

AJES

Adirondack Journal of
Environmental Studies

EDITOR

Gary Chilson
Paul Smith's College
Paul Smiths NY 12970

MISSION STATEMENT

The *Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies* (AJES) exists to foster a dialogue about the broad range of issues that concern the Northern Forest.

AJES serves to bridge the gaps among academic disciplines and among researchers and practitioners devoted to understanding and promoting the development of sustainable communities, both human and wild.

The journal purposefully avoids serving as a vehicle for any single or special point of view. To the contrary, in searching for common ground AJES welcomes variety and a broad spectrum of opinion from its contributors.

CONTRIBUTING TO AJES

We encourage the submission of manuscripts, reviews, photographs, artwork and letters to the editor. For additional information please visit the AJES website at www.ajes.org/ or contact Gary Chilson at chillog@paulsmiths.edu or 518-327- 6377.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

AJES is published semi-annually.

Subscription rates are \$15 for individuals in the U.S. (\$20 in other countries) and \$30 for U.S. institutions (\$35 in other countries).

Back issues are \$10 postpaid.

Visit AJES online at www.ajes.org.

The views expressed in AJES are the authors' and not necessarily those of the editor, publisher, or Paul Smith's College.

Copyright © 2004

ISSN: 1075-0436

Produced by St. Regis Workshop

PREROGATIVE

Sustainable Development: An Adirondack Perspective

By GARY CHILSON

Paul Smith's College

Sustainable development is a powerful phrase. It has captured imaginations around the world. To many, if it's not the panacea for achieving a sustainable world civilization of peace and prosperity, it's the next best thing. Here in the Adirondacks, the ecological groundwork and economic foundation of sustainable development have been laid. Now only the equitable structure remains to be developed.

Most great concepts, such as democracy and justice, are contested concepts in practice, and sustainable development is no different. It means different things to different people. At its most basic, sustainable development is a goal-oriented process intended to promote three, highly interrelated objectives: 1) a fully-employed and efficient economy; 2) vibrant, high-quality communities; and, 3) an ecologically healthy, sustainable natural environment. What these three objectives intend to achieve has been defined in *Our Common Future* (1987) by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

In stark contrast and by almost every measure, *conventional* development has failed to meet the needs of the present. Four fifths of the world's present population lives in what America and Europe consider poverty. The abject level of poverty experienced might be imagined by realizing that the poorest 10% of Americans still earn more than two-thirds of the world population. The benefits of conventional development clearly have not reached the great majority of people and, in its process of making the rich richer, that development has destroyed

communities and whole cultures while it degraded and consumed the natural environment. Thus the expected doubling of the world's poverty-stricken population over the next fifty years makes a conventional vision of our common future very grim indeed.

Beginning in the early 60s, the United Nations organized educational and scientific efforts to understand the nature and extent of the problem with conventional development. A generation later, with another billion lives born into poverty, came a new and sustainable vision in the UN's publication of *Our Common Future*. Five years after that the concept of sustainable development became the central focus of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. There the world's leaders, including our own, agreed to take the steps necessary to achieve a sustainable civilization. Since then, thousands of local and regional efforts have been made around the world, each in their own, unique fashion, to practice the concept of sustainable development.

In the Adirondacks the need for sustainable development (SD) is not as desperate as it is desirable. This is largely because important aspects of SD came to our region early in our history. More than a hundred years ago we began to protect the environment with the creation of the Forest Preserve. This historic step in protecting the environment was taken to help maintain New York's water-based transportation system – protecting the environment to protect the economy. Then, long before the practice became generally accepted, came regional zoning and strict environmental regulations under the Adirondack Park Agency to further protect the environment and promote the region's economy. Several decades of

controversy and conflict later, we have largely come to accept the necessity of a healthy environment for a healthy economy.

Since the Earth Summit in 1992, the idea of sustainable development has come to be accepted by many organizations and individuals in the region. For example, students of Paul Smith's College amended the Mission Statement of the College of the Adirondacks to include "promoting and practicing the principles of sustainable development." Other organizations, including environmental groups, the Adirondack Research Consortium and even economic development agencies have accepted the concept as well. Most prominent among individuals helping to spread the concept of sustainable development in the region is Dr. Ross Whaley, Chair of the Adirondack Park Agency.

Yet the final objective necessary to achieve sustainable development remains to be seen in the Adirondacks. We have blazed the trail toward environmental and economic harmony that many have since followed to their benefit. But, while most believe in the expressed goal of sustainable development, inter- and intra-generational equity, we really don't know how to create the vibrant, high-quality communities needed to achieve it.

The Lake George watershed offers an ideal setting in which to try. The "Queen of American Lakes" is an excellent example of conventional development that embraced tourism and made a "conventional" success of it. Lake George is special among Adirondack watersheds for many reasons, such as its venerable tradition of family-oriented hospitality, its proximity to the Northway and, perhaps most important, its incredible beauty and ecological resilience. Given her undeniable attraction, one shouldn't be surprised by the fact that rooms to rent around Lake George outnumber the rooms to

rent in the rest of the Adirondack Park taken together (Jenkins and Keal, 2004 *Adirondack Atlas* p. 213). Nor should one be surprised to learn that the two most accessible communities, the Towns of Bolton and Lake George, have the highest per capita incomes in the Park and are among the towns with the lowest poverty and unemployment rates (*Adirondack Atlas* p. 128 and p. 130 – 131). As far as the economy goes, for an area based on a seasonal industry, Lake George seems to represent success but its success also has brought gentrification to the region.



Stone Pinnacle (Mt. Mansfield, Vermont)

Conventional development has placed the socio-economic structure of our Adirondack communities, like Lake George and Bolton, in jeopardy. Conventional development relies upon the debunked "trickle down" theory to achieve an equitable distribution of the benefits of development. The reality in the Adirondacks, as happens in the rest of the world, is that the poorest 31 percent of households receive a mere 10 percent of the income produced by our shared natural wonders and rural culture (*Adirondack Atlas* p. 130).

Because working class wages have stagnated while property values and taxes have increased (even though tax rates have decreased), many working class Adirondackers find they need to sell out to upper class newcomers and leave the

region. Yet we can't expect our professional or leisure classes to drive the buses and plows, care for seasonal homes, man the counters, make the beds, scrub the toilets or pour the drinks. The result is that transients and commuters fill our working class jobs. Our communities can not be vibrant, high-quality places to live if they are populated only by the rich or very poor.

Devising ways to share the benefits of development more equitably is the remaining challenge of sustainable development in the Adirondacks. What, exactly,

ought to be done to promote and protect our communities? Higher wages, full-time jobs and an increase in the direct benefits of living in the community seem obvious goals. Community-based health insurance plans, low-cost but high quality housing development, day-care and latch-key programs, employee-ownership cooperatives and perhaps even a local currency are just some additional ideas that might find expression in a community's effort to share the wealth in sustainable development.

Perhaps the people who care about Lake George, who have already demonstrated that economic growth and environmental protection are compatible, will continue to lead the rest of the Adirondacks along a new path of sustainable development. If they rise to the equity challenge needed to promote their communities, their efforts may become an important model for the rest of us in the Adirondacks if not the country as a whole.

Please direct your comments, suggestions or ideas for material for *AJES* to Gary Chilson, Editor, Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies, Paul Smith's College, Paul Smiths NY 12970, chilsog@paulsmiths.edu.