A Global Perspective on the Adirondack Park
An Interview with Bill Weber

By LEE GROSS

Returning from a trip to view mountain gorillas in Rwanda’s Volcanoes National Park, I sat down to reflect on the role of tourism in the conservation of this magnificent species. In Rwanda, one of the world’s most densely populated countries, national parks and reserves stand as isolated patches amidst a patchwork of agricultural lands and people. During the 1970s, protected lands were seen as remnants of the colonial past, offering little to the welfare of a largely subsistence culture. The development of tourism was introduced as a way to generate revenue, employment, and political support for conservation. Some 30 years later, tourism now drives the regional economy, and from a population of barely 260 in 1978, the mountain gorillas have rebounded to more than 400 individuals today.

Lee: You mention in your chapter a number of valuable lessons from the Adirondack Park model for application abroad, such as scale. Could you share a few others?

Bill: Scale alone would argue for consideration of any region of this size and natural condition as a potential model. The Adirondack Park covers almost 24,000 square kilometers. That’s larger than the Yellowstone, Yosemite and Grand Canyon parks combined.

Another important lesson is that the Adirondacks require thinking and planning at a landscape scale. Not only looking at protected areas and parks, but taking a perspective that includes both biological and human communities. When we see it as both we can see where there are areas of conflict and tension. In the Adirondacks those are there, because of wilderness areas and commercial timber operations and subdivisions. It’s a big, multiple-use landscape, a big complex system with people in it so we have to balance many competing interests.

Another aspect is the whole issue of taxes. When I used to live in the Hudson valley my taxes helped pay for school districts in the Adirondacks. That is really a positive thing, supporting and recognizing that there are costs to conservation is the bottom line. We make it so soft and fuzzy and so win-win, we don’t always acknowledge that there are some real costs in conservation. We have to do our best to mitigate or compensate those who bear those costs, most often local communities.

Finally people embedded in the matrix, wildlife recovery and a multiple use framework are all important lessons. We have logging, hiking, hunting, eco-tourism. All these are things people in other countries are trying to balance when practicing conservation.

Lee: From your time in Africa, what ideas did you bring to the Adirondacks as the North American director for the Wildlife Conservation Society?

Bill: In Africa, I was always thinking about putting people into the equation. I was thinking about the timber industry as part of conservation almost everywhere we worked in the Congo Basin. Then when I came to the Adirondack Park I saw the Adirondack Park Agency, the Department of Environmental Conservation, and frankly most of the conservation community not really talking with the local communities. They were talking at them, threatening to sue them or regulate them, but they weren’t really engaged with talking with them. That’s just one example of putting people into the equation.

When we started talking about working with the timber industry in the 1990s, there was a lot of antagonism on both sides. So we just locked ourselves away for three days in room. The first day was a little bit tense. Its what you do in any situation, you identify areas of agreement. Even if that comes down to,
“I like trees,” and everyone can say, “we like trees,” either for the birds or for timber. Ok, everyone agrees. How do we build from that and move forward?

Those are the things to me that came from working in Africa, dealing with people and with existing industries as groups that had just as much right to be there as we did, but recognizing that we would want to change some of the practices most harmful to conservation interests.

Lee: Do you feel the local voice in the Adirondacks has received the kind of representation it needs?

Bill: Over a ten-year period we hosted a series of roundtables that brought together very diverse interests and stakeholders from within the park. Then the WCS Adirondack Program, under Heidi Kretzer and Zoe Smith, built on those exchanges and personal contacts—as well as their own experiences as park residents and parents—to build a foundation of trust across what used to be hard lines. I think that has helped to create a much better environment for different voices to be heard and ideas discussed. Still, some people only seem to have a voice that is nothing but a constant shout. Its kind of hard to have a dialogue when people are like that. But I think this goes for all groups in society. You have to identify people who are interested in finding common ground.

Snowmobilers to a large degree are a good example of that, while parts of the ATV culture seems to embrace an outlaw view that they can go wherever and do whatever they please. Snowmobile associations have engaged in more constructive dialogue with give and take on issues of access and protection.

Lee: Where should government be in all this?

Bill: Well, government has to be the referee and enforce rules. But they can also play a key role in getting people involved, and that is having more public hearings, getting out to communities, etc. You know, we are a contentious disputatious people. Because we have some great wildlife laws, and in the case of the Adirondacks a great wilderness statute, its easier to take the big club of those laws and regulations and beat people over the head with them than it is to engage.

When I came back from Africa to the US I looked around at what people were doing and saw that huge efforts were going into litigation. Conservation seemed more about dueling press releases and lawsuits, and not a whole lot of talking with the primary interested parties who lived in and around the areas we were interested in protecting. We were one of the early promoters of this landscape approach in the western US that pushed for greater community engagement.

Lee: In your book In the Kingdom of Gorillas you share the differing ideas you had with Dian Fossey about how to save mountain gorillas. Two perspectives that people have today: preservation, close it off and protect it, versus development with a multiple use model. Which is more relevant? Is it a combination of the two? Can they coexist?

Bill: We’ve been playing around with this since the 1980s. It was a huge paradigm shift, saying that conservation and development were not inherently houses in opposition, but that they could, and should support each other. Interestingly, the US lags behind in its application, again perhaps because of our strong laws. It’s still a work in progress, but it’s a much better paradigm than the fortress model we had before.

In my earlier experiences in the Peace Corps I saw lots of beautiful parks and amazing wildlife, but every time we left the park we came across really poor people and cattle that couldn’t find water. In the park the wildebeest and buffalo had all the water they could drink. That experience convinced us that local people’s interests had to be part of the mountain gorilla conservation equation in the late 1970s.

Then in 1981 the World Conservation Strategy was published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the United Nations Development Program, and World Wildlife Fund. If you take that as a formal marker, then it’s been some years now of operating under this more integrated model. I’d say we still have a lot to learn and farther to go.

You know it’s really hard to bring groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) into some of these discussions. These groups have different driving forces that I accept as valid, but it puts them in a whole different position. If you believe that a person should never kill an animal, then you can’t really work in the Congo basin, where people don’t have anything else to eat except animals. The issue isn’t traditional subsistence hunting of antelope and porcupines, but how to crack down on market-driven illegal poaching of endangered species like gorillas and elephants.

Like I said, you can’t bring everyone to the table.

Lee: Ok, so who should be at the table?

Bill: When we started in the Adirondacks we had some people with incredibly strong convictions, including convictions on our side. In some of the first round tables in the Adirondacks we sought to bring together conservation...
groups, logging interests, snowmobilers, hunters, fishermen, local politicians and people from agencies. We reviewed profiles of suggested participants to identify those most likely to engage in the spirit of give-and-take, and to weed out some who might be too contentious. There were some truly wonderful, committed people, particularly on the conservation side, that were just too passionate to have the kind of discussion you need to have. I can sit there and think whatever I want about what someone else is saying, but if we're going to find common ground I can't jump up on the table and shout and call people names.

That has always been the key to me... find people who search for common ground.

Lee: How people-centric do we need to be when doing conservation?

Bill: Well anybody that says we need to shift from biodiversity to something that includes more people has not been paying attention for a long time. On the other hand, it can be really dangerous to bring people in if conservation objectives and needs aren't first clearly defined.

I've been around long enough to see the pendulum swing away from the fortress model to more focus on local human needs. I've even heard a few conservationists say, "We have learned over time that local people are the best stewards of their land." Well that's absolute bullshit. Sometimes they are, usually with small human populations living very traditional lifestyles. But that's acting as if the Mbini pygmies of eastern Congo don't live in a world where there are outside economic pressures; where there are urban markets for bushmeat; where they might be enticed to sell their timber, or even their land.

We say traditional use is okay, but who decides what is traditional and for how long? Can you only use nets and spears and poison tip arrows? Can you buy guns? Can you buy twenty guns and start filling up the back of pickup trucks with smoked monkey meat that you sell 200 or 300 miles away? Who makes those decisions? That's a tough one.

You have to have regulatory capacity and yes by definition that means top down, like the Adirondack Park Agency in the Adirondacks. They provide structure on top of the whole system, through the application of limits and rules. And then they also need to find ways to be inclusive of other people's voices.

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You can go too far on the people side of things. I'm not one for turning over Yellowstone to local ranchers. Well first of all, which ranchers? How far out do you put the circle? Does it include Jackson or Bozeman and the rest of these towns making millions of dollars from tourism? The millions of Americans and foreign visitors who come to see wolves and grizzly bears? I think those groups have legitimate interests. At the same time, we should find ways to help or compensate local ranchers trying to protect their cattle from predators.

The win-win model of conservation provides a great target, but we're not always going to hit it. Everyone can't win all the time, not all interests are equal. Conservation involves constant negotiation and the Adirondacks is a really good example of this as key issues have evolved from deforestation and overhunting to motorized access and exurban subdivisions.

Lee: A trend in conservation has been a movement away from the traditional hot spot biodiversity model towards one more focused on protecting ecosystems vital to people's health and material needs. Chief scientists Kent Redford from the Wildlife Conservation Society and Peter Kareiva from The Nature Conservancy have weighed in on this topic. Any thoughts?

Bill: Gorillas aren't biodiversity at large, but I think the mountain gorilla example is a good one. We had a preservationist model, which was Dian Fossey's view and yet half the park was cleared and 40% of the gorillas were killed or died because they lost their habitat during her first 10 years. It wasn't working because local people saw no benefits from the park and national authorities saw no interest because there was no tourism at that time. Now with Rwanda making roughly $80 million per year from gorillas, and thousands of tourism sector jobs, attitudes have changed and gorilla numbers are back where they were fifty years ago. But biodiversity protection is still central. I think that's what anyone working in conservation is thinking about, by definition. We didn't go out to the northeast corner of Madagascar because of our concern for local people. We went there because it's the last big hunking piece of really rich rainforest left on that island. Once you're there, you try to factor your equation: what factors favor conservation and which ones work against it? Then you work to build up the pluses and reduce the minuses? In order to work you have to admit that there are others forces there that you need to deal with, and that almost always includes local human communities.

Lee: We're talking about Integrated Conservation and Development projects right? The Adirondacks are an example of this kind of balance, would you agree? And abroad?

Bill: Right, some of the things we've started to learn from Uganda and Rwanda are that you can have very effective conservation and development projects. But except for tourism, people don't really see the connection between conservation and development.
For example, medical clinics and water sources get developed around Nyungwe Forest National Park in Rwanda and people don’t recognize that they got that medical clinic because they’re within 5 kilometers of the park boundary and groups like WCS sought development partners to bring benefits to local people. Now part of that is a failure of branding, but part of it is human nature too.

A lot of local people saw it as another development project and they saw development projects all over the country and thought this one was no different from the others, but it was different. This one happened in their community because they lived on the edge of the park. Maybe they lose some revenue because of crop raiding by wildlife, but they have cleaner water supplies, a new health clinic, and school classrooms. At some point you have to compensate people for some of the costs associated with living next to wildlife. I would say that this is what is happening in the Adirondacks, when taxpayers from the rest of the state help support school districts within the park—with similar problems of recognizing the source of benefits.

Lee: So back to the main purpose of our interview, would you say the Adirondack Park is a sustainable model?

Bill: I never claimed the Adirondack Park to be a sustainable model in a strictly economic sense. A fascinating model for conservation for sure, with many successes and more to come. But as with most rural economies dependent on natural resource extraction, we have a very narrow economic base. I would argue that our prospects for long-term sustainability would be much better off with a more diverse economic base.

When I think about models, to me the question isn’t what works and gee how can we copy this functioning model, but that we learn from what we do. I’ve learned more in my life from when things were screwed up than when things were successful. I generally have a good idea why something screwed up. I’m not always clear why something actually worked.