The Adirondack Mountain Club: Its Programs and History

By JOHN P. FREEMAN

Abstract
The history and current programs of the Adirondack Mountain Club are outlined from its inception in 1922 up to the present. Though originally formed with a prime interest in trail construction and hiking in the Forest Preserve, the organization has evolved with an equal emphasis on conservation and education. A volunteer board of directors, advised by 14 standing committees, governs ADK. Volunteers run the 27 chapters of the Club. From conservation, advocacy, education, and recreation, to the publishing of trail, paddling and climbing guides, the Club is deeply involved in all aspects of wild land affairs in New York State.

What is ADK?
The mission statement of the Adirondack Mountain Club is merely a framework for understanding its activities in the 21st Century, but I want to start there, because every thing that ADK is doing - its programs - is derived from it.

The Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) is dedicated to the protection and responsible use of the New York State Forest Preserve, parks and other wild lands and waters. The Club, founded in 1922, is a member-directed organization committed to public service and stewardship. ADK employs a balanced approach to outdoor recreation, advocacy, environmental education and natural resource conservation.

This statement was adopted in 1997, the year the Club celebrated its 75th anniversary. ADK is dedicated both to the protection of New York State's Forest Preserve and with its recreational use.

Next I should emphasize that ADK is not just involved with the Adirondacks, but with Forest Preserve lands in the Catskills, and with park lands and waters throughout New York State. Through the interest of our 25 chapters throughout the state (and one each in the Boston area and in New Jersey) and our 8,000 members-at-large, ADK has helped to protect park lands and open space from Allegany State Park south of Buffalo to Bethpage State Park on Long Island.

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John P. (Jack) Freeman (jfreeman@together.net) has recently retired after eleven years in conservation affairs with the Adirondack Mountain Club and is the author (with Wesley H. Hayes) of the 2001 ADK guidebook, "Views from on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills."

Governor George Pataki (left) walks the lowlands of Schunnemunk Mountain State Park with Neil Woodworth, then counsel of ADK (center), and Joe Martens, president of the Open Space Institute, and his wife Kathleen. The potential for this new park was called to the governor's attention by ADK in 2001.
And finally, you might ask what is meant by a “balanced approach” to the great conservation issues of our day. This phrase does not mean that ADK takes wishy-washy or compromised positions, but that the Club is recognized as moderate in its environmental stance, researching issues thoroughly before taking carefully and internally debated positions. Significantly, leaders in state agencies, elected officials, and research groups respect the knowledge of ADK’s staff and skilled volunteers. The single guiding principle to Forest Preserve protection for ADK has always been the “forever wild” provisions of Article XIV, Section 1 of the NYS Constitution, as interpreted by the courts, and elaborated by the Adirondack and Catskill Park’s State Land Master Plans, and the Adirondack Park [private] Land Use and Development Plan.

The Importance of Volunteers
An important characteristic of ADK is the dedication and knowledge of its individual members. The Club is the only statewide conservation group whose primary purpose is to represent the hiking and paddling communities. Rather than reliance on its skilled staff alone to define Club policy, positions, and administrative affairs, ADK involves members in all facets of the organizational structure. A volunteer Board of Governors of 37 members and an executive committee of 10 volunteers plus two staff members govern the Club. Advice is provided by a phalanx of 14 standing committees such as Conservation (20 volunteers), Education (16 volunteers), Finance (10 volunteers), and Trails (22 volunteers). Individual chapters of the Club are run exclusively by volunteers. The average number of officers and committee chairs for ADK’s largest three chapters, Albany, Glens Falls-Saratoga, and Rochester, is 25, all volunteers, plus committee members and outing leaders! This means that unlike many similar organizations, ADK members know what’s happening on the ground in wild lands throughout the state, and eagerly participate in formulating ADK policies. Club membership is currently at 31,000.

Leaders at the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) regularly note that ADK produces the largest number of attendees and speakers at hearings on open space affairs throughout the state.

Why do ADK members take such an active interest in state administrative policies in the Forest Preserve and elsewhere? We believe that it is directly related to the Club and chapter’s involvement in recreational use and in hands-on stewardship. Members adopt more than 140 lean-tos each year in the Adirondacks through DEC’s Adopt-a-Natural-Resource program. In another such agreement with DEC, members adopt 70 trails through our Trail Stewards program. Through a less formal program, 16 units of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves are regularly monitored by chapters and individuals for illegal use and overuse. And, ADK members have taken active leadership roles in eight of the 17 recent fire tower restoration projects in the Adirondacks and Catskills. ADK is DEC’s biggest partner in trail maintenance in the Forest Preserve, both with skilled professional workers and with volunteers. Finally, ADK chapters and their members are involved throughout New York outside the Forest Preserve with trail construction and maintenance. Thus it is natural that Club members become passionate about “their” wild lands and are not reluctant to inform DEC and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation when it appears that the state’s own stewardship needs improvement.

History of the Adirondack Mountain Club

[I am indebted to Bruce Wadsworth, long-standing ADK member, for what follows, taken largely from his 1997 booklet, With Wilderness at Heart: A Short History of the Adirondack Mountain Club, written and published for ADK’s 75th anniversary. It is now out of print, but is available in regional libraries.]

The history of the Adirondack Mountain Club is both immensely fascinating and little known. Franklin Delano Roosevelt (then NYS governor), Bob Marshall (Wilderness Society founder), William O. Douglas (Supreme Court
Justice), and Gifford Pinchot (first chief of the US Forest Service) and many other prominent persons are part of it.

The story begins in January, 1921 when Meade Dobson, secretary of the Palisade Interstate Park Conference, later to become the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, innocently, but illegally caught a trout through the ice of a private pond near Utica, and then bragged about it to a friend. The friend happened to be the chief game protector for the Conservation Commission. Partly in good humor, Dobson was hauled before Commissioner George Pratt and assessed a small fine. Dobson took advantage of his presence with the commissioner to discuss the inadequate hiking system of the Adirondacks. He suggested that a club be formed to organize and publicize such a trail network, much as the Appalachian Mountain Club had already done in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and the Green Mountain Club in Vermont. At that time, the Forest Preserve was growing rapidly as lumber companies refused to pay their land taxes — after having removed the lumber from forest tracts in the Adirondacks. Dobson suggested that the logging roads of these lands could form the basis of a recreational trail system. Later, Pratt asked his assistant William G. Howard to work with Dobson to initiate plans for the proposed club. These two men spent ensuing months talking to interested parties and finally arranged a meeting of forty people in December 1921 at the “Log Cabin,” a rooftop lunch spot atop the headquarters of Abercrombie & Fitch sporting goods business in New York City. Attendees included representatives of hiking, mountaineering, outing, hotel, transportation and commercial interests. George Marshall was later to write, “The general feeling was that the purpose of the Club would be to give as many people as possible a chance to get into the woods; to improve the system of trails and camps; and to educate the public to keep the camps clean and the woods from being burnt.” So here at the very first gathering was the sense of the Club’s future educational role and an environmental ethic.

A second meeting of 208 charter members was held at the same location on April 3, 1922. Pratt was elected president and Dobson, vice president. Officers later signed the Certificate of Incorporation and on April 29, 1922, the Certificate was recorded by the NYS Department of State. Franklin Roosevelt was an original Club director and remained a lifetime member. Other charter members were Gifford Pinchot, Bob Marshall, and Bob and George’s prominent father, Louis Marshall, the great constitutional lawyer, philanthropist, and trustee of the NYS Forestry School at Syracuse.

The Early Years, 1922-1929

In its first half-year the Club was amazingly energetic. With 583 members by November, 1922, ADK had cut 135 miles of the Northville-Placid Trail and three other short trails; erected five shelters along the N-P Trail; established a monthly bulletin; and founded its first chapter in Albany with Meade Dobson as chair. The New York Chapter became the second chapter in 1923, followed by the Glens Falls Chapter formed in 1928 at a meeting of interested hikers at the Queensbury Hotel. From 1922 to 1925, the Club was busy with the planning, financing and building of Johns Brook Lodge. (See details, below.)

Of the eight Objects of the Club’s certificate of Incorporation the first seven centered around trails. However, when Pirie MacDonald, whose concern was neither trails nor lodges, was elected president in the late 1920s, he announced that he would refuse to serve unless he had full cooperation from the Board of Governors and all committees. His concern was conservation, the last of the eight Objects of the Club. MacDonald felt that the last should be first. He wrote,

“This Club is not essentially a hikers’ proposition with its attendant trails and shelters, but one which is concerned with the broad application of the best conservation doctrine as adapted to the Adirondacks. ...The Adirondack Preserve is the property of the people of the State of New York and they must be made conscious of it and its value to them, to the end that they will protect it from hostile and ignorant interests and from their own acts. The Club should show the people how to participate in that protection.”

MacDonald felt that the time had come for the Club to take a clear position in favor of preservation over lumbering that was then common in Forest Preserve lands. In July 1928, the Club’s periodical High Spots announced the MacDonald doctrine in bold type. The seed planted in 1922 had broken ground in 1928. The “tree” that grew had three branches that to this day characterize the Adirondack Mountain Club: Conservation, Education and Recreation.

The “ADK” Acronym

When the Adirondack Mountain Club formed in 1922, the older Appalachian Mountain Club was already known by its initials, “AMC.” The newer organization needed to find a different moniker. Abbreviations such as “Adiron. Mt. Club” or “Adk. Mt. Club” were finally rejected in favor of the simple ADK in capital letters, which is now a registered trademark of “The Adirondack Mountain Club.” Publishers needing an abbreviation for “Adirondack” are encouraged to use “Adk” or “Ad’k.”

The ADK Lodges

As promised above, I want to give a brief account of how ADK came to own property in the Johns Brook Valley and at Heart Lake where the Club’s two permanent lodges are located.

The story of Johns Brook Lodge begins in 1922 when the Conservation Commission’s state superintendent of forests, Clifford Pettis, approached the general manager of the J. & J. Rogers
Company concerning the state's purchase of the company's extensive land holdings in Johns Brook Valley. The commission and the Rogers Company were about to come to terms when the Conservation Commission realized that once the land became Forest Preserve, state opportunity to create a lodge and hiking center would be impossible. It had long been George Pratt's goal as Conservation Commissioner to encourage recreational enjoyment of the Forest Preserve as a tool for ensuring that the public would understand its value and would continue to support its protection. Thus, ADK was offered a gift of a small parcel by the Rogers Company, as part of the package for state acquisition of the rest of the Upper Johns Brook Valley.

Details for site selection for Johns Brook Lodge were left to a committee composed of Clifford Pettis, George Marshall, and A.S. Houghton. They chose a cleared site of 15.5 acres where J. & J. Rogers Co. had a former business office.

Material for lodge construction moved up the valley by wagon and sleigh in 1924. The route was the former Rogers tote road, now the South Side Trail. The lodge opened the first week in July, 1925. Guests numbered 325 that first year. A route ascending Big Slide was scouted and other trails to the Wolf Jaws, Basin and Table Top were planned. Trailbuilding centered around Johns Brook Lodge for the next few years.

Adirondak Loj had its beginnings with a prior facility, Adirondack Lodge, a three-story structure built in the late 1870s on then Clear Lake as a private venture by Henry van Hoevenbergh. Henry built many trails in the area, including the one that bears his name up Mt. Marcy. He renamed Clear Lake “Heart Lake” and a small peak in the property “Mt. Jo” for a lost former fiancée, Josephine Scofield. (For more details, see Sandra Weber’s fine story, *The Finest Square Mile*, Purple Mountain Press, 1998.) Van Hoevenbergh lost ownership in a financial downturn in 1899, selling off the property, though remaining as innkeeper. In 1900, the Lake Placid Club purchased the site. And then the great forest fire that swept through the area in 1903 destroyed the lodge. Henry barely escaped the flames with his life. The Lake Placid Club rebuilt a much less pretentious structure near the site of the old lodge in 1928. Following the phonetic dictates of the Lake Placid Club's Melville Dewey, Adirondack Lodge became Adirondak Loj and Heart Lake became, for a time, Hart Lake.

ADK's relationship with the Loj began in 1932, when Fred Kelsey, an ADK governor and member of the Lake Placid Club, entered the picture. Kelsey formed the Adirondak Loj Corporation and, with himself as sole stockholder, leased the Heart Lake property and Loj from the Lake Placid Club. Many ADK members flocked to the Loj, making it their base of operations in the High Peaks. It was a good buy: a week in the Loj bunk room with three meals each day cost $21. Kelsey himself took care of all expenses, while making the property open to all ADK members.

When Kelsey died in 1957, the Lake Placid Club, not wanting to sell to someone who would use the property for purely commercial purposes, agreed to sell it to ADK at an extremely reasonable price.

A six-year long-range planning effort, 1964-1970, for the Loj complex considered how ADK would need to manage this property in the future. Early on, the committee recognized that it was important to protect the natural appearance of the property and any unusual natural areas. A major concern was a 150-car parking lot at the edge of Heart Lake and adjacent to a lean-to and camping area and to the Loj. ADK suggested to the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) that since the public had free use of the trails through the property to the Forest Preserve beyond, as a result of an easement sold to the state for one dollar, the state should bear the cost of a larger, relocated parking lot. The state countered the Club's offer with approval of a plan that ADK build a new 200-car lot itself. By 1973, a new lot had been built farther from the lakeside and, concurrently, a new trail connection was cut from the new lot to the van Hoevenbergh Trail, a joint project with DEC. Thus, ever since 1973, the hiking public has had access to the Adirondacks' most popular trailhead, removed from proximity to the developed sites around Heart Lake.

An Education Program

Recreation and Education are so intertwined in the fabric of ADK that they must be considered the warp and woof of the cloth from which the Club is made. If recreation provides enjoyment, education enhances it. If recreation is personal, education is for all. And while conservation seeks to protect the very same natural resources that recreation uses, education permits both to coexist in harmony. It is through education that the understanding, appreciation and intellectual will to protect the natural resource evolve and eventually stimulate the creation of necessary conservation measures.

There is no space in this essay to enumerate all aspects of ADK's educational program. But I will attempt to hit a few of the highlights. By 1929, an Education Committee had been formed to arouse public interest in their ownership of the Forest Preserve and to teach them how to use and protect the forest. Education committees came and went over subsequent years. Finally in 1978, education became in fact an integral part of the Club's service to members and the public. The greatly increasing membership of the Club at this time finally provided the funding necessary to make this possible. The committee sought ways to coordinate informational needs at the lodges, natural history areas, outings, workshops, etc. It worked with the staff of the Club's periodical, *Adirondac* magazine, to make
the best educational use of its pages. It produced informational pamphlets on such topics as giardiasis, hypothermia, and black bears. The first paid education director was appointed in 1980. The position now supervises a program instructor, a naturalist and, in recent years, three summer interns. The Summit Stewards program, run in cooperation with the Adirondack Nature Conservancy and DEC, is designed to educate the public on the fragility of the summit alpine environment.

The Campers and Hikers Building, now called the High Peaks Information Center, was built in the early 1970s adjoining the new parking lot on the Heart Lake property. Basically it serves as a small ad hoc education center. Here hikers may ask about trail conditions, examine the weather forecast, buy last-minute hiking supplies, and examine the Education Committee’s informational exhibits covering the inside walls, view audio-visual programs on selected topics, and pick up informational brochures.

With the advent of an Education Department with paid staff, education has in recent years become less of a passive pursuit and taken an active bent. Workshops on recreational subjects and natural history abound, both for members and the general public. The education staff organizes two lecture series on Adirondack-related topics, at the High Peaks Information Center and at the Club’s Member Service Center at Lake George. Were it not for ADK’s presence at Heart Lake, offering training courses in the proper use and appreciation of the Forest Preserve, perhaps there would be no reason for ADK’s presence on the Heart Lake property, surrounded by state land. This argument for the Club’s continued presence here and at Johns Brook Lodge is bolstered by the observation that DEC has its hands full administering the state’s forests, with scant time or resources to spare for proper education of the public. It is left largely to ADK and its chapters to train adventurers in Conservation and Advocacy

Conservation at ADK involves recommendation of conservation policies to the Board of Directors by the largely volunteer Conservation Committee. These policies, if approved by the Board, then become the basis for Conservation staff advocacy before state agencies, the state legislature, and occasionally before Congress and Federal agencies, when the issues directly affect NYS’s environmental interests. Such a federal issue is acid deposition. The Club has been particularly vocal on this in recent years.

David Newhouse, long-time chair of ADK’s Conservation Committee (as well as two-time president of the Club), tells a story from the mid-1960s that demonstrates how ADK’s conservation constituency solved the problem of trash disposal in the High Peaks.

The problem was the incredible quantity of litter practically everywhere hikers had hiked. The summit of Mt. Marcy was filthy; each lean-to had large dumps of trash nearby. ADK complained about the situation, but DEC felt the problem was too widespread for amelioration.

Realizing that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step, David and his Conservation Committee colleagues organized an attack on Mt. Marcy, planning to haul out the trash. DEC got wind of the plans, and rushed staff to the Marcy summit midweek to show that something was being done. ADK’s weekend crew discovered that the top of the mountain had been swept clean of debris. Closer inspection, however, revealed that the trash hadn’t been removed from the summit, but rather

Albany Chapter volunteers Donna Shee and Gary Hilt quarry a rock for a rock step on the Cascade Mountain trail, October 1987
hidden in the crevices around the summit — a cosmetic cleanup. Right away, the ADK team went to work and hauled great volumes of litter from the crevices out to the trailhead.

In later efforts at cleanup of lean-to sites, DEC and ADK worked together in the High Peaks, moving the litter to Marcy Dam, from where DEC took it out in trucks. A campaign by the Club and DEC educated the hiking public that if one must “Carry it in, Carry it out.” Thus a new ethic for the Forest Preserve evolved, extended more recently by the aforementioned Leave-No-Trace program.

ADK’s advocacy in recent years has resulted in important protections for the Forest Preserve and open space advances throughout the state. (See box below.) Leading the way in these and many more initiatives at advocacy was Neil Woodworth, former chairman of the ADK Conservation Committee, later Conservation Director and Counsel, then Deputy Executive Director, and finally in 2004 Executive Director of the Club, still directing the Conservation portfolio.

**Trails and Publishing**

The Trails Program has been mentioned above in several contexts. Having responsibility for the Club’s professional and volunteer trail maintenance work with DEC, the Trail Director, more recently referred to as Director of Field Programs, has been quick to point out that his work is basically a conservation program. Correcting a muddy spot in a trail is done not to keep hikers’ boots dry, but rather to protect the resource from mud holes that become ever wider as hikers walk around the mud. Such work as building stone steps and improving drainage has “hardened” major trunk trails so that many thousands can use these routes with scant environmental damage.

ADK is also a publishing house, with some 33 books and maps in print at any one time. Foremost among the list are eight volumes of hiking guides, seven for the Adirondack trails and one for the Catskill trails. Both the guide books and accompanying maps are updated with each reprinting. Currently, new editions of these guides are being published sequentially. In 2004, new editions of the High Peaks Guide and the Central Region Guide appeared.

A separate series of four guides describes canoe routes. And the Club publishes a rock-climbing guide. Other style hiking guides serve as samplers of the best day hikes or backpacking trips in the Forest Preserve. Another gathers together trail descriptions to all the publicly accessible fire tower summits in the Forest Preserve. And still another, *Kids on the Trail*, recommends to parents how and where to take their children hiking. The variety and geographic scope of these volumes is purposely designed to spread the use of interesting trail and canoe routes throughout the Adirondacks and Catskills, thus helping to relieve crowding in the High Peaks.

ADK’s publishing history is full of classic volumes, including Dorothy Plum’s amazing *Adirondack Bibliography* (1958), an inventory of books, pamphlets and periodicals through 1955. A second volume covering 1956-1965 was printed in 1973. Another example is Eleanor Brown’s encyclopedic volume, *The Forest Preserve of New York State, a Handbook for Conservationists* (1985). For the first time an author covered all essential laws and court rulings relating to the Forest Preserve, in a field which normally takes many years to gain a comprehensive understanding.

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**ADK Advocacy for the Forest Preserve and Open Space**

- ADK led efforts to forestall proposed expansion of the Hunter Mountain Ski Bowl operations into Forest Preserve lands.
- It joined other conservation groups around the state in promoting successful passage of the 1996 Environmental Bond Act ballot initiative, and works each year to make sure that funds are allocated in the NYS budget to environmental projects via the Environmental Protection Fund.
- Since 1993, it has nurtured and promoted fire tower restoration efforts by local groups in cooperation with state agencies at many non-wilderness sites in the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves, and other sites across the state.
- It was instrumental in urging the governor and DEC to commit to completion of all the Unit Management Plans for Catskill and Adirondack units within five years.
- ADK members and staff lobbied successfully for state purchase of Whitney Park’s Little Tupper Lake parcel of 15,000 acres through massive letter-writing, newspaper op-ed pieces, and face-to-face meetings with decision-makers. ADK also lobbied the Adirondack Park Agency successfully for a wilderness classification for this new addition to the Forest Preserve.
- The Club has formed a partnership with the New York - New Jersey Trail Conference to ensure greater protection and stewardship of New York’s downstate parks, Sterling Forest and the Catskill Forest Preserve.
- Through extensive staff and member efforts, ADK successfully lobbied the state to purchase wild river corridors owned by Champion International for addition to the Adirondack Forest Preserve.
- The Club assisted the *International Paper Company* in deciding which of its lands should have development and recreational easements with the state.

**Postscript**

I'll conclude with a quote by another well-known Club member on the wilderness character of our Forest Preserve lands:

“...I am pleased that our Club has observed the seventy-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the New York State Forest Preserve because people need to be reminded of the great recreational and spiritual resource they have in that region.

Few people east of the Mississippi are so fortunate as to have a great wilderness area for camping, hiking, canoeing and the general enjoyment of nature within a few hours of their home....

Surely it is worthwhile to preserve for our posterity some small part of our woods and mountains and lakes as our ancestors knew them, not as a museum, but as a natural place where roads and artificial amusements are barred and where modern people can go to refresh themselves.


For more information on the Adirondack Mountain Club, readers may consult the Club's website, www.adk.org, or call our Member Service Center in Lake George at 518-668-4447.