

Perspectives on the Adirondacks

By Barbara McMartin, Syracuse University Press, 2002

REVIEW BY ELIZABETH THORNDIKE

Balancing human aspirations with nature's constraints is the fundamental challenge of our times. Boundaries of political or administrative subdivisions of government, within which we live, work and play, rarely coincide with, or respect, the ecological boundaries that largely determine nature's constraints. This boundary disconnect, so apparent in the Adirondack Park, is a formidable obstacle to equitable and sustainable use and development in protected areas.

In the early 1970s, the fledgling modern environmental movement in New York State cut its teeth on the issue of the Adirondack Park. Over and above broad public concerns about air and water pollution that characterized the emerging national environmental movement, in New York State the desire to insure the unique "forever wild" constitutional protection for the state owned Forest Preserve was primary. The top-down strategy to enact a Private Land Use and Development Plan and to designate Wilderness and Wild Forest restrictions in a State Land Master Plan was at the forefront of public concern. Forgotten by those of us earnestly attempting to convince state government that a state imposed and directed regional land use control law was imperative, were the thousands of local

Elizabeth Thorndike was actively involved in the 70s in organizing and lobbying for passage of the Adirondack Park private and public land use control plans. She subsequently served as an APA Commissioner for fifteen and a half years.

residents in over 100 small communities in the Park who would perceive themselves as adversely affected by the proposed legislation.

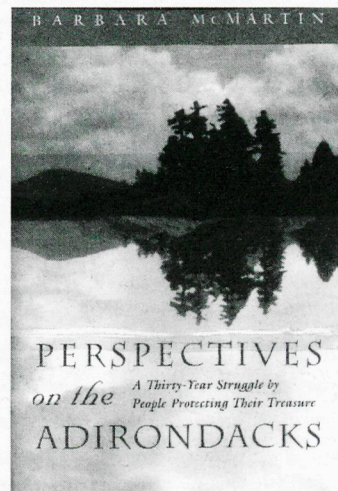
It is in this context that "Perspectives on the Adirondacks, A Thirty Year Struggle by People Protecting Their Treasure" should be placed. Barbara McMartin has led us with pleasure through much of the Adirondack wildlands through her series of guidebooks. With this volume, she now directs us through the web of political and social threads that have characterized the Adirondack scene for the past three decades since creation of the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Adirondack Park Agency and the Plans which regulate the use of private and public lands in the Park.

It is not easy to write dispassionately about the political history of an era, when one has been an integral part of that history. McMartin has been a board member of several Adirondack environmental organizations and for many years, a member and chair of the Forest Preserve Advisory Committee to the state's Department of Environmental Conservation. She is widely known for her incisive, "tell it like it is," personal point of view about Adirondack issues and people; in this book she brings her "perspectives" to the reader with characteristic force and flavor.

Her theme — the development of management tools for a 'park of people and natural wonder' — is assuredly the core issue facing the Adirondacks and other biosphere reserves and protected areas. Thus her book is an important addition to the literature of how to avoid killing the goose that laid the golden egg.

The first of the three sections of the book describes the Park in the 70s and 80s, including the formation of the Department of Environmental Conservation and the Adirondack Park Agency, as well as the many environmental groups that emerged or became energized at that time.

The second section (and the most valuable) focuses on the circumstances and events surrounding the Commission on the Adirondacks in the 21st Century. This Commission, convened by Governor Cuomo, chaired by (then) National Audubon Society president Peter Berle and directed by visionary planner and leader George Davis, created, in just over a year, a report and recommendations that ignited a firestorm (unanticipated by those directly involved) which consumed the Park constituencies for over two years. McMartin's detailed description of the unexpected drama of violence, hostility, self-serving showmanship, bewilderment, and eventually a controversy that ran its course is well worth the



reading. It demonstrates what can go wrong when all the interested publics are not part of the process that will affect them.

In 1970, the so-called "Quiet Revolution in Land Use Control" had ushered in a brief era when regional and state land use control took the reins from local zoning which was proving to be inadequate for dealing with protection of large areas for the benefit of the region or the state as a whole. By 1990, a reversal of this top down approach was visible in the changing role that citizens were playing in the formation of public policy. Their role had evolved from the "citizen-bystander" of pre-1970 to the "citizen-consultant" of the 70s when formal public participation became mandatory in environmental laws, to the "citizen-activist" of the 80s following the Love Canal disclosures.

By the 90s citizens at the grassroots were seeing themselves as decision-makers, not to be ignored. Unfortunately (and with the benefit of hindsight) the failure to include participation by citizens and local representatives in the process followed by the Commission proved to be the fatal flaw that doomed implementation of the Commission Report — a report which McMartin notes, actually had many recommendations to benefit Adirondack communities while protecting the environment.

The final section of the book, the 1990s after the Commission furor died down, is largely devoted to the Department of Environmental Conservation, the history of the High Peaks Unit Management Plan and other state land issues. It also focuses on the many significant changes that occurred, probably as a direct result of the 21st Century Commission upheaval — for example, creation of the Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, and of

the Association of Adirondack Towns and Villages.

This reviewer found the entire book interesting reading, because, as a participant in these very events, the names and actions were familiar and it was like reading a family history. Others, less familiar with the circumstances, may find the details difficult to follow and the many individuals and organizations mentioned too diverse to track their roles or understand where everything fitted together.

I learned many things I hadn't known at the time, but also discovered numerous small, (but perhaps important to the participants) inaccuracies and omissions and an Index that did not pick up many of the text citations of individuals or organizations. For example, Tom Ulasewicz is credited with coming up with the idea of the Visitor Interpretive Centers. The push for these came from several sources and was finally made possible because of the strong support of APA Chairman Woody Cole who directly conveyed his sense of mission to Governor Cuomo. APA Commissioner Peter Paine was a major participant and influence over much of what occurred in the Park and with the Park Agency through most of the book's timeline, yet he is mentioned only briefly three or four times.

The book is limited in its description or assessment of many key decisions made by the Park Agency in these years and it does not include information about the very active citizen lobbying effort that was going on in Rochester in the 1970s under the leadership of Robert Collin and the Adirondack Action Coalition, a process that has kept the Rochester region a "hotbed" of out-of-the-Park interest and activism even to this day. An appearance by Peter Paine in Rochester in 1971 drew more than 400 people to a meeting there. However, it is in-

evitable, as McMartin acknowledges, that any attempt to write about the events of the past thirty years cannot cover the full scope of actors and actions that have been at play.

In conclusion, McMartin calls for a new planning agency to play a leadership role among the various competing interests, responsive to all points of view but not subservient to any one, consulting all kinds of public groups, melding opposing views, ensuring that agencies work together, in short, doing the impossible.

This reviewer suspects that perhaps incremental change, building upon existing institutions, might be a more realistic goal. For example, the administrative merger of DEC regions 5 and 6 under one consistent management matrix for the Park and its nearby buffers would contribute greatly to coordinated administration of the Department's responsibilities for the Park. Also, given the recent study documenting that the vast majority of new land use and development in the Park is permitted by local governments, the restoration of local planning assistance funds to enable local governments to develop optimal planning components for their municipalities is essential.

Even with the author's self-confessed biases about people and organizations, this is an extensively documented narrative of many facets of the Adirondack story of the past thirty years and an important reference and resource. It will continue to be of interest to those who are seeking a detailed report of Adirondack issues and it is, to my knowledge, the only account that thoroughly evaluates the successes and failures of the 21st Century Commission. The opportunity to gain a better understanding of the lessons learned from the Commission experience makes reading of this book worthwhile for that reason alone.