Crafting a new approach for eco-regional management in the Adirondacks

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Abstract

The Adirondack Park and north country are being threatened by an increasing number of invasive species. Managing invasive species is similar to managing non-point pollution in that it requires efforts at the local as well as State level. The Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program has trained volunteers and created a database to record locations of invading species; however, the scope of the program is limited and has no capacity to direct controls or oversee programs to limit their spread. A two-year study including three targeted surveys aimed at how to best develop a regional approach to controlling the spread of invasives points out additional needed actions. Survey data indicate broad consensus by lake groups, municipal officials and various advocacy groups that preventive measures need to be instituted. We believe this effort will likely require a Regional Board of Stakeholders that allows for shared decision-making, equitable sharing of resources and political action necessary to sustain this effort.

Lakes and streams in the Adirondack Park and north country are now being invaded or threatened by an increasing number of invasive species. Currently 49 lakes/streams within the Park contain Eurasian water milfoil and/or other invasives including zebra mussels in Lake Champlain and Lake George (Oles, 2005). These organisms not only pose a significant threat to the region’s unique biota, but they also may pose a threat to the region’s tourism and recreation economy.

In response, the Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program (APIPP) has formed through a collaboration of The Adirondack Park Agency, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, the Nature Conservancy, and the Invasive Plant Council. APIPP is staffed by a coordinator and assistant to educate and train volunteers in detecting invasive plants and maintaining a database inventory of invaded sites.

During the past two years, we frequently posed the question of how best to develop a regional approach to manage and control the spread of invasive species in the Adirondacks. We sampled attitudes and opinion from lake associations, municipal officials and advocacy groups. Using participatory action research methodology that allows a researcher to interact with subjects, provide feedback and record subsequent responses we mailed surveys, organized focus groups and conducted interviews of key informants (McTaggart, 1989; and Skaley and Richmond, 2005b).

Briefly summarized, our results indicate a strong consensus on deploying preventive measures including: 1) signage to inform lake users on how to avoid introducing alien species to waterways; and 2) establishing check stations to catch hitch-hikers on boats and trailers. There is also strong support for legislation to outlaw the transport of invasive species and to focus limited resources on boat launch areas. Responders also agree that sustained funding and volunteer commitment will be required for an extended length of time. While many lake groups indicate they will continue to support programs to control invading species and active management on their lake, all three survey groups indicate strong preference to secure funding from boat license fees and the New York State Environmental Protection Fund.

There is less consensus on how to control invasive plants such as Eurasian watermilfoil; although there is broad agreement that the problem will not solve itself and may seriously threaten the value of recreational waters and lake shore properties. In one reported case, a lake shore property assessment has been reduced because excessive “weeds” were devaluing the near shore recreational opportunity for the owner. With 30 percent of towns receiving half to 3/4 or more of their property tax revenue from these shoreline properties, and with 8-10 million annual visitors attracted to water environments and spending more than $1.2 billion dollars in the region, a rapid spread of invasive species into more waterbodies could seriously impact the local economy (Skaley and Richmond, 2005b).

Efforts by APIPP to educate, train volunteers and inventory waterways have been successful in raising awareness, but have not addressed or supported control programs, are limited to the Park boundaries and are supported only by annual grants. Dependence on annual grants limits APIPP’s scope of work and is not sustainable. Hopes have been expressed by financial supporters of APIPP that the...
recent report from the Invasive Species Task Force (ISTF, 2005) will encourage
the Legislature to provide adequate funding to continue and expand this initia-
tive. At this writing there is no assurance that the Governor and Legislature will
act in this manner.

Is it time for a new approach? Similar to managing nonpoint sources in
watershed management, early detection to limit the spread of invasive species re-
quires broad stakeholder involvement. A more involved democratic framework
needs to be considered to expand stakeholder participation in setting priorities,
lobbying for funds and increasing local participation in decision-making. This
particular stance is supported by a num-
ber of studies that have shown success
by grassroots environmental manage-
ment organizations (Koonz, et al.
2004; Weber, 2003; McGinnis et al.,
1999; Mandell, 1999 and others).

Regulatory authority of state agencies
and historical influence of nonresident
interest groups have largely influ-
ced the region’s land use and protection pol-
cies with limited participation by the
150,000 year-round residents. Each in-
terest group has struggled to protect its
own idea of what the Adirondacks
means to them while mostly ignoring
what it meant to the year-round resi-
dents who not only provide the accom-
modations, but support the infrastruc-
ture that allows for their stay in the Park
(Harris and Jarvis, 2004). McMartin
(2002) describes in detail thirty years of
controversy that emerged over the APA
and its associated Land Use and Devel-
opment Plan (Adirondack Park Agency,
1972). McMartin identifies many groups
that formed to defend their respective in-
terests as the Park plan and zoning mea-
sures were put in place. The distrust
among these groups lingers today. While
the contentious atmosphere has cooled in
recent years, McMartin (2002) writes
that there still is little middle ground on
which to discuss concerns for the Park.

Under current law APA and the
DEC define the rules and protocols for
planning, decisions and implementa-
tion efforts. While state agencies and
local municipalities routinely hold pub-
lic hearings on initiatives, these forums
do not necessarily allow for effective
two-way communication, coordination
and implementation in an inclusive
way. Consensus will be needed between
these agencies and stakeholder interests
on a strategy to enhance political sup-
port for appropriate legislation and
funding to support an Adirondack
invasive species program.

According to our surveys, the Depart-
ment of Environmental Conservation
(DEC) is favored for a lead role; however,
there is also recognition and strong sup-
port among all groups for an umbrella or-
ganization to coordinate an invasive
species and watershed program. Explicit
comments from the surveys and inter-
views acknowledge that it will take a sub-
stantial ongoing effort to effectively con-
trol the spread of invasive species and that
such effort will require some level of coor-
dination among the many interested par-
ties (Skaley and Richmond, 2005 b).

In recognition of a need for a regional
plan, Paul Smith’s Adirondack Watershed
Institute sponsored a workshop/conference
in 2005 to discuss a draft aquatic nuisance
species (ANS) management plan. Confer-
ence speakers outlined some of the current
efforts under APIPP, the Lake Champlain
Basin Program, and programs in Maine
and Massachusetts as well as proposals
from the Invasive Species Task Force. The
Adirondack Park ANS Management Plan
presented at the 2005 conference in a 3rd
Draft focused on specific objectives to con-
tral the spread of invasive organisms. It was
not clear, however, as to how the effort
would be managed and funded. Lake
groups present were quick to recognize the
lack of a governance structure, and were
concerned about how funds would be dis-
seminated. A fourth draft of the ANS plan
did incorporate many specific suggestions
supported by workshop participants, but
has still left the organizational structure for
regional management vaguely defined (http://www.paulsmiths.edu/PAGE=1685
/page.pl#Committee).

Sustainability implies a balance be-
tween economic and environmental con-
cerns so that the ecology of the region is
not unduly impacted by economic develop-
ment. To have effective ecosystem man-
agement in the complicated regulatory en-
vironment of the Adirondacks and to as-
sure adequate participation, special em-
phasis should be placed on coordination
and communication among all major
stakeholders including those working to
maintain a sustainable economy. Likewise,
adequate technical support to execute pre-
vention and control programs should be
addressed. Finally, there should be suffi-
cient political action to sustain funding
and to support program implementation.
These actions require shared decision mak-
ing and lobbying to raise the necessary
funds. Current literature and our experi-
ence with the Finger Lakes-Lake Ontario
Watershed Protection Alliance (FL-
LOWPA) model indicate that better deci-
sions and programs emerge when these in-
teractions take place within a neutral
forum where participating parties share
ideas and are coequal in decision-making.
An umbrella organization with regional
representation from major constituent
interests could collectively address policy
concerns and focus on sustaining a region-
al eco-management program including ad-
ministration of State and/or private funds.

Because the Adirondacks have both
a regulatory and biological landscape
that is well defined and unique in the
State, perhaps the region should
uniquely define the way it develops its
approach to manage invasives. A broad
coalition of local residents, summer
people, advocates and locally elected offi-
cials could work together within a
“Regional Board of Stakeholders,” not
unlike FL-LOWPA. This governance
structure could then embrace shared deci-
sion-making to set priorities and de-
velop an equitable formula for sharing
resources, overseeing program initiatives, and lobbying to sustain funding. This implies geographic and broad representation among stakeholders operating within a democratic framework.

The original goal of APIPP is to limit the spread of invasive species within the Park is still of highest priority. However, to sustain this effort requires a regional governance structure that has a strong institutional base, and can unite ecologic and economic interests to conserve the unique assemblage of communities, both biologic and cultural. While regional stakeholders need to debate the configuration of such a framework, there are examples of successful grassroots initiatives across the nation that may guide the process. In New York State FL-LOWPA has for over twenty years successfully managed and applied State funds to combat invasive species and address local and regional watershed concerns. The following are key elements to FL-LOWPA’s success and should be considered as operational components of a Regional Board of Stakeholders:

- A strong political action base linking economic and citizen concerns with approaches to preserve the ecology of the regions’ waterbodies.
- Regular public meetings to exchange information on local programs that aim 1) to preserve the aquatic biodiversity and water quality, 2) build communication channels to sustain a trusting relationship among institutional participants and local constituencies.
- A regional program coordinator and offices with links to a 501 c(3) economic development organization for contractual support and ties to the region’s tourism economy to justify continued state and shared local funding.
- Local program initiatives, administered and implemented with technical/professional staff in each county (e.g. soil and water conservation districts and county extension personnel).
- A healthy political action base involving lake groups, environmental advocates and the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages to lobby for legislation and funding that links local economic and citizen concerns with approaches to preserve the ecology of the region’s waterbodies.

Park legislation may require that a Regional Board of Stakeholders work within established principles to preserve the region’s unique character and to use the latest science to implement best management approaches to sustain the region’s economy and ecology. At the same time the APA and DEC may well recognize the necessity for some devolution of authority and delegation of responsibility to local institutions. Balancing regulatory roles of state agencies with that of a Regional Board of Stakeholders is essential. A regional governing board needs flexibility to participate in lobbying for policy changes, and flexibility to initiate pilot programs to control invasive species. Such a Board also needs bylaws to limit the domination of any single group over the whole, to define operations, to minimize internal conflict, and to determine allocation of resources.

Fairness and equity with a willingness and flexibility to work “outside the box” when warranted, are necessary when a diverse group of stakeholder interests come together to address problems of mutual concern (Weber, 2003). Success in building this alliance depends on delivery of product. As product is recognized, trust in the process and the alliance will build. Based on our research, we believe it is possible for consensus to develop around a regional ecosystem management program in the Adirondacks. What form it takes is, as yet, unclear. Nevertheless, we have as an example more than 20 years of success in the FL-LOWPA model (Skaley and Richmond, 2005a) as well as the emergence of a number of similar successful grassroots environmental management organizations across the nation (Koontz et al, 2004; Mandell, 1999; McGinnis et al, 1999; and Weber, 2003). Therefore, we remain optimistic that by focusing on common interests a unique management structure can emerge for the Adirondacks and North Country.

Reference