Hope or Despair: How Can an Environmentalist Keep up the Struggle?

By PHILIP G. TERRIE

Abstract
Both in the Adirondacks and nationally we see unavoidable evidence of environmental degradation. In the Adirondacks, for example, lake and river shores, inadequately protected by the Private Land Plan, are irresponsibly developed while acid precipitation threatens forests and fauna throughout the Park. On the federal level, an administration beholden to corporate interests seems determined to roll back thirty years of environmental reform. In this context, how can an environmentalist resist despair? We must remember that government regulation has achieved much and continues to be an important environmental instrument. At the same time, the capacity of nature to inspire us with awe and appreciation for its beauty demands that we keep up the struggle.

A couple of years ago, the Adirondack Explorer published a list of 15 Adirondack lakes for which the DEC had issued "mercury advisories." One of these, Round Pond, Town of Long Lake, Hamilton County, occupies a special place in my spiritual geography.

Round Pond isn't particularly round. Encircled by low hills and mostly hardwood forests, fed by murky little brooks trickling out of beaver swamps, it's roughly a mile across, with a couple of tiny islands. It looks like dozens of small lakes sprinkled across the central Adirondack plateau. No roads go there, not even a maintained trail, though a rough hunter's track of about a mile winds in from the Northville-Placid Trail.

With the adoption of the State Land Master Plan in 1972, Round Pond was incorporated into the High Peaks Wilderness Area; all motors are thus illegal there. Before then, Herb Helms would fly in and then from Long Lake with spring anglers or autumn hunters, but nowadays, its waters are utterly uncorrupted by gasoline engines, though the hearty have occasionally lugged in canoes.

It seems an idyllic spot. For many years, I've made a point of hiking out there at least once every summer. It has special meaning to me because it was here that I spent my first night out in the Adirondacks—late June, 1966. The mosquitoes were truly astonishing; my prior camping experience had been in southern Appalachia, where the bugs just don't manage the awful grandeur they attain in the Adirondacks.

Round Pond is also special to me because that night was the occasion of my first substantive encounter with Bill Verner, who died in 1989, having become my friend, mentor, and environmentalist role model; he had taken me and a few other Adirondack neophytes out to Round Pond to break us in. We sat around a smoky fire, and Bill held forth magnificently on wilderness philosophy, Adirondack history, and camping ethics.

I've spent other, equally memorable nights there. On a full-moon August evening about five years later, I hunkered down with friends on the boulders on the north shore, watching a raucous electrical storm raging somewhere to the south. The thunder was not audible, but we were mesmerized by the stunning puffs of distant lightning—a mute display of nature's fireworks.

A few years ago, I took my daughter, then 12, and a friend of hers to Round Pond for an overnight. At about 6:00 in the morning, I was looking for warblers amidst a lingering fog and must have been moving around quietly: I stepped from behind some scruffy alders and startled a great blue heron. No more than ten feet away, it took off suddenly in a flapping burst of its huge wings.

As I say, Round Pond seems an idyllic spot—roadless, structureless, unencumbered by any apparent sign of human culture, the sort of place we contemplate wistfully when we're stuck in a traffic jam. Yet the DEC tells us that its yellow perch are dangerously loaded with methylmercury.

In a remote corner of a designated wilderness, in an ostensibly edenic pond that no one can get to without serious hiking, the fish are toxic, corrupted by mercury released into the air by coal burned to power air conditioners and dish washers hundreds of miles away. Unaware, that heron had been poisoning itself. Welcome to the twenty-first century.

In many respects the story of Round Pond crystallizes so much of Adirondack history and so much of what's right, what's wrong, what's both hopeful and depressing about the future. When we look at it in the context of where it is and what it is, we see the value of classifying and protecting publicly owned land, preventing the incursions of motors, and esteeming that land for its recreational, spiritual, and ecological value. But at the same time, we can't help but see that locally derived statutes
and regulations cannot protect any place from the ongoing degradation of the global environment. The ineffable sadness of the presence of that mercury can easily lead us to despair. How are we to accept the silent but pernicious violation of this corner of the wilderness? Indeed, despite its inclusion in the High Peaks Wilderness Area, can we even call Round Pond a wilderness body of water? The need to confront everything that is truly threatening and, simultaneously, to refuse to submit to despair is the subject of this essay.

What do we have to worry about? In 2000 and 2001, we learn, permits for more than 1,500 new houses were issued in the Adirondack Park. Of these, only 15% needed to receive a permit from the Adirondack Park Agency. This followed a decade – the 1990s – during which more than 8,500 new dwellings were authorized throughout the Park, most of which did not fall under the purview of the Park Agency.7

So far as I know, we do not have Park-wide data on how many of these permits involve river-front or lake-front property, but we all know that the rivers and lakes of the Adirondack Park that remain in private hands are woefully under protected. The almost universally acknowledged single most important shortcoming of the Private Land Use and Development Plan, which has now been in existence for three decades, is its failure to provide adequate protection for the remaining stretches of undeveloped river and lake shore.

There's more: Eurasian watermilfoil and other uncontrolled invasive species threaten the stability of Adirondack waters and the ecological systems that they both are a part of and support. Not only are these species disrupting fragile environments, but their very presence is taken by some parties as just cause for advocating the application of chemical herbicides, the long-range and likely deleterious effects – especially on fish, amphibian, and invertebrate life – of which are little known. The Park Agency recently denied a permit for the application of the aquatic herbicide SONAR to the waters of Lake George.8 But, given the real threat posed by invasive species, we can be sure that demands to use such poisons on our waters will not go away.

The same forces of industry, geography, and weather that put the methylmercury in Round Pond are responsible for the continuing deposition of acid precipitation throughout the Adirondacks – in the water and on the trees. Emissions of sulfur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen enter the atmosphere, often hundreds of miles from here, and end up acidifying Adirondack waters and soils. The result is depleted fish populations and threatened forests. And even though New York State has taken serious steps toward decreasing the acid precipitation attributable to in-state sources and although the federal Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 led to further reductions in total emissions of sulfur, "we have not observed the large scale improvements in the acidity of Adirondack lakes and streams that we anticipated."9 The result is continuing threats to fish, amphibians, and insects, even zooplankton and algae. Animals up the food chain – like loons, eagles, and otters – are affected. Upper elevation spruce-fir forests are highly stressed by acid precipitation, and annual growth is retarded. Significant further reductions in sulfur and nitrogen emissions are essential to the health of the Adirondack ecosystem.

And acid rain isn't the only way in which air pollution generated elsewhere is corrupting Adirondack air. During the period 1998-2000, the ozone levels in Essex County exceeded national standards on eight separate days, which led the American Lung Association to give the County a grade of “D” for air quality, the same grade it gave the Bronx. It's only slightly reassuring to note that Hamilton County, where ozone levels exceeded those standards less often, received a grade of “C.”

Despite widespread hostility to noise pollution, jet skis are ubiquitous. These and other motors continue to disturb the peace on Adirondack rivers – the Raquette, for example, between Long Lake and Raquette Falls, another of my beloved places unnecessarily and ruthlessly compromised by the modern world.7

There's the growing plague of ATVs, of which a retired DEC forester had this to say: "They are capable of going over or detouring around former obstacles and creating new trails with ease. In fact, in the Independence River Wild Forest, you would be hard pressed to find a snowmobile trail, horse trail, ski trail or foot trail that hasn't been violated by ATV use."8 In the town of Horicon, the local government is encouraging ATV incursions into the Lake George Wild Forest; this has led to vandalism, illegal tree clearing, violation of a wetland, and 50-foot-wide mud holes.9

It's almost infinitely worse on the federal level, where a national environmental policy depending on the vigilance of various agencies and the implementation of laws for environmental protection that go back over thirty years is being systematically overturned by an
administration whose hostility to environmental sanity simply boggles the mind. Here is a brief summary of a report on the abysmal record of the Bush administration issued by the Natural Resources Defense Council. International efforts to address the truly unthinkable threat posed by global climate change are casually dismissed; the same can be said for international concern over the degradation of the world’s oceans. The mandate to federal agencies to monitor and address the pollution of air, water, and soil is under almost daily attack, especially since the elections of November, 2002; a prime example of this is the November decision by the Environmental Protection Agency to hamstring the 1970 Clean Air Act to reinterpret provisions for what is known as the “new-source-review program” and allow some of the “nation’s oldest and dirtiest power plants and refineries … to expand and modernize without installing updated pollution controls.” Protections for forests, wildlife, and all the vast federal domain are either weakened or eliminated altogether, as the Forest Service proposes to drop its historic charge to protect wildlife and to permit increased clearcutting in the name of “healthy forests” and “fire prevention.” At about the same time, the EPA proposes that it will rewrite the Clean Water Act in such a way as to remove the already weak protections for wetlands – this only a month after declaring that it would decline to provide adequate oversight of factory farms and the countless gallons of animal waste released by them into surrounding waters.

Just this month, we learn that President Bush’s Department of the Interior is officially not interested in further wilderness designation for some 250 million eligible acres of federal land; this is “a fundamental reinterpretation of environmental law, and a reversal of four decades of federal wilderness policy.” If anything were needed to show that Secretary Norton is a willing tool of western development interests, this is it.

The NRDC observes – and I fully agree – that “every federal agency with authority over environmental programs has been enlisted in a coordinated effort to help oil, coal, logging, mining, chemical, and auto companies and others to promote their short-term profits at the expense of America’s public health and natural heritage.” The genuinely horrifying environmental record of this administration makes the cover provided for it by the Adirondack Council when it endorsed the so-called “Clear Skies Initiative” all the more perplexing and troubling. New York Attorney General Elliot Spitzer labels this stealth gift to the power industry “the most serious attack on the Clean Air Act since the law was adopted more than 30 years ago. … [I]t’s bad for the Adirondacks and for the nation as a whole.”

The President’s well-publicized visit to the Adirondacks took place on Earth Day; while there’s no shame in this administration, there certainly does appear to be a highly developed sense of irony. Only after the photo ops and the deft political advantage taken of the Council’s support did the EPA issue the directive I mentioned before, rescinding new-source review. As Yancey Roy pointedly asked in the Adirondack Explorer, was the Clear Skies Initiative and the trip to Whiteface just a smoke screen, providing some good photo opportunities for a President hostile in every way to environmental protection and planning to betray the Council and anyone else naïve enough to trust him?

And even as the environment, both here in the Adirondacks and throughout the country, endures the indifference of politicians beholden to corporate supporters and willing to deceive the public and sacrifice the common weal, we have pseudo-scientists equally willing to serve corporate interests. Consider the publicity and clamor surrounding Danish author Bjorn Lomberg’s The Skeptical Environmentalist, published, with the distinguished imprimatur of Cambridge University Press, in 1999. Greeted by both the mainstream and the overtly, pro-business, conservative press, from the New York Times to the Wall Street Journal, with widespread acclaim, Lomberg’s huge book argued strenuously that nearly all the claims of environmentalists concerning deteriorating ecological systems, air and water quality, resource depletion, and just about everything else that troubles most of us here, are exaggerated, if not downright false. Indeed, Lomberg concludes that the “air and water around us are becoming less and less polluted. Mankind’s lot has actually improved in terms of practically every measurable indicator.”

The book was instantly adopted by right-wing radio hosts and think tanks. Slowly, reputable scientists began to examine its claims, finding them based on shoddy research if not overt dishonesty. The Scientific American, the Union of Concerned Scientists, and even a special committee established by the Danish Research Agency found The Skeptical Environmentalist to be chock full of error, bias, and incompetence. But that has done nothing to diminish Lomberg’s resonance with the anti-green backlash.

We might ask ourselves why Lomberg’s opus is so popular. One answer, which is that he says what corporate interests need to have said in order to distract people from corporate predations, is obvious and depressingly true. But Lomberg also taps into something else, our
need not to be overwhelmed with bad news. This is a legitimate and understandable human impulse, one that seems especially pressing in these days of illicit, immoral, and unconstitutional "pre-emptive" war. The brazen willingness of Lomborg and many of his supporters cynically to take advantage of this impulse does not diminish its reality or, in fact, its utility. William Cronon, perhaps the best-known American environmental historian working today, reminds us that despair is not "a particularly useful emotion, either personally or politically." It's understandable that the urge to avoid despair leads some otherwise well-intentioned people to swallow the falsehoods in Lomborg's book.

While avoiding the head-in-the-sand denials of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, we nonetheless need to remember that environmentalism can lead to positive accomplishments. Consider the case of Long Island Sound, for example. In the summer of 1987, a horrifying environmental disaster struck the Sound. Waters that had for millennia supported stunning quantities of fish, shellfish, plant life, and microbes of nearly infinite variety suddenly appeared to be utterly devoid of oxygen, and all living things either died or fled. These hypoxic conditions turned out to be the inevitable consequence of the introduction, over many years, of countless tons of nitrogen into the ecosystem of the Sound. The nitrogen came from a host of sources, but the chief culprit and the one that needed to be fixed — and soon, if these waters were to return to the levels of productivity known and enjoyed even a generation earlier — was sewage, either inadequately treated or not treated at all.

At the time of European contact, Long Island Sound was a teeming paradise of life and beauty, supporting well the many Native cultures dwelling on its shores. From bluefish to lobsters and oysters, the marine life of the Sound was abundant beyond modern comprehension — a Serengeti of marine fecundity. We read the accounts of early explorers and weep over what industrial capitalism has wrought. For with the advent of commodity agriculture, then nineteenth-century industry, and finally the sprawling suburbs of the post World War II era, the Sound suffered a series of vicious attacks on its health, until, as Tom Andersen, an environmental journalist and activist based in Westchester County, convincingly argues, it was on the "brink of disaster." It's a simple affair: the conflict between unchecked economic expansion and a region's ecological health.

In a recent book, Andersen tells the story of this crisis — what led up to it, how people reacted to it, what steps were taken to end it and prevent others, and how the construction lobbies fought an effective government response. Especially toward the end of the book, when he describes how environmentalists began pushing for a "nitrogen cap" on total nitrogen entering the Sound, Andersen's narrative offers an absorbing paradigm of contemporary American environmental conflict. Development and construction interests saw this as an assault on their ability to make wads of money building ever more malls and McMansions, and state and local governments waffled but finally came down for ecological sanity. It's a tale of activism, greed, bureaucratic equivocation, and environmentalists determined to address an environmental crisis.

The answer, as is often the case, was government regulation. Although the final plan to limit nitrogen did eventually receive some support from industry, it was the threat of the coercive arm of government, pushed grudgingly into action by widespread grass-roots dismay over what was happening to the Sound and its ecosystem, that led to ameliorative measures.

A similar story unfolded on Lake Erie, where it took concerted cooperation among two countries, several American states and a Canadian province, and many local municipalities to address the deleterious effects of eutrophication. The answer, again, was government regulation. It wasn't a complete victory — they never are — but much has been accomplished. I can remember the infamous fire on the Cuyahoga River in 1969: that couldn't happen today, (though maybe if the current administration gets its way, it could happen tomorrow).

I wish President Bush, Secretary of the Interior Norton, and EPA Administrator Whitman could be encouraged to realize that, contrary to the recent Republican mantra, government intrusion into the affairs of commerce and industry is precisely what is needed as we wrestle with the consequences of two centuries of urban industrialism. Even Richard Nixon, remembered as an indefatigable disciple of laissez-faire economics, came to accept this truth (or at least came to accept its political expediency), signing the legislation behind the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Environmental Protection Agency. These were landmark legislative events, signaling a dramatic watershed in American environmental history. And they're still, more or less, the law of the land, despite the Herculean efforts of the Bush administration to reverse them.

All of this brings me back to Round Pond. Yes, the fish are suspect. It is a compromised locale. As so many environmental scientists have told us over the last decade or so, there's not a spot on the planet that hasn't been compromised.

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smoke stack. One of the lessons that I derive from the much maligned and often misunderstood William Cronon is that it is possible to see these stains of human industry as terribly lamentable but not as something that is debilitating, that destroys the pleasure I can find in nature. The imprint of our species on the planet cannot be avoided; it's the degree that matters.39 Nature, however diminished, can still be redemptive, if we let it.

I'm still with William Wordsworth, who was well aware that the facts of human existence corrode, to some inevitable extent, the joy available anywhere. Nonetheless, as he wrote just over two centuries ago,

I have learned
To look upon nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky.

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth.30

An American poet, Wallace Stevens, a little over a century later, reached similar conclusions. Contemplating the spiritual joys of nature, though sensitive to the disturbing facts of how people have corrupted it and how the earth we know is a fallen place and in particular thinking of the monumental flocks of passenger pigeons he had seen as a boy, gone forever, he gave us these lines:

We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Or that wide water, incalcapable.
Deer walk upon our mountains, and
The quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.21

That's certainly a less than unqualifiedly joyful affirmation. By 1915, when he wrote the poem (“Sunday Morning”) that ends with these lines, the last passenger pigeon was gone, having died just the year before in the Cincinnati zoo; Stevens's pigeons are birds of the imagination. This lends a poignant, tragic note to the image of sweet berries in the wilderness. But there is also satisfaction and the possibility for contentment. I can still go to Round Pond, and I can still see great blue herons there. Or, looking for “sweet berries in the wilderness,” I can trudge to another of my personal sacred places, a logging-camp clearing on Ouluska Pass Brook, deep in the Seward, abandoned some seventy or eighty years ago by the Santa Clara Lumber Company, and for many years referred to by my friends and me as “the world's largest raspberry patch,” a site of industry and bustle now slowly under reclamation by the very Adirondack forest those loggers assaulted. Like every spot on this littered, polluted, violated, stained, and corrupted planet - the only one we've got - Round Pond and Ouluska Pass are postlapsarian Edens, but that doesn't mean they cannot be edenic. Or, of course, that we cannot strive to make them better. This includes, among other things, ongoing, relentless efforts to restore new-source review.

We hear a lot (including from me) about how the Adirondacks, with its mix of human communities and protected wilderness, could be a model for the world.22 Understanding that this model is far from perfect and that there are almost unimaginable forces of wealth and power combined with widespread apathy opposing us, how can we make that point more convincingly? Are we, in fact, convinced that this is truly the case? I am. Despite all the horrors I've mentioned above - and I could no doubt have listed countless more - I believe this notion of the Adirondacks as a model has both rhetorical allure and practical utility. Deeply flawed, the Private Land Use and Development Plan provides the essential ideal of regional, long-range planning. Not so flawed, but routinely ignored, the State Land Master Plan supplies vision and focus to environmentalists inspired by Article XIV of the State Constitution. The additions to the Forest Preserve of the last 30 years, both anticipated and promoted by the State Land Master Plan and the Park Agency Act, are - not to put it mildly - awesome. Will we be able to continue this record, as more critical parcels come on the market?

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The Italian writer Antonio Gramsci, imprisoned, contemplating the horrors of fascism, argued in the 1920s that the only tenable philosophical position for people of conscience was “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.”23 I submit that this is precisely the stance that we should adopt as we maintain the struggle.

In the current on-line issue of Orion Magazine, Rebecca Solnit says this:

History is like weather, not like checkers. A game of checkers ends. 
The weather never does. That's why you can't save anything. Saving is the wrong word. Jesus saves and so do banks: they set things aside from
the flux of earthly change. We never did save the whales, though we might’ve prevented them from becoming extinct. We will have to continue to prevent that as long as they continue not to be extinct. Saving suggests a laying up where neither moth nor dust doth corrupt, and this model of salvation is perhaps why Americans are so good at crisis response and then going home to let another crisis brew. Problems seldom go home. Most nations agree to a ban on hunting endangered species of whale, but their oceans are compromised in other ways. DDT is banned in the US, but exported to the third world, and Monsanto moves on to the next atrocity.

The world gets better. It also gets worse. The time it will take you to address this is exactly equal to your lifetime, and if you’re lucky you don’t know how long that is. The future is dark. Like night. There are probabilities and likelihoods, but there are no guarantees.

This is just what passed through my mind about three weeks ago at Point Pelee National Park, near Leamington, Ontario, on the north shore of Lake Erie. It was the height of spring migration, and the warblers were stunningly abundant. I saw my first-ever Cape-May warbler, a spectacular little bird that perched about fifteen feet away from me for at least ten minutes. I had plenty of time to examine every perfect detail of color and proportion, and I’m not kidding when I admit that I muttered to myself, out loud, “There is a reason to keep up the struggle.”

RAY JENKINS

NOTES

1 I delivered a slightly different version of this article as the keynote address to the May, 2003, annual meeting of the Adirondack Research Consortium. Much of my thinking on our obligation not to submit to despair in these difficult times has been inspired by the intellect and example of my partner, Jackie Jablonski.

2 The list of lakes was in the Adirondack Explorer 3 (June 2001), p. 7. My response, “The Tragedy of Round Pond,” used here with permission, in somewhat different form, was in Adirondack Explorer 3 (July 2001), p 27.


5 This quotation is from and this paragraph is based on Karen Roy, Walter Kretser, Howard Simonin, and Edward Bennett, “Acid Rain in the Adirondacks: A Time of Change”, AJES 7 (Fall/Winter 2000), 26-32.


7 See Philip G. Terrie, “Racket on the Raquette,” Adirondack Explorer 4 (July/August 2002).


9 The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, “All-Terrain Vehicles Despoiling the Forest Preserve,” Association News (Spring 2003), 1.3.


12 “Is Clear Skies the Cure for Acid Rain?”, Adirondack Explorer 4 (July-August, 2002), 27.


16 William Cronon, “The Uses of Environmental History,” Environmental History Review 17 (Fall 1993), 1-22.

17 All of this account of environmental matters in Long Island Sound is based on Tom Andersen, This Fine Piece of Water: An Environmental History of Long Island Sound (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002).


20 William Wordsworth, “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798.”


24 http://www.oriononline.org/pages/looksidebars/Patriotism/index_Solnit.html. I’m grateful to Jackie Jablonski for sharing this article with me.