LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Protecting Wilderness — Interpreting “Man-Made”

By BARBARA MCMARTIN

What did the Temporary Study Commission recommend with respect to Wilderness and the works of man? Its Wilderness definition should be familiar: In short, Wilderness was to be an undeveloped place where man was a visitor, where man and his works do not dominate the landscape, and which is managed to preserve the natural condition, without permanent improvements. The imprint of man’s work was to be substantially unnoticeable.

But the APA Act, which formalized the TSC recommendations in the State Land Master Plan, did not interpret this to mean there could be no structures. Scattered lean-tos were acceptable; so were rustic signs, foot trails and footbridges, and fish barrier dams. Later interpretations permitted a substantial ranger cabin, although it is difficult to reconcile this with my understanding that any structure was supposed to blend with the landscape, to be unobtrusive.

Furthermore, according to the SLMP, all improvements and conforming structures (fire towers are not conforming) had to be approved by UMPs and designed to blend with the surrounding environment and to require only minimal maintenance (emphasis added).

However, somewhere in the process of shaping the SLMP to reflect the TSC’s statement of Wilderness concepts, APA added a key clause not in the original: The SLMP states that only natural materials be used. This has led to some weird contradictions and I think subverts the real meaning of the wilderness concept.

Historically, one of the strangest problems created by the use of natural materials was the use of stones and boulders from the top of Marcy to build the shelter there. Of course this happened long before people understood summit ecology, but recent studies have shown that the disturbance of the stones exacerbated the decline of Alpine flora and impedes its restoration.1

The strangest interpretation of man-made that I have encountered has to do with ordinary rocks — Adirondack rocks. Round rocks are considered natural, rocks blasted out of bedrock are not. The DEC wants huge round boulders to block the beginning of trails that are subject to illegal ATV use. The department can’t always find round rocks nearby, but does not use quarried rock because it is “not natural.” Think about it, does a blasted rock stand up and shout, “man-made”? Sure river rocks are prettier than crushed rocks on roadsides, but the roads themselves are surely man-made, so why not the culverts?

More recently, a decision to use synthetic materials in the boardwalk at Ferd’s Bog has been challenged, despite the fact that using treated lumber would involve synthetic and potentially dangerous chemicals. Untreated lumber would not meet the test of minimal maintenance and construction with lumber would be much more obtrusive than the new boardwalk, which is anything but visibly obnoxious.

Similarly for bridges: A narrow swinging bridge, supported by steel cable, with a wooden tread, does not stick out nearly so much as the massive wood and stone abutments required to support the huge wooden beams needed to create a fixed bridge. The new bridge below Wakely Dam, although designed for snowmobiles, demonstrates this overbuilding, which also has to be applied to Wilderness horse trails. Most proposed new bridges are for snowmobile trails, such as the suggested steel bridge over the Raquette at the head of Carry Falls Reservoir.

However, an exception may be a proposed swinging bridge to carry the rerouted Northville-Placid Trail across Stony Creek, a Wild Forest addition not subject to the Wilderness constraints. This is an ideal site for a bridge similar to the double swinging bridge over the West Branch of the Sacandaga at Whitehouse. The latter, in a Wilderness area, is an essential part of the N-P and about as minimally visible as can be constructed. Maybe in the future, new discoveries will make available cables so narrow that they are almost invisible.

Certainly there should be no concrete monstrosities such as Marcy Dam. We have adapted to the removal of the dams or their rebuilding on a much smaller scale as at the outlet of Colden and Flowed Lands.

I think the framers of the APA Act really meant we should figure out how to make the hand of man less visible. Science may just lead the way to minimizing the visual exceptions we have built into the SLMP.

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1 Sandra Weber in paper at the 2002 ABC conference.