A Special Place

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Even if Lake Champlain isn't a Great Lake, as Congress has decreed, it's still a pretty good lake, especially as part of a model with a Special Designation. Champlain is a lot like other lakes around the world—much more so than any of the Great Lakes. Human impact on our lake is more immediate and "in our face" than human impact on any of the really big lakes. Our efforts to improve the watershed are more readily observed as well. So too, it's true: the Adirondacks isn't a "real" (i.e., original, untrammelled, pristine) wilderness, but the cut-over land and pockets of Old Growth we have protected for a hundred years are recovering nicely now, thank you very much. We must remember that most of the world's settled ecosystems have been or soon will be degraded as our population doubles; so the Adirondacks can offer and demonstrate hope for their recovery as well.

Together, the Champlain-Adirondack region is very special because of its ordinariness—its many parallels with other regions both in North America and around the world. It is also very special because of its socio-economic history, which obviously makes this place unique. Unique enough to be a particularly useful model of sustainable development. One of the exciting aspects of our uniqueness is the serendipitous shifts in the course of history that inadvertently "saved" us from earlier, more primitive forms of economic development. Our bioregion is now surrounded by the most technologically and economically developed civilization in the world. One result: we have long enjoyed the wilderness of the Adirondacks in high style; indeed, it's our trademark. This tradition and our location enables researchers here to use the most sophisticated research methods to examine an ecological-economic model of Nature and Man.

Ordinary and unique, the Champlain-Adirondack Biosphere Reserve (CABR) is clearly a special place that can help serve the world community as a model. Many can recite the big numbers: the thousands of ponds and lakes, the hundreds of miles of waterways, and the heights of all the interesting bumps in the landscape. At about 10 million acres it's huge. The Biosphere Reserve (BR) is so large it includes nearly all the known species that inhabit this biome. That is one of the reasons why it might really serve as a particularly good model (or even, if necessary, an ark). It's probably big enough to include most of the important ecological features and functions that keeps this place alive (See the map).

Such hubrist! "It's not a model: it's a mess!" as Barbara McMartin writes in this issue. She is right but, we are still a model that can help serve the world. We are just a very messy model with lots of bugs, both real and systemic. We are, after all, the oldest example of a democratically controlled region—and, therefore, a messily controlled region (almost by definition). We really are very fortunate, as we become aware of ourselves as a special kind of community—A Leopold-type community of people and Nature—to have so many members willing to stand up and speak out for our rights as Americans. I can't think of a dictator in these parts in all of recorded history. Nor can I imagine one in our future. If it were not for these stalwart people keeping us aware of, and in-line with, our American ideals we certainly could not be a very good model for a Free World.
An unfortunate aspect of this messy democratic model is the fact that no one talks much about our BR designation any more. What happened was probably inevitable, given hindsight. The originally proposed institutional structure for the BR was made up and largely led by government regulatory agencies. That simply wasn’t politically acceptable.

No doubt the idea could have been proposed and promoted differently—bottom-up rather than top-down. The killer was, though, the simple fact that any designation of any kind couldn’t have come at a worse time—when the Governor’s special Commission and their Report on the Adirondacks in the 21st Century was under virulent attack. Make no mistake about it, a significant component of sustainable development is and must be the maintenance or improvement of our region’s ecological integrity—and that must ultimately have some impact on our property rights in land.²

Property rights are a very important and very difficult subject for most of us. Americans have long used property rights to keep society’s control of our liberty at arm’s length. So the idea of regulatory agencies, like the Adirondack Park Agency, taking the lead in a United Nations sponsored network of international organizations and cooperating with rather than dictating to our local communities just didn’t sound very likely to a lot of people, especially in the Adirondacks. I imagine some people even had nightmares of blue helmets and black helicopters.

The degree of trust and level of public acceptance of government’s role in environmental protection and economic development is not uniform across our Bioregion. Bryan Higgins and Richard Kujawa found that only 62.7 percent of those living within the Champlain Basin agreed that the State [printed as either New York or Vermont in the actual surveys] needs stronger regulations to protect fish and wildlife. When the data was disaggregated by state, they found a significantly lower percent of agreement on the New York side of the lake. In another question, they found that less than half the respondents on the West Shore felt that government should stop new subdivisions or economic development if there is a good possibility that it would harm the natural environment. On the other shore, more than 70 percent of the respondents would want government intervention even if the harm to the environment was only just a possibility. Vermonters must view their government in Montpelier with a lot less suspicion than Adirondackers view New York’s powerful political elites and Albany politicians.³

As pointed out in a 1995 National Technical Information Service (NTIS) report, “[I]ntial planning of CABR involved primarily state and federal agencies and university scientists. The benefits of BR status have yet to be communicated effectively or demonstrated convincingly to the public. Some see it as a threat while others question the need for yet another ‘government program.’ Near-term progress in implementing BR concepts will require commitments by BR proponents to strengthen public education and participation in planning BR activities that meet local needs.”⁴

Has “near-term progress” been made? Quoting the NTIS authors further:

The primary goal of the Champlain-Adirondack Biosphere Reserve is to establish a non-regulatory, non-advocacy program that uses education, research, and demonstration projects to encourage social and economic vitality and to preserve and improve the environmental health in the region. Other goals include:

- Find practical and environmentally sound solutions to problems of conflicting uses;
- Facilitate regional, interstate, and international cooperation in the areas of environmental education, scientific data exchange, and development of regional policies to address natural resource, social and economic development issues;
- Serve as a model of how a coordinated public/private effort at the regional scale can help protect biological diversity and promote sustained economic development; and,
- Build public awareness, understanding, and support of the relationship between preservation and protection of the unique, diverse, and special natural resources within the reserve and the sustained economic growth and vitality of the region.

Yes, implementing BR concepts has continued; progress has been made during the decade-long hiatus since the United Nations recognized us as a
Biosphere Reserve. Anyone following resource conservation, ecosystem management, and economic development issues in this region knows many examples. Several articles in AIES have recorded this progress. In this issue we continue the tradition with another recorded perspective from the East Shore, where the Lake Champlain Basin Program and the Lake Champlain Research Consortium (LCRC) developed, in part, due to CABR designation. Our recognition as an international model helped to persuade Congress to pass the Lake Champlain Special Designation Act in 1990. On the West Shore, the Adirondack Research Consortium (ARC) was born out of volunteerism without government help even as a midwife. Surmounting the usual difficulties of all volunteer organizations this year, the ARC is proudly hosting their 6th Annual Conference on the Adirondacks jointly with the LCRC’s Conference on the Lake Champlain Basin at Paul Smith’s Hotel Saranac (May, 1999).

Despite the lack of a functional CABR organization, we are still designated a Biosphere Reserve. If we organize ourselves, we have the opportunity to participate at a significant level in the global effort to promote sustainable development in communities at all scales (from village to bioregion). Roger Soles, representing the U.S. State Department’s Man and the Biosphere Project, reminded us of the potential benefits of participating as a functional BR at the ARC’s 4th Annual Conference on the Adirondacks (May, 1997). He described many examples of international cooperation in biological and sociological research as well as several sustainable economic development demonstration efforts.

Most of the benefits of being both a recognized and functioning BR model remain untapped. I believe it is time we start thinking about ourselves as a Biosphere Reserve again. Only this time, the institutional aegis should be the Academy rather than the Government. The Academy is explicitly research and education oriented with no regulatory authority whatsoever. In just one possible version, our two existing research consortiums from either side of the Champlain Basin, or some such CABR Institute with two branches, could become the facilitating organization in a newly re-configured, re-created and functional Biosphere Reserve.

This newly imagined CABR Institute, following the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISSE) Public Policy Committee’s recommendation, would certainly be focused on “high profile, but essentially unresolved, international programs and policies” such as sustainable development, the Earth Summit’s Agenda 21, Biosphere Reserves, and our nation’s own, Man and the Biosphere Project. To balance the perspective between the environment and the economy, the CABR Institute should align itself with the integrated environment-economy accounting methods and principles of ecological economics. Ecological economics is the transdisciplinary bridge between the natural sciences and the humanities (across the social sciences). Some areas of research and development suggested by the ISSE Report include performance indicators of sustainable development; valuation techniques for assessing the contributions to human welfare of cultural and natural capital; an ecosystem approach to the management of community development efforts; and the application of ecological economic principles to the formulation, implementation and evaluation of social, economic and environmental projects and policies.

In this issue’s Perspectives, Colleen Hickey describes some of the achievements of the Lake Champlain Basin Program and Ann Kuzow Holland describes the Friends of the North Country’s nearly twenty years of community development efforts in Keeseville. In our Forum, Naj Wikoff presents the role of the arts in sustainable development and Chuck Brumley speculates on the future of Adirondack guides. In our peer reviewed Analysis, Robert Withington and Robert Christopherson develop and present several important regional economic variables and find, to the surprise of some, that the economic activity within the Park deteriorated less than that outside the Park.

Notes
1 See, for example, Jon Erickson, “Sustainable Development and the Adirondack Experience,” Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies, 5(2) Fall/Winter, 1998.
4 Biosphere Reserves in Action: Case Studies of the American Experience, Autoinette J. Condo (Editor), Department of State Publication 10241, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs (June 1995).

Comments
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