

The Adirondack Nature Conservancy and Adirondack Land Trust: Partners in Land Protection

By CONNIE S. PRICKETT

To know the Adirondack Nature Conservancy and Adirondack Land Trust — separate organizations that operate under one roof with a shared staff and board of trustees — it is best to begin with The Nature Conservancy, their international parent organization with a mission to protect the world's biodiversity. With quiet beginnings in New York State, The Nature Conservancy grew out of the Ecological Society of America, a group of concerned scientists and naturalists who became alarmed by the depletion of our natural areas as early as 1917. It was in 1951, as one of a series of groups that splintered from the Ecological Society, that The Nature Conservancy made its mark by purchasing 60 acres of hardwood forest at the Mianus River Gorge about 30 miles outside of New York City.

The Mianus deal paved the way for a previously unheard of business-like approach to conservation. With equal parts ecology and economics, the Conservancy's business-suited lawyers and real estate experts began

purchasing threatened lands and meeting with corporate executives to arrange for the protection of natural areas before they were lost forever to development pressures and other threats. Producing "results you could walk on" quickly attracted private donors to support this inventive approach to conservation.



Spring Pond Bog, acquired in 1985, is a habitat for spruce grouse and northern harrier and the site of the Northeast's largest concentration of white-fringed orchids.

In time, the Conservancy established five regional chapters in New York, chapters in all 50 states, and programs around the world. The Nature Conservancy's mission statement today is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. By working closely with communities, businesses, and private individuals, it has protected more than 92 million acres of valuable lands and waters world-

wide, including more than 12 million acres in the United States, and 277,200 acres in the Adirondacks. In 1952, the Conservancy had 554 members; in 2002 its membership exceeds one million.

Some twenty years after the Conservancy's founding, what began as an ecologically-driven and geographically-focused committee assembled by conservationist Carl George became the Adirondack Chapter in 1971. The timing of the chapter's founding was in step with the recommendation made by Governor Rockefeller's Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks that an organization "like The Nature Conservancy" should be established in the Adirondacks.

The chapter's first executive director, Timothy Barnett, who grew up in Westport, returned to the Adirondacks in 1972 to take the helm after a brief and successful stint as a marketing professional at a television station in New York City. The Adirondack Nature Conservancy's early projects included purchasing the 12,500-acre Santanoni tract in Newcomb, securing a 12-acre buffer for the Pack Forest old growth in Warrensburg, and acquiring conservation easements on 48,517 acres at Bay Pond and Brandon Parks.

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Working in the Adirondacks afforded the Conservancy the opportunity to work at much larger scales than it had previously. This helped set the stage to move from protecting isolated occurrences of rare plants and animals by acquiring small nature preserves to large-scale projects that conserve biodiversity in relation to ecosystem structure and the ecological processes that create and maintain the variety of habitats across the landscape. By establishing a natural heritage network in every state, the Conservancy keeps track of rare, fragile, representative, and exemplary natural communities to help guide its land protection efforts. These heritage data guide decisions to spend limited capital and staff resources on particular tracts.

Ecoregional planning

Across the globe, the Conservancy interprets the natural world in terms of ecoregions, which are delineated by common features such as climate, soil types, vegetation, and geology. The Adirondacks fall into two ecoregions, Northern Appalachian/Boreal and St. Lawrence/Lake Champlain. Within these regions, Conservancy scientists identify "functional conservation areas" that, if protected, would conserve both representative and rare species, natural communities, and ecological systems by protecting the ecological processes that sustain them. Its approach is a constant path of setting priorities based on ecological objectives, developing appropriate strategies and identifying threats, taking direct action, and measuring success.

The national and global importance of the Adirondacks

The Adirondacks are larger than Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and Olympic National Parks

combined. The fact that they cover a large area does not make them important, but the fact that they harbor some of the best remaining examples of the natural communities once typical of the 31-million-acre Northern Forest that spans New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and parts of southern Quebec does. The Adirondacks also represent the largest remaining temperate deciduous forest in the world.

Because the Adirondacks are a mosaic of more than 2.5 million acres of Forest Preserve lands intermingled with 3.5 million acres of private lands and small communities, they also provide a great model for how people and wildlands can coexist. Protecting the Adirondacks is as much about protecting the natural communities that live here as it is about protecting the way of life that sustains the people that live here.

Enter the Adirondack Land Trust

To supplement the Conservancy's biologically driven focus, a conservationist named George Davis took the lead in collaboration with the Adirondack Council to establish the Adirondack Land Trust in 1984. ALT is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting working landscapes such as farmlands and managed forests, as well as other lands contributing to the quality of life of Adirondack residents.

In 1988 ALT formalized its partnership with ANC to become a combined local conservation force distinguished by its ability to balance a broad range of ecological goals with human livelihoods to help ensure rural economic vitality. In partnership with private landowners, local communities, government agencies, and other non-profit organizations ANC/ALT has protected more than a quarter of a million acres, many of

which remain in private ownership. In a 2000 radio broadcast that featured ANC/ALT's current Executive Director, Michael T. Carr, Brian Mann noted, "...[the] tools Carr uses harness the conservation movement to capitalism itself. It's a sort of enlightened self-interest that has less to do with lobbying efforts and noisy protests than with board rooms and complex negotiations."

ANC/ALT has a history of putting together creative land deals that would make any business executive proud. The secret to its success is putting a variety of tools to use to meet its land protection objectives.

In a complex negotiation that combines many tools of the trade, ANC/ALT recently purchased from International Paper 26,500 acres that contain 16 lakes and ponds (39 miles of wild shoreline), 85 miles of rivers and streams, and 4,000 acres of wetlands. The purchase not only protects key ecological resources, but it will also create new public wildland recreation opportunities, and support the Adirondack forest-based economy. ANC/ALT seeks to balance ecological protection with the interests of a variety of key stakeholders — local governments, New York State, hunting clubs, neighboring landowners, to name a few. These lands and waters will be divided into a combination of Forest Preserve, working forests (under conservation easement), and private nature preserve.

Nature preserves

When special management is needed to protect sensitive ecosystems, ANC/ALT's strategy is to acquire the land and add it to its network of preserves across the Adirondacks. In 1985, Spring Pond Bog Preserve was established to protect an important wetland system by acquiring 4,278 acres outright, which in-

clude the second largest open expanse of peatland in New York, and acquiring a conservation easement over an additional 2,821 acres. The transactions prevented the establishment of a commercial peat harvesting operation, which, if set up, would have adversely altered the ecology of the bog and the watershed to which it belongs. The bog provides habitat for spruce grouse (an endangered species in New York) and northern harrier (a threatened species in New York) and it has the largest concentration of white-fringed orchids in the Northeast.

Conservation easements

Protecting the ecological value of a privately owned tract of land through a conservation easement is one of the most effective conservation tools ANC/ALT has at its disposal. A conservation easement is a legal contract between a landowner and a conservation organization or a government agency that limits or restricts certain uses of the land, such as development rights. Easements allow the owner to retain title to the land, to continue to live on and use the land (within the constraints of the easement provisions), to sell the land, or to pass it on to heirs. Easements can often result in an income tax deduction and other tax savings. Every easement is designed individually, depending on the attributes of the land and the desires of the landowner.

In 1992, by acquiring an easement on 1,904 acres of land on Hague Mountain, ANC/ALT and International Paper Company struck a deal that successfully balances ecology and economics. The arrangement enables IP to keep its land in working forest while protecting the largest bat hibernaculum in the Northeast (where the bat population includes species of special concern: small-

footed bats and the endangered Indiana bats). The conservation easement provisions require IP to keep heavy machinery off the land directly above the hibernaculum, which is made up of a series of abandoned graphite mines, and to seek approval before cutting timber that is above or in close proximity to the mines.

Farmlands

Essex County's farm country is not only beautiful, but hosts the greatest diversity of bird species in the Adirondacks. ANC/ALT's efforts, along with the Farmland Bureau, have resulted in Essex County's eligibility for state-funded agricultural conservation easements, which are held by ANC/ALT. The program preserves the landscape and eases the tax burden on farmers, helping them and their heirs stay in business while preserving important wildlife habitat. ANC/ALT has protected more than 2,500 acres of productive agricultural lands through this program.

Creative land swap

In 1991, through a land swap with a local sawmill owner, ANC/ALT acquired Coon Mountain, now a preserve in the Champlain Valley. By trading a biologically rich, mountainous tract for another that was more suitable for forestry, the sawmill owner ended up with a better timber supply for his operation. Every year nearly 1,000 local residents and tourists visit Coon Mountain, which offers exceptional views of Lake Champlain and the Adirondack High Peaks. It contains an intermixture of oak-pine forests, small fens, hemlock ravines, vernal pools, and hardwood swamps. And its rich soils provide habitat for a variety of wildflowers including white trillium, dutchman's breeches, bloodroot, wood anemone, and pink lady-slipper.

Adding to the legacy of the Forest Preserve

When the best possible protection is under the mantle of the "Forever Wild" Adirondack Forest Preserve, ANC/ALT transfers land to public ownership. Since 1971, it has added more than 100,000 acres to the Forest Preserve. From small parcels, such as four acres along the East Branch of the Ausable River in Keene to much larger parcels, such as the 12,500-acre Santanoni tract in Newcomb, ANC/ALT has a history of successfully negotiating transactions with willing sellers and buyers (e.g., a landowner and New York State). In 1995, ANC/ALT purchased Canoe Carry East from the Whitney family and sold it to the State in 1996. Because the family sold the property at a price below fair market value, they were able to claim the difference as a charitable donation and ANC/ALT was able to pass the savings along to the people of New York.

Pulling out all the stops

In another multi-tiered negotiation, ANC/ALT worked with the Town of Willsboro over a three-year period to acquire a 65-acre beach on Lake Champlain while preserving an important floodplain at the mouth of the Boquet River. It took the collective efforts of individual donors, New York State Department of Recreation and Parks, Willsboro Town Supervisor, Teresa Sayward, and ANC/ALT staff and trustees to make the project a success. According to Sayward, "A community of 1,700 people could not have done a project like this alone. ANC/ALT was a wonderful partner in making this happen. Today [we have] a nature preserve [that] belongs to all the people of the town — more than 3,500 feet of shoreline on the lake."

Stewardship and partnerships

Stewardship efforts and partnerships are also critical to ANC/ALT's conservation efforts. Beginning in 1990, in partnership with the Adirondack Mountain Club and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, ANC/ALT administers an education and outreach program that stations stewards on the summits of the highest Adirondack peaks. During the summer 2002 field season, which was generously funded in large part by the 46er Conservation Trust, the stewards reached 10,108 hikers. The stewards are charged with the protection of New York's rare and fragile alpine habitat, which is accomplished by educating thousands of hikers each year, monitoring the location and status of these rare plant communities, and restoring and stabilizing highly eroded areas.

Invasive species are among the top threats to the world's biodiversity, second only to conversion of lands and waters from their natural state. To address the threat of terrestrial invasive plants to Adirondack ecosystems, ANC/ALT has joined forces with three regions of New York State's Department of Transportation, two Department of Environmental Conser-

vation regions, the Adirondack Park Agency, the Student Conservation Association's Adirondack AmeriCorps Program (see Jill Baum's article in this issue), and a strong contingent of volunteers. The partners work along roadsides, river corridors, and intact forested blocks to locate, map, and implement control methods to stop the spread of specific plants. On the team's "most wanted" list are the following troublesome plants: common reed (*Phragmites australis*), garlic mustard (*Allicaria petiolata*), purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), and Japanese knotweed (*Polygonum cuspidatum*).

In 2001, ANC/ALT established a partnership in the Champlain Valley with Keeping Track®, a non-profit organization with the mission to inspire community participation in the long-term stewardship of wildlife habitat. Together they are working with local volunteers to track and monitor wildlife patterns in the Split Rock Wild Forest area.

Conclusion

ANC/ALT is financed through private donations from individuals, foundations, corporations and trusts. Its staff of 16 operates out of Keene Valley to cover all corners of the Adirondack Park, which it divides

into smaller ecological units, such as the High Peaks, Northwest Flow, and Sable Highlands. Along with its partner, the Lake George Land Conservancy, ANC/ALT receives administrative, legal, and operating support from The Nature Conservancy's offices in Troy and New York City, as well as Arlington, Virginia. In cooperation with Conservancy chapters in Eastern New York and Vermont, ANC/ALT also supports a program in Southern Lake Champlain Valley where three ecoregions converge to create a biologically rich area.

According to ANC/ALT Board Chairman, Ed Fowler, "One hundred years of human effort have kept the Adirondacks a vast ecological refuge in the most crowded corner of the country. We are working with a multitude of partners today to ensure future generations an inheritance of healthy lands and waters tomorrow, which are integral components to healthy communities and viable economies."

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The flow to Round Lake one of 16 lakes and ponds acquired when ANC/ALT purchased 26,500 acres from International Paper.

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