildlife, watersheds, and recreation.

On August 9, IDNR’s Division of State Parks & Reservoirs conducted a timber sale in the largest tract of forest at Hardy Lake State Reservoir, located in Scott County. IDNR received a total of seven bids, and Phil Etienne’s Timber Harvest won the timber sale with a bid price of $166,368. Etienne will cut down 898 trees with a total estimated volume of 364,107 Doyle Board Feet (DBF). Included are 19 veneer trees, 18 Northern Red Oak and 1 Black Walnut, with a volume of 13,972 DBF.

Hardy Lake is Indiana’s smallest state reservoir. Its total property acreage is 2,449 acres, including the lake’s surface area of 745 acres, leaving just over 1,700 acres of roads, campgrounds, and property facilities as well as several forest tracts, fields, wetlands, ponds, and mudflats around the reservoir. Logging operations will close or re-route approximately three miles (nearly half the park’s trails) of the Outward Bound and Cemetery hiking trails and occur close to the lake, putting Hardy Lake’s water quality at risk.

Hardy Lake is used as a back-up water supply for communities in the Stucker Fork Conservancy District. Yet Hardy Lake, like most other Indiana reservoirs, is under a state Advisory warning swimmers, boaters and others who may come into contact with its water not to take any accidental gulps, to bathe after swimming, not to use water from the Lake for cooking, and to take other precautions to avoid getting sick from harmful algal blooms, or “HABs,” of blue green algae. One of IDNR’s recommendations for avoiding HABs in this Advisory is to: “Prevent soil and organic matter from washing into waterways and carrying excess nutrients into the drainage.”

Why is this timber sale happening? Hardy Lake personnel stated that the timber sale is to fund a nature center and increase quail habitat for hunters. We find it ironic and inappropriate for the IDNR to destroy the best interior forest habitat at Hardy Lake to build a nature center.

In addition, the timber sale area is adjacent to a several existing large clearings less than a decade old. Popular sport hunting species such as the cotton tail rabbit and quail are already drawn to the miles of edge and openings in this habitat. IDNR’s online description of hunting at Hardy Lake explains that for rabbit, “Hardy has extremely high hunter activity” while for quail, there is "very limited hunter activity or success” because, “property size and early rabbit hunting moves the Quail population onto private property.”

The reality is that the logging will invite more generalist species that are adaptable to many different habitat types into the limited deep forest at Hardy — displacing forest-interior species that rely on an intact older, deep-interior forests for successful reproduction. These include rare, threatened or endangered species such as the Indiana and Northern long-eared bats as well as the Cerulean warbler, hooded and worm-eating warblers, yellow-throated vireo, Acadian flycatcher, scarlet tanager, ovenbird, wood thrush and many other native birds found only in deep forest habitats.

While quail numbers have been reduced for an extended period, the state already manages land at Hardy for quail, in addition to quail populations that are managed at Crosby Fish and Wildlife Area’s 4,228 acres and the Muscatatuck National Wildlife Refuge’s 7,760 acres which are 12 miles and 15 miles away from Hardy Lake respectively. The vast majority of bird species benefitting from logging — species such as the brown-headed cowbird, red winged blackbird, Eastern towhee, indigo bunting, chipping sparrow, Carolina wren and white eyed vireo — are abundant or at least not facing serious declines. Nest parasitization by the brown headed cowbird is a well documented and major reason for....
the declines of the deep forest birds mentioned above. This logging will create more openings to attract more cowbirds into the limited interior forest at Hardy Lake.

While Indiana has an abundance of open or edge habitat, there is a critical shortage of older intact interior forests across the state. The US Forest Service inventory of forest land in Indiana, known as the Forest Inventory and Analysis program shows that even in the “Knobs Unit” of southern Indiana, Indiana’s most heavily forested region, only 7% of the forests are 100 years or older.

The IDNR’s website states that the mission of Indiana’s Division of State Parks and Reservoirs is “to manage and interpret our properties’ unique natural, wildlife and cultural resources using the principles of multiple use and preservation, while sustaining the integrity of these resources for current and future generations.” There was no opportunity for public comment on this sale. In response to IFA questions, IDNR claims this logging is part of a “forest habitat improvement project” in the 2016-2020 Hardy Lake Wildlife Management Plan and that the Division of Nature Preserves conducted a Natural Heritage Database site review to see if any rare, threatened or endangered species have been identified at the site. Nature Preserves staff found the rough green snake, a “species of special concern,” on the state endangered species list, in this high-quality forest.

The IDNR also failed to at least check for the presence of the federally endangered Indiana bat or federally threatened Northern long-eared bat (NLEB) in this forest. These forest dependent bats utilize large dead “snags” and live trees in interior hardwood forests for summer roosting habitat. Habitat loss and more recently, the disease White Nose Syndrome have caused these species to decline precipitously, with NLEB numbers dropping by up to 99% in parts of the Northeastern US. With no records of these species documented at Hardy Lake, IDNR apparently decided it was not necessary to conduct acoustic monitoring, mist netting or even a habitat assessment, to ensure that no accidental “take” or killing of these species would occur from the logging.

Sadly, this isn’t the first timber sale to occur on a Division of State Parks & Reservoirs property. Please contact Governor-elect Holcomb and your legislators to tell them that state parks and reservoirs are not appropriate public lands for logging and that selling timber in limited deep, interior forest habitat is contrary to the Division’s mission. If you live in Scott or Jefferson counties, contact Sen. James Smith (R-54) and Rep. Terry Goodin (D-66) to let them know what you think about logging at Hardy Lake.

Nature Preserves staff found the rough green snake, a “species of special concern,” on the state endangered species list, in this high-quality forest.

Trees marked for logging in the Hardy Lake timber sale. Photo by Crowe’s Eye Photography.