The Adirondacks: 
It’s Not a Model; It’s a Mess

BY BARBARA McMARTIN

The Adirondack Park’s mix of public and private lands has been called a worldwide model for environmental planning in this day of growing populations and shrinking natural resources. During the Park’s centennial in 1992 we revealed in our role model status and I admit I was one of the proudest boosters of the way New York State has integrated the public and private land within the Blue Line. Deeper reflection has shown me just how wrong I was.

But first, I need to explain why I am writing this. The editor of AJES asked me for a piece on public lands and national parks around the world. He wanted me to compare some of the things we have seen with the Adirondack Park. My husband and I are really very fortunate; in the past 23 years we have visited 100 such parks around the world. Maybe I exaggerate, but we certainly have seen a lot.

Countries and their parks break down loosely into two categories. There are those where natural resources are really threatened by population expansion; where preservation is essential, not only to preserve biological diversity but to preserve water, soil, and vegetation in order to sustain populations; where controlling the relationship between private interests and public needs has to confront life and death issues faced by native populations. Examples of this type can be found in Africa where domestic animals compete with wild and often endangered animals in the game preserves, where ecotourism, game parks, and reserves have produced some limited success; or in much of Central America, where forests have been destroyed or harvested in order to make room for expanding farmlands and where failures to limit forest destruction have meant that natural disasters like hurricanes have totally destroyed local economies. In places like this, all the solutions are very difficult.

The second category comprises countries that have succeeded in creating park systems that work. These countries have either set aside whole, protected parks and preserves or integrated public land with private lands in a way not too different from the Adirondack model. It is necessary, however, to further divide this category: those countries that are struggling to create a system of parks and preserved lands and those whose success exceeds or equals ours.

The first category offers many contrasts. Ecotourism probably had its birth in Africa. By controlling people’s access to wild animals (safety of viewers is a tremendous concern) there are dozens of parks in Kenya and Tanzania. We have seen prides of lions in Ngorongoro Crater and stood on the veldt in the midst of a migration watching in one sweeping view a million wildebeests and zebras. Zimbabwe’s Hwanke Park is well managed, so are South Africa’s parks, but Tanzania and Kenya are struggling. We have seen how in Zimbabwe native leadership has maintained and expanded parks, conserved wildlife, and assisted the country’s economy.

We have seen what island extinction can do to isolated islands as on Mauritius where many species of birds and plants are lost. We have seen how pressures for food and fuel have resulted in the destruction of boojum trees of Madagascar and limited the range for lemurs and birds. Places like Madagascar are slipping farther and farther behind. Forest destruction even reaches into the small areas the country has tried to set aside, to preserve.

We have walked a little in Nepal (but never learned to like yak butter tea), climbed to Tigers Nest in Bhutan through forests draped with the moss called “old man’s beard,” and visited Bharatpur in India one of the most spectacular bird preserves in the world. Forest destruction for fuel in Nepal is appalling and threatens the great Indian and Pakistani rivers with severe flooding. We saw people cutting fuel in a sacred and protected forest near Katmandu. Forest destruction is credited with causing the severe floods on the Yangtse that occurred in 1998. Bhutan is trying to preserve forest stands and their inaccessibility makes that a possibility. But one of my most vivid memories from visiting that country was a day spent at a magnificent Buddhist festival in Paro. The government used the occasion to inform natives through booths filled with poster displays about birth control, health measures, and forests. For the latter, there was a picture of an old man and his story: “When I was a young boy, I gathered wood to cook the family’s dinner in half an hour. Now I walk for four hours to find fuel, often I have to stay overnight to find enough fuel for two days.”

These places rarely have the luxury of separating preserved lands from agricultural lands. And, this is probably where the Adirondack example really shines. Because we have that absolute separation between lands that can be logged and lands where no trees can be cut, we provide an economic base for the region as well as environments and ecosystems that are as natural as our state’s preservation efforts can provide. There may be conflict between the two kinds of lands, but they are separate and will remain that way. Third world countries might see our form of separation

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Barbara McMarten is the author of the Discovering the Adirondacks hiking and guidebook series.
FEATURE

as a model to achieve, but it is beyond their political grasp.

India presents a very different picture, and exemplifies my second category. As I began to categorize different countries' responses to natural resources, it has become apparent that India's efforts reflect the British tradition. Game parks in India have poachers, but they also have enough staff to keep the poachers under control. The parks are separate from agricultural or forest lands where trees can be harvested. Some of the very few bright spots in large animal preservation are found in India. Certainly controlling India's burgeoning population is no easy task, but preserving natural resources is a government priority and an effective policy.

Observing the impact of British traditions around the world, it seems as if England has done more to influence the world than the United States has. Of course, Great Britain had a worldwide colonial empire in which to implant their English traditions. Public and private lands in England have been intertwined since William the Conqueror established Britain's New Forest. With its mix of public and private lands, this could have been a model for our Adirondacks, although it is more likely that our mix of public and private lands owes more to accidents of history than to planning.

Certainly the tradition of setting aside parklands has followed the Empire and many countries that were once part of the British Empire actually do a better job managing public lands both for preservation and for people than we do in the Adirondacks.

Consider the results of land preservation in Canada where each province not only has protected lands but goes out of its way to help tourists find history and nature at many levels within the parks and their surrounding developed lands. A visit to any province gateway center will convince you of that. And, Canada has some great parks, the best of which are so tightly managed that their residents often visit America to avoid the controls, which the government has found are necessary to protect their parks.

New Zealand and Australia both have fantastically well-run parks interspersed with settlements. New Zealand has some of the best scenery in the world and some of the most spectacular and well-maintained trails you can imagine. Signs tell you about how long a trail will take to walk and warn you of all the problems you might encounter. The park service controls the numbers of hikers on the most desirable places. Here are preserved lands that would be perfect, except for one thing—early settlers brought birds and animals from home and they have wiped out some species and threatened others. (Tree ferns are a favorite food of imported deer.) At first glance, New Zealand appears to be an image of England with little, if any, native flora and fauna. We did get to Stewart Island and a nearby sanctuary on Uva Island where there are no deer and the forest is pristine—and magnificent.

Public lands in New Zealand are managed not just for preservation, but for people to visit and enjoy. Their economic benefits are real, but preservation of natural resources has failed because steps to preserve forests and limit the introduction of exotic species were too late and the processes cannot be reversed.

Australia, too, fights exotic fauna and has found that once introduced, the disastrous results are virtually irreversible. Consider the problems Aussies face trying to eradicate introduced rabbits. Nevertheless, Australia has fantastic parks from the cold forests of Tasmania to the tropical wet regions of the northern coasts. There are trails everywhere with great signs and attention to natural details. One of our rain forest walks was spectacular, with a planned and well-maintained trail, a series of waterfalls, trees (Nothofagus) that were over 4,000 years old, and leeches. New Zealand and Australia both have fantastically well-run parks interspersed with settlements.

Great Britain itself has walks of all kinds tying public lands to private destinations along both public thoroughfares and private paths. These walks integrate wonderful, inexpensive places to stay with historical places and spectacular scenery. A long tradition of good guidebooks, maps, and a population that appreciates the paths makes it all possible.

Most of Europe has a tradition of trails, and although there is nowhere the proportion of protected lands found in America, there are strong controls on forest lands that aid species preservation. Southern Europe was settled so long before anyone thought of land preservation that most of the great forests surrounding the Mediterranean were cut in the time of ancient Greeks and Romans, and sheep and goat herding since that time have permanently altered the flora. It was only on one of the most remote walks I have ever made, a trek through the Samarra Gorge...
in Crete, that we found native forests—the fact that they were too remote and difficult to reach made it impossible to cut them.

Turkey struggles to limit access to its national parks by the sheep and goats that destroy native plants, and, reinforced with attempts to better the lives of people in the countryside, they are beginning to succeed. Still, we found it depressingly difficult to discover how far we had to travel to reach natural and relatively undisturbed sites to see the origins of those plants, like tulips and daffodils that now grace western gardens.

Abruzzi, a park in Italy’s Apennines, is an unusual example. The state owns only 1% of the land, yet through planning, government help, and a charismatic leader, the park has protected the brown bears for which the region is famous, reintroduced wolves and the wild chamois they feed on, separated regions used by sheep herders from the preserved areas by compensating herders, trained local people to serve as guides for tourist groups to provide employment and make sure animals and land are protected, promoted the region, and increased tourism to a level that makes the local people appreciate their resource and the need to protect both the land and its wild inhabitants.

There is no question that most of the rest of the world lags behind Europe and former British colonies in setting aside public lands and developing them for recreation and economic gain. The biggest exception is, of course, Costa Rica with 15% of its land protected. Costa Rica has led the way in both Central and South America in setting aside preserves and trying help natives benefit from those preserves. It is not an easy task, but the government is behind it all the way. Ecotourism works, resource preservation makes the country a primary destination for foreign tourists who enjoy the jungle trails, mountain paths, and ubiquitous birding walks.

The Chileans have many spectacular parks. Torres del Paine is my favorite and it is spectacularly well run. Still, the country has had trouble protecting the rare temperate forests that are so sought after for lumber and pulp. Seeing mountains of pulp logs waiting for shipment to Japan made us wonder if enough forests had been protected. Fra Jorge, a coastal park in the desert north had one of best short trails in the world. We walked from desert vegetation to rain forest in fifty paces, the changes all caused by patterns of fog rising from the ocean below the park’s cliffs.

Argentina’s parks along the Beagle Channel reminded us of parks in the western part of our country. The Patagonian coast has important preserves for penguins and sea elephants. In the glacier parks we had boat rides to fields isolated by ice where strange temperate forests were home to rare plants. That country has not only established preserves, but accommodations for visitors.

Ecuador has park rangers in the Galapagos that really care about protecting that fragile place. Venezuela has parks for birds and rare plants. The Peruvian headwaters of the Amazon basin have wonderful jungle parks—birds and butterflies that are more spectacular than the pictures in travel brochures. Eco-tourism is making inroads in the struggle to limit forest destruction.

What does all this have to do with the Adirondacks? Certainly much of the rest of the world has become aware of the need to set land aside and protect it. All these attempts have flaws, as does the preservation effort in the Adirondacks. Here, where we have lost almost no species (wolves and lynx are the main exceptions), we still have problems. The accidental nature of the way we set land aside has meant that some of the ecologically important areas—the Blue Ledges, Boreas Ponds, Preston Ponds) are in good hands, but not within Forest Preserve protection. Some lands that might better serve the forest products industry have been preserved. Small parcels that give access to Forest Preserve tracts have not been acquired. The total acreage of the Forest Preserve is about right, we may need to swap some lands, and we probably will not. The third world comparison is most telling with respect to exporting natural resources. The inability of third world countries to develop processing or manufacturing to boost the economic value of their products occurs right here. Too much of our resources are shipped out without benefitting local people. Sure we share the mix of public and private lands with parks around the world. We are older than many, but not all. The Adirondacks cannot be a model for those countries that face almost insurmountable pressures from population and lack of resources. Even when we compare the Adirondacks to countries with well developed park systems, it is obvious that our region is certainly not unique, except in one devastating way. Every other park has a central organization that integrates planning and carries out the goals of preservation, economic development, and people’s needs to be a part of nature.

We have done a very good job of natural resource protection. We have done a very poor job of putting people in a natural setting.

The contrasts with the best parks in other countries, especially those that were once a part of the British Empire, points up our shortcomings. In the Adirondacks, where preservation is so advanced, very little has been done to place people in the natural areas in ways that protect those areas and enhance people’s needs and desires to be a part of nature. The failures are all traceable to our bureaucracies. There are overlapping agencies, split regions, and multiple, competing governmental bodies.
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We in the Park are governed by entities that are parochial at every level. The only way we are unique is in the mess that purports to govern our most precious resource and the people who need to live and work in it.

Strong words, you say. But it is clear that overlapping layers of fractured entities of government mean that we are not getting the best from established agencies. For example, we have two disparate regions of the Department of Environmental Conservation, which, in spite of their allegiance to DEC staff in Albany, manage to administer state lands in very different and sometimes hurtful ways. The western region has completed most of its Unit Management Plans and is leading the way in recreation planning for some of its wild lands. The eastern region still cannot produce a plan for the abused and overused High Peaks region and has made virtually no strides in planning for recreation in other areas that could serve to divert use to less threatened and developed areas.

The Adirondack Park Agency is supposed to oversee planning for our public lands, while the DEC is supposed to do the actual management of those lands. But the APA is already eight years behind in revising the State Land Master Plan, which is notably short in advice for recreation planning in our Wild Forest Areas. The APA has only one staff member responsible for state lands. The APA and DEC talk, but have accomplished little together.

The Department of Economic Development [now Empire State Development, Ed.] also has split regions. Only the northern and central portion of the Park is within its Adirondack region; the southern portion is tacked on to the Leatherstocking and Capital regions. There is an Association of Towns, but they have little status in talks with state agencies. The Local Government Review Board has status, and increasing input in APA deliberations, but no real part of the planning process. Add to this the overlaps of the Departments of Transportation and Health, and you see the reasons we have a mess.

What could be accomplished if there were better communication and a direct line of organization? For starters, it would be possible to help local communities expand their ties to the Forest Preserve, to
foster proper use of it as part of their tourism programs. They could be encouraged to help plan trails from the communities to surrounding state land. It would be possible to have trails from hamlets, vacation centers, and guest accommodations to the beauty of the Forest Preserve. Local government participation in Park planning and organization is essential; it is the best means of providing representation for residents in the context of larger planning and government agencies.

Have other national or state parks done a better job? In this country, all our other parks are contiguous geographical entities, not intermixed public and private lands. Their managers are concerned with them as resources to be protected and as recreational opportunities for the public. Sure there are problems of buffers and extraction of mineral resources, of overuse and too much building of public accommodations within their boundaries, but these problems can be solved.

They do have some great examples of how to make public lands work for people. Almost every national park has a good visitor center near the entrance (the Adirondacks’ centers are remote destinations, not the place to obtain first impressions and an understanding of what may be available both at the public level and at the private level). Many national parks have roads surrounding them or penetrating a part of them, with roadside stops, vistas, and information about what you are seeing. National parks and forests have a range of trails offering short introductory walks, moderate hikes, and long backcountry treks. Every short hike I have tried has been a wonderful sample of what the region offers. (How few such sample trails exist in the Adirondacks! And, the best were not even built by the DEC, but by the Nature Conservancy. That organization built the boardwalk that takes you into Silver Lake Bog; the steep, fern bordered trail to Coon Mountain’s summit and its panoramic view; the wetland and views along the trail to Cooks Mountain overlooking Lake George.)

Can you imagine a program like the recent efforts of the Adirondack Regional Tourism Council, which prepared booklets on canoe routes and great walks and day hikes, working together with the DEC to develop new opportunities in the regions where they are scarce? Consider the benefits of a comprehensive plan that will ensure that almost every wild forest and wilderness area in the Park has a short, introductory trail and roadside stops and picnic places on surrounding roads. Imagine how desirable it would be for towns to have trails leading out from bed and breakfasts or motels to special places. Or even enough trails to special places nearby that could act as a magnet for visitors. Most progress toward promoting the Park as a tourist region has come from local tourist offices and county tourism organizations. Such efforts have never been integrated with the DEC or APA.

Further, the organizations that purport to watch over public concerns for the Park are even more fragmented and contradictory than the governmental agencies. Some organizations are concerned almost exclusively for wilderness values and limiting the impact of development on wild lands. Some groups are mainly concerned with acquiring new lands. Others focus on developing access, in some instances in ways that threaten the wild land values. The cacophony of voices, each asking for financial support for their organization, splinters and weakens their thrust. And, in recent years such organizations have proliferated rather than joining together to focus on real support of the park and its wild land and economic values. The whole Adirondack region is one of the most beautiful in the United States, but all most people hear about are the tallest peaks. It will take a concerted effort to unite all the parts of the Park and to promote them equally. Recent attempts have been piecemeal efforts at best. The DEC’s Use and Information Plan, an aborted attempt to use federal funds for recreation planning, failed when it was decided that it was not the venue for really integrating the private sector with the development of public lands. It was a doubly unfortunate misstep in that representatives of towns and tourist agencies were eager to participate, yet thwarted. Still, the exercise did show the possibilities of joint efforts.

The Park is an incredibly complex mix of resources and opportunities. I do not think that real progress can be made toward integrating the needs of Park residents with wild land preservation until all the involved agencies are part of one council that works together. We are in dire need of leadership for the Park. There is a lack of vision that is mired in overlapping layers of government. More government control is feared, but vision would not require or necessarily create more control—it would propose a framework in which all existing agencies could be integrated more effectively.

A more streamlined governmental approach would not eliminate public participation in planning and managing our wildlands, it would enhance it. In fact, it should make it easier for towns and local entities to be effective because they would have fewer layers of government to contend with. A joint agency dealing with all aspects of the Adirondacks could provide a forum for all interested parties—preservationists, conservationists, foresters, downstaters, residents, everyone to work together openly. Back to my foreign travels. I marvel that countries with such limited resources have done so much. I appreciate what the western tradition of parks has done for more prosperous countries. I am saddened that the Adirondacks which has done such a spectacular job of preserving natural resources has done so little to make these resources easily available to the region’s visitors; that it has done so little to provide the economic base that residents require; that it has not made this “a park of people and natural resources” as we hoped when we planned the park’s centennial.