Hope for the CABR?

By GARY CHILSON

I would bet very few Adirondackers realize they live, work and play in the largest and most populated Biosphere Reserve in America. Encompassing 22 counties across the Lake Champlain watershed, the Green Mountains of Vermont, and all of the Adirondack Park, nearly 10 million acres were designated the Champlain-Adirondack Biosphere Reserve (CABR) by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1989. International recognition of the ecological and social importance of this region through UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) program supported the creation of the Lake Champlain Basin Program and the Northern Forest Lands Project.1 But beyond these significant initial side-effects, nothing more has come of it since. The CABR and the 46 other designated Biosphere Reserves (BRs) in America all failed to become truly functional, deleting America’s potentially important contribution from the global effort to protect biodiversity, promote research, monitoring and information exchange, and demonstrate the development of sustainable communities.

I seek to explain, in this short essay, what the CABR and Biosphere Reserves are, why they’re important, why Biosphere Reserves in America seem to have died, and to discuss the hopeful new developments that suggest a possible resurrection. To begin, I quote a 1995 document that highlights the purpose of the CABR and BRs in general:

The primary goal of the CABR is to establish a non-regulatory, non-advocacy program (emphasis added) that uses education, research, and demonstration projects to encourage social and economic vitality and to preserve and improve the environmental health in the region. Other goals include:

- Find practical and environmentally sound solutions to problems of conflicting uses.
- Facilitate regional, interstate, and international cooperation in the areas of environmental education, scientific data exchange, and development of regional policies to address natural resource, social and economic development issues.
- Serve as a model of how a coordinated public/private effort at the regional scale can help protect biological diversity and promote sustained economic development.
- Build public awareness, understanding, and support of the relationship between preservation and protection of the unique, diverse, and special natural resources within the reserve and the sustained economic growth and vitality of this region.2

Fortunately, even with the functional disappearance of the CABR and nearly all of our other American Biosphere Reserves, the goals of a Biosphere Reserve continue to inspire the efforts of many American organizations, including the Adirondack Research Consortium. Even more important, the international effort to protect biodiversity and promote social and economic development continues—despite America’s failure to assume its leadership role and responsibilities. Although no new BRs have been formed in America since 1991, the growth in the number of BRs worldwide has increased dramatically even without our leadership, as the figure indicates. In July, 2005 there were 482 designated BRs in 102 countries.3 Just this summer, more than 30 nominations for new BRs were presented to the International Coordinating Council of UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere Program for designation.4 If approved, the total will be well over 500 BRs in 104 countries.

It is a real shame, though, that the Adirondacks, the oldest experiment in living together with the Other, does not function more effectively as the international model it should and could be as the core and buffer zones of a BR. Our constitutionally protected Forest Preserve, defended for over a hundred years by many individuals and organizations, like the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks and many other advocacy groups, forms the core area of wilderness and wild forest lands necessary for protect-

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ing, conserving and restoring the biodiversity of the lake-forest ecosystem we call the Northern Forest. Together with Vermont’s Camel’s Hump and Mount Mansfield State Natural Areas and the Green Mountain National Forest, it is commonly estimated that more than 90 percent of everything native to this important biogeographical region exists within the boundaries of our CABR.

To protect, conserve and restore the biodiversity of this region, conservation biology recommends concentric zones of environmental protection: a wilderness core surrounded by a buffer zone which, in turn, is surrounded by a transitional zone. Beyond wilderness core areas, which National Parks and other protected areas can claim, the CABR includes buffer zones around its wilderness cores as a result of the pre-existing Adirondack Park Agency Act (1971) regulating development on private land within the Park. Beyond the Adirondack Park’s wilderness and buffer zones, Vermont’s less restrictive Act 250 (1969) regulates private land in Vermont, representing the CABR’s transitional zones. Thus, the CABR’s international significance involves:

... human communities as integral components and including resources managed for objectives ranging from complete protection to intensive, yet sustainable development. A biosphere reserve is envisioned as a regional “landscape for learning” in which monitoring, research, education, and training are encouraged to support sustainable conservation of natural and managed ecosystems. It is a framework for regional cooperation involving government decisionmakers, scientists, resource managers, private organizations and local people (i.e., the biosphere reserve “stakeholders”). Finally, each biosphere reserve is part of a global network for sharing information and experience to help address complex problems of conservation and development.5

Despite the disappointment I feel in America’s failure to maintain its former leadership role in BRs, as well as in so many other important global issues, there may be a thin sliver of silver lining to this particular cloud. One of the very best things about America, as a model for the world, is that our nation stands for individual liberty and the ability of a free people to govern themselves in a democracy. Our failure, since 1991, to nominate additional BRs and the loss of fully functioning already-designated BRs like the CABR may ultimately be the result of a political backlash against a top-down, paternal, perhaps even elitist, coercive Command and Control approach to solving environmental and social problems so popular in the 60s and 70s. Recent efforts to apply more transparent and bottom-up approaches, together with our disillusionment with coercive environmental policies in general, may lead to a resurgence of American leadership in the global environmental and social justice arena with our American ideals of individual liberty and democracy enhanced and illuminated brightly.

Perhaps the backlash first appeared on the political stage with the Sagebrush Rebellion and grew under Ronald Reagan’s Administration. President Reagan, in addition to cutting funding and enacting numerous restrictions limiting environmental regulations, cited mismanagement and
philosophical differences with UNESCO and canceled America's membership in 1984. The United Nations and the entire concept of global cooperation is a perennial subject of suspicion in America in spite of the fact that it was one of America's greatest gifts to the world following World War II. Cut off from direct participation at the highest levels with UNESCO, American BRs and other important global programs nevertheless limped along and several more BRs were even nominated and designated, including the CABR.

Things then came to a head, at least here in the Adirondacks, with the release of the Report and Map of the Governor's Commission on the Adirondacks in the 21st Century. Apparently, according to Carol LaGrasse, it happened,

... when the UN designation took place in 1989. Neither the town board nor anyone else I know, either officials or private citizens, had heard about the designation... People got riled up against the Biosphere Reserve designation when it was announced, unwittingly, I believe, in fine print, in a 1990 set of recommendations to bring about extremely onerous regulations over the three million acres of private land in the six million Adirondack acre region.6

The perceived but mistaken linkage between the Commission's Report and the CABR was unfortunate. The very visible and vocal opposition to the Commission's Report and Map led to the creation of a number of effective grassroots property-rights groups in the Adirondacks, the failure of the Commission's recommendations, and squashed any hope to organize the CABR, even by our friends across the Lake in Vermont. Nationally, the property-rights and anti-environmentalist movements continued to grow and, coupled together with an eruption of anti-UN emotions against several BR nominations in 1991, led to the withdrawal of the nominations and to a series of so-called sovereignty bills proposed in Congress by the mid-90s. The 'sovereignty' issue flourished in Congress even though a 'Biosphere Reserves Fact Sheet,'7 prepared by the Congressional Research Service, demonstrated that all the allegations of a UN-White House conspiracy to abandon sovereignty and American property rights were false. While the sovereignty bills failed in Congress,8 even with repeated attempts, the spillover result was reduced political and financial support for America's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) program and the termination of BR activities in many areas.9

Many years later, the need for global cooperation against terrorism may have prompted George W. Bush to return to the international community for help. As part of this new approach, in 2003 the President resumed our membership in UNESCO. Renewed participation led Vernon C. “Tom” Gilbert, long-time advocate and leader in the original US MAB program, to meet with Administration and Congressional leaders and establish the United States Biosphere Reserve Association in an effort to revive BRs in America. Henry Lamb, Executive Vice President of the Environmental Conservation Organization and Chairman of Sovereignty International, heard of this tentative development and, in 2004, wrote “Here Comes the UN Again,” seeking to revive opposition to BRs in general and sustainable development in particular.10

Something pretty amazing has happened since. Lamb's early intervention with Congressman Pombo, Chair of the House Committee on Resources, nearly squashed the revival of BRs before it had begun. But Tom Gilbert persisted and, following through on a suggestion to meet with the opposition, he met with Lamb to clarify the purpose and nature of BRs. Some success at these meetings even led to Gilbert presenting the concept of BRs at the Freedom21 Conference 2006 just this last July. As Gilbert related to me:

... we have established some common ground. We have agreed to propose legislation in support of the US BR program if we can resolve differences. We have agreed that BRs contribute to conservation of ecosystems, landscapes, species, and genetic variation, and that BRs should conduct the education, research and demonstration to help achieve this goal. We acknowledge that this cannot be done without participation, but voluntarily and “through education — not coercion” as Lamb said. Lamb's group's biggest problem with BRs is the sustainable development function. They say that “Freedom cannot be sustained in the presence of sustainable development, which can only exist when people are controlled by government.”11

Proposed legislation is now being hammered into some kind of shape that we may soon see introduced in Congress. Without legislation for guidance and funding, our federal agencies will not support BRs and America's role in protecting, conserving and
restoring biodiversity will continue to lag behind the rest of the world. Without legislation that property rights and sovereignty advocates can support, BRs in America will be forever doomed to constant opposition and attacks. Fortunately, too, the sustainable development function of BRs doesn't require government coercion, Henry Lamb's opinion notwithstanding; we wouldn't want it if it did.

Back here in the Adirondacks, should legislation be proposed, we should all actively attempt to be inclusive, welcoming alternative perspectives to seek "common ground among a multitude of viewpoints." Perhaps then the benefits of the Champlain-Adirondack Biosphere Reserve's designation and international recognition will finally be realized and we will take the stage as the world's finest model for living with the Other while preserving individual liberty, the democratic process and a vibrant economy.

References

2 Biosphere Reserves in Action, op. cit.
4 VC "Tom" Gilbert [vernongilbert@comcast.net], Chair of the US BR Managers Association, personal communication, August 16, 2006.
5 Biosphere Reserves in Action, op. cit.
6 Testimony of Carol W. LaGrasse, President, Property Rights Foundation of America, Inc. Submitted to The Committee on Resources, United States House of Representatives May 5, 1997.
8 Thanks are due to Tom Cobb, then-President of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, for his public testimony in support of BRs and against the sovereignty bill. Statement of the George Wright Society on H.R. 901, the "American Land Sovereignty Protection Act" The George Wright Forum, 14 (2) 1997.
11 I take my understanding of these events from my email correspondence with V. C. Gilbert on August 16, 2006.