

The Wildlife Conservation Society's Adirondack Communities and Conservation Program

Working to Foster Healthy Human and Natural Communities across the Adirondacks

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Abstract

The Adirondack Communities and Conservation Program (ACCP) is a small project of the Wildlife Conservation Society's North America programs. The Wildlife Conservation Society works to protect wildlife and wild lands in more than 50 countries around the world. In the Adirondacks, ACCP strives to advance the interests of both human and natural communities through research and a cooperative, information-based approach that has evolved from the input of local residents and the unique needs of the area. In all of its activities, ACCP works to meet the needs of local communities while fostering dialogue about issues affecting wildlife and conservation. In the process, the program hopes to help the communities of the Park realize the concept of sustainable development on a local level. This paper describes the program's origins, its ideological approach to conservation, and its multifaceted activities in the region.

Though the mantra of sustainable development has been lauded in academic circles and, at times, in the pages of this journal, there is sometimes a troubling disconnect between its proponents' ideal and the reality on the ground. Here in the Adirondacks, a region that is often held up as a model of sustainable devel-

opment, the communities of the Park have not always felt that their best interests have been served by the region's instruments of sustainability — reasonably stringent zoning regulations and a high proportion of state land. The fuzzy vision espoused by armchair observers, of cozy communities benefiting from protection of natural resources, is sharply at odds with another vision (and, sometimes, the reality)—disgruntled residents, grassroots resentment to environmental protections, and an absence of information flows or communication to address these questions and problems.

These are the competing visions that the Adirondack Communities and Conservation Program is working to bridge. Though the former view has its merits (after all, we generally agree that residents benefit from a healthy environment), so, too, does the latter; communities and residents face real problems and real needs, and, all too often, members of the conservation community have been less interested in those concerns than in their own projects and priorities.

The Adirondack Communities and Conservation Program (ACCP) originated as a set of roundtable discussions in the early 90s to begin to examine the disparities between these two different mentalities. The Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) North America Program director, Bill Weber, saw the need for a group to bring a diverse constituency of parties together in the Adirondacks to advance the mutual interests of communities and conservation. During those conversations, it became apparent that the primary conservation

need in the Adirondacks was better communication with local communities and easier access to information regarding the issues affecting the region. Those ideas and discussions ultimately grew into a small program of the Wildlife Conservation Society.

WCS, an international conservation organization conducting as many as 300 wildlife research projects, has a presence in more than 50 countries. Based at the Bronx Zoo, it also operates five other living institutions in the New York City area such as the New York Aquarium and the Central Park Zoo. WCS's North America Program supports more than thirty projects from the Alaskan arctic and Greater Yellowstone, and from Metropolitan New York to multiple sites across Canada. Focal issues include sprawl, energy development, forest management, disease, and fire; while focal species range from shorebirds, loons, and salmon to pronghorn, moose, and bears. The Adirondacks was chosen as a site for a WCS program because of the region's high conservation value, but also, above all, because of the potential for a group with a focus on both wildlife and community involvement to make a positive impact on the region's conservation landscape.

ACCP responds to the area's unique attributes by promoting a cooperative, information-based approach to research, community involvement, and outreach. Through projects that strengthen ties between communities, bring together stakeholders, and provide both biological and socioeconomic information, ACCP aims to provide bridges between diverse constituencies.

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Community Involvement

ACCP's community programs have evolved since the initial roundtable discussions in response to community needs. Past projects have included targeted studies on several Adirondack communities, a tourism study focusing on the perspectives of business owners in the central and western part of the Park, and a compilation and mapping project on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data of the Adirondack Park.

More recently, ACCP has focused on an innovative mechanism for community development and the provision of information. Two Adirondack Community Information Centers were created in 2000 in cooperation with the host communities to revitalize rural town centers and surrounding communities in the Adirondacks and provide information to Park residents and visitors. The process involves converting vacant storefronts or underused downtown areas to small attractive thematic centers that provide es-

sential information ranging from local attractions to regional history. [See "Empty Spaces Offer a World of Opportunity," *AJES* 7(1).] The goal is to increase the flow of information among institutions, organizations, residents, and visitors and thereby foster greater understanding and appreciation for the stewardship of the Adirondack Park's resources and human settlements. Currently two centers exist in the Park – in the Town of Inlet and the hamlet of North Creek. A temporary center exists in the hamlet of Star Lake. Communities participate voluntarily in the program and chose a local theme for the center's displays.

WCS also hosts a series of Community Exchange Days twice a year to promote the sharing of ideas among local leaders and residents. Any community member in the Park is welcome to attend and learn about the host community and share ideas, listen to stories and experience community revitalization projects first hand. The exchange serves as an op-

portunity for groups from different parts of the region to compare notes on similar economic, social, and environmental conservation issues. Each exchange focuses on a specific theme such as community recreation trails or information centers.

Another effort to provide information is the Adirondack Forest Preserve Education Project (AFPEP), which strives to provide a clear and consistent message to users on how to safely enjoy and protect the Forest Preserve. ACCP is helping to develop the AFPEP message to be implemented through various outlets in the Adirondacks — including tourism service providers and local schools.

Through all of its community related projects, ACCP fine-tunes its relationship with Adirondack leaders and residents to better understand their needs in terms of economic prosperity, quality of life, and conservation issues. This enables the program to provide useful services, exchange opportunities, and information to interested community members.



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Community Exchanges provide an opportunity for residents to learn about successful community projects such as the River Walk in Saranac Lake.

Conservation through Information

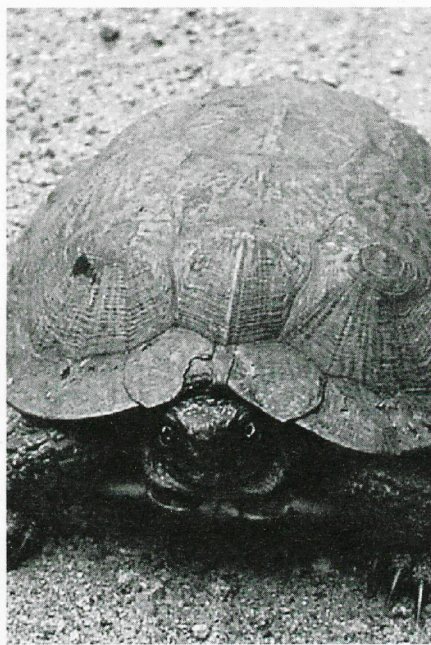
Providing unbiased, high quality information to decision makers, residents, and the scientific community in the Adirondacks is a critical component of ACCP's mission. We strive to engage in activities that will distribute research findings, improve understanding of ecological issues, and stimulate informed public dialogue about controversial issues. Past and ongoing ACCP research topics include:

- Hardwood regeneration failure
- Questions of residents regarding wolf restoration
- The ecology of northeast coyotes
- Mesocarnivores of northeastern North America
- Community-based conservation
- Tourism Business, Community and Environment in the Adirondack Park

- Corridor management plans for segments of two scenic byways: the Olympic Byway and the Adirondack Trail Byway.

This research is accessible to the public through publications, displays, and presentations. One of the avenues for dissemination is the *Wildlife Conservation Society Working Paper Series*. These papers are distributed to local libraries to improve accessibility and many of them are available digitally on the WCS website. The most recent release from this series, *All-Terrain Vehicles in the Adirondacks: Issues and Options*, has garnered a fair amount of attention among the press and the public. The working paper is an effort to synthesize national and local research on all-terrain vehicles, with particular attention to the legal and social issues surrounding ATVs in the Adirondacks. Requests for the paper have come from land managers, ATV users, and preservationists alike. This far-flung interest is an important measure of success, in keeping with the program's goal of improving dialogue amongst a diverse group of stakeholders. The paper is representative of the program's work; it tackles an issue of interest to the public, it presents the facts on the subject without making recommendations, and it presents the perspectives of all interested parties.

The next major publication that ACCP will release, to further the effort of bringing data and information to the local audience, will be *The Adirondack Atlas*, a 250+ page geographic portrait of the region which will be published next year by Syracuse University Press. Representing a multi-year effort, and authored by Jerry Jenkins with Andy Keal, the *Atlas* presents a broad selection of information, statistics, and maps on socioeconomic, historical, cultural, and environmental data. The portrayal of this information will serve as a mirror for the region and its communities. We hope the reflection will be both accurate and



The Wood turtle, Clemmys insculpta, is one of the Adirondack landscape species that ACCP will be targeting research towards in its Living Landscapes Program.

provocative, creating a stimulus to view anew the region's ecological and cultural context, and debate and discuss the region's future.

The *Atlas* is just one product of ACCP's work in the realm of Geographic Information Systems (GIS). ACCP uses GIS internally in a number of ways, including developing high-quality information for the public, and advocates the power of GIS as a tool for the community. Through GIS instruction in local schools and a leadership role in the newly-formed Adirondack GIS Users' Group, ACCP aims to empower local students and community-leaders to utilize the information and analysis potential of GIS.

The goal of the *Atlas* and all of ACCP's research and publications is to encourage a new perspective on Adirondack communities, the natural resource base, and our unique park structure. Serving as honest information brokers, we hope, will allow us to provide a valuable resource to the community and will foster public thought and dialogue.

Responding to Local Needs

As a cooperative organization with an information-based approach, ACCP is not an advocacy organization. Instead, the program aims to respond to public needs, fill critical information gaps, and provide a forum for open dialogue. ACCP calls on various Adirondack stakeholders to help guide our conservation efforts and focus our research on relevant topics. Each year the Oswegatchie Roundtable serves as our annual meeting and a time to discuss at least one major issue. Participants vary and include regional stakeholders with diverse expertise. ACCP uses this public input to guide our activities. Past topics have included recreation, wildlife, and global climate change.

Recent Oswegatchie Roundtables have led to significant products, research, and activities. Guided by stakeholder comments in the course of these discussions, ACCP has launched efforts to study All-Terrain Vehicle use and promote the use of bear-resistant food canisters. The follow-up is not just internal at ACCP; active community interest in climate change at the last Oswegatchie Roundtable has led to interest at the Consortium for Atlantic Regional Assessment in highlighting the Adirondack region as a case study to demonstrate the local impacts of potential changes in land use and climate. This effort will result in web-based tools and products available to Adirondack stakeholders that will aid planning and decision making in terms of adapting to change in land use and climate.

Living Landscapes

As ACCP projects evolve to meet the changing needs of the Adirondacks, we continue to draw directly from WCS's worldwide expertise in conservation. In 2000, WCS initiated the Living Landscapes Program to bring together our collective experience from dozens of long-term sites to establish a systematic approach to conserving biologically rich

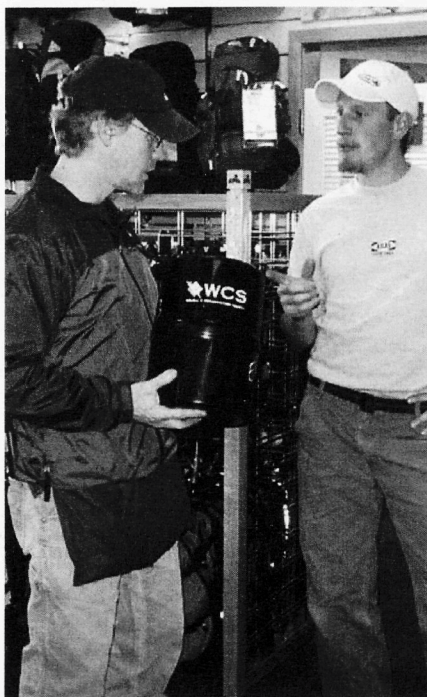
landscapes around the world. The focus of this crosscutting program is "the conservation of large, wild ecosystems that are integrated in wider landscapes of human influence" – a perfect fit with the Adirondacks.

The WCS' Living Landscapes Program (LLP), now being applied in the Adirondacks, and the LLP's Landscape Species Approach, are designed specifically to develop better ways for people and wildlife to share landscapes. The Landscape Species Approach emphasizes the need to view the world through the eyes of wildlife. Landscape species are defined as biological species that use large, ecologically diverse areas and often have significant impacts on the structure and function of natural ecosystems. Their requirements in time and space make landscape species particularly susceptible to a wide array of human impacts.

We invited 30 wildlife biologists and scientists working in the Adirondacks to our February 2002 Oswegatchie Roundtable Meeting to discuss and begin the selection process for a suite of Adirondack Landscape Species. This and a series of additional meetings resulted in a final species suite including: black bear, moose, wood turtle, common loon, three-toed woodpecker, and marten. It is on this final suite of species that WCS will continue to focus our efforts of the Landscape program. This approach provides a practical, effective way to elucidate key threats and direct appropriate conservation interventions, effect conservation at specific sites, and conserve the necessary scale, structure, and function of natural landscapes.

The Landscape Species Approach provides the structure to direct the bulk of ACCP's current ecological research. Through mapping the biological and human landscapes for the suite of landscape species using GIS, and overlaying them into a conservation landscape, we hope that we will gain new insight into the ecological functions and human-induced conflicts present in the Adirondack landscape. Ultimately, it is hoped

that this will lead not only to a better understanding of the landscape, but also the long-term conservation of the landscape species, other Adirondack fauna, and the lands on which they depend.



Eastern Mountain Sports in Lake Placid is one of many retail shops in the area that promote the use of bear resistant food canisters supplied by ACCP.

The Human Dimensions of Wildlife

In keeping with the philosophy of responding to public input about issues of concern and targeting activities towards these areas, in 2001 ACCP became involved in the conflict between humans and black bears in the backcountry. The black bear has thus become one of the first landscape species for which we have developed a targeted project to address human-wildlife interactions.

ACCP's Black Bear Education, Awareness, and Research (BBEAR) project addresses ways to reduce the growing conflict among bears and backcountry users of the Adirondack Park, especially in heavily utilized areas like the High Peaks Wilderness Area.

Habituation of black bears to the food storage techniques of campers has resulted in an increasing number of negative bear encounters, particularly in the High Peaks; incidents include bluff charges, bears stealing food, and bears destroying camping gear. Fortunately, no humans have been harmed in this area. For the bears, however, these conflicts can be lethal. Human food is unhealthy for bears and feeding them ultimately results in bears losing their natural desire to forage, which can lead to aggressive bear behavior, and ultimately requires extreme management intervention. Furthermore, negative bear encounters threaten campers' safety and losing food is inconvenient for campers.

In 2001, ACCP initiated a program that provides bear-resistant food canisters and bear awareness training to sales associates at local outdoor retail shops. Through this program, stores are able to rent canisters to campers at a minimal cost and sales associates are informed on how to promote the use of the canisters. The program has grown to include retail shops in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany, and Saratoga Springs. Currently, ACCP has supplied retail shops with a total of 95 canisters to rent to customers; in 2002, canisters supplied by ACCP were rented to hundreds of camping parties.

ACCP's BBEAR project has also placed informative posters at trailheads, and, this past summer, conducted an in-depth trailhead survey to determine the number of backcountry bear encounters, gauge people's understanding of bears and food storage, learn where people are receiving bear information, and study the functionality of current food storage systems. The goal of these efforts, and all of ACCP's work involving human-wildlife interactions, is to better understand these encounters in both a social and ecological sense, and to find management strategies that will improve human experiences and the health of wildlife populations.

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Partnerships

ACCP works with a broad range of local partners to strengthen its activities; in fact, these partnerships are integral to the success of a program that is founded on the idea of bringing diverse groups together. From the towns that have opened Community Information Centers and hosted Community Exchange Days to the retail shops that rent our bear canisters, these partnerships are functionally and ideologically important to our mission.

One of our most successful and far-reaching partnerships is the Adirondack Cooperative Loon Program (ACLP). In the spring of 2001, ACCP launched this endeavor with the Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, BioDiversity Research Institute in Falmouth, Maine, and the Audubon Society of New York to evaluate the human-related impacts on the Adirondack common loon population and, in particular, human-related im-

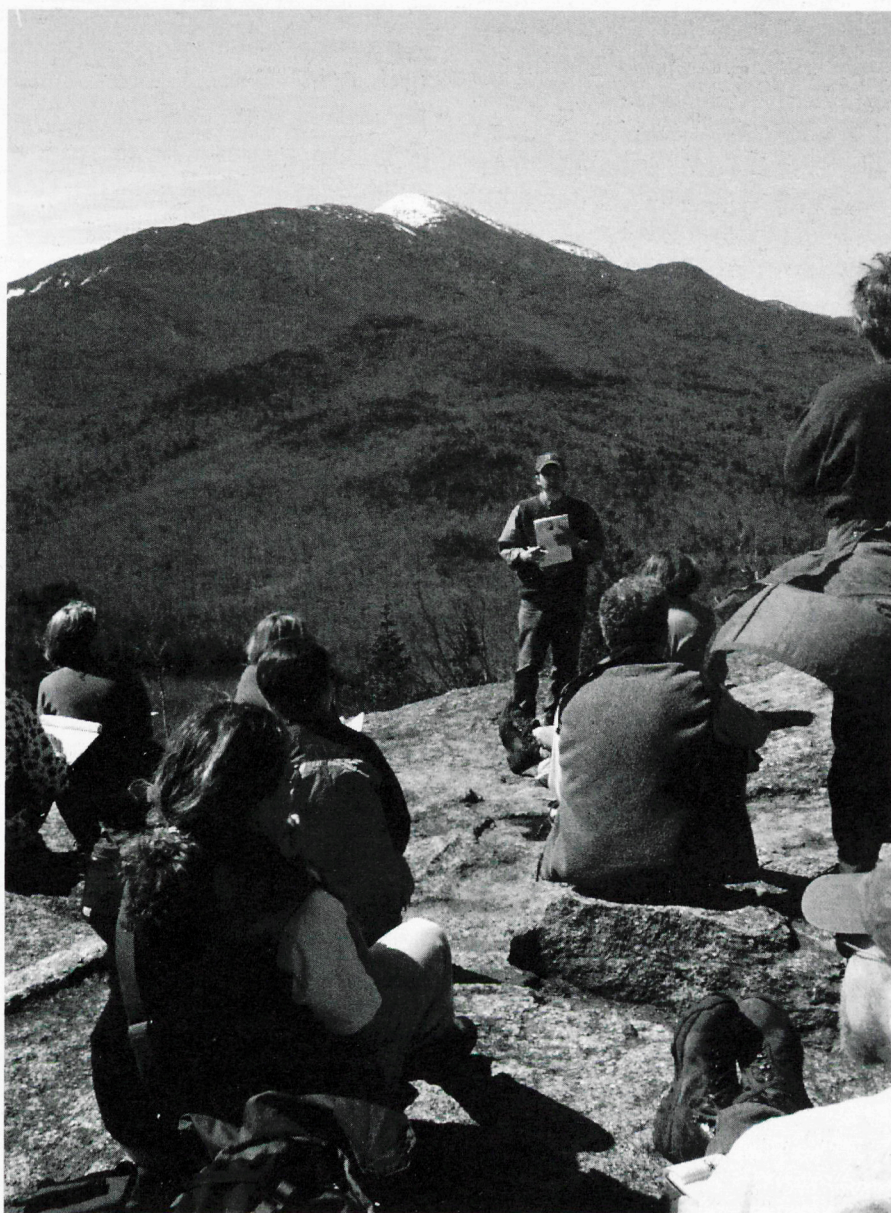
pacts on the species. ACLP's research evaluates the impact of environmental mercury contamination on loons and aquatic ecosystems in the Park through regular monitoring of individually color-banded loons to determine differences in their return rates and long-term reproductive success.

In an effort to couple research with education and outreach, ACLP coordinates an Annual Loon Census involving hundreds of volunteers throughout the Park in an effort to monitor the status of the Adirondack loon population. ACLP education efforts also include public presentations reaching over 1,500 people a year and a 5-day "Loon Scientists" curriculum for local seventh grade students. Again this summer, more than 55 local fishing and outfitting stores participated in a Lead Sinker Exchange project aimed at increasing angler awareness about the toxic effects of lead fishing tackle ingestion on loons and offering free steel sinkers as a non-toxic alternative.

ACLP merges the worlds of field research, public participation, outreach and education, and the program itself is a strong partnership of groups with a mutual commitment to the fate of the loon and the other species that depend on healthy aquatic systems for their survival. ACCP is proud to be one of the active partners in this dynamic program.

Conclusion

Through engaging with and involving local communities in conservation issues, providing critical information to decision makers, responding to local needs and offering a forum for dialogue, and actively researching both ecological and sociological dimensions of wildlife populations, ACCP hopes to contribute to healthy human and wildlife communities in the Adirondack Park. In the process, we hope to start conversations and inspire actions that help to make sustainable development in our region less of an abstract dream and more of a reality.



ACCP, in partnership with the Vermont Institute of Natural Science and ADK, trains citizens to collect data on high elevation birds including the Bicknell's Thrush.

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