

AJES

Adirondack Journal of
Environmental Studies

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MISSION STATEMENT

Covering the broad range of issues that concern the Champlain-Adirondack Biosphere Reserve, the *Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies* (AJES) exists to foster a dialogue about this area loved by so many. The journal purposefully avoids serving as a vehicle for any single or special point of view. To the contrary, in searching for common ground AJES welcomes variety and a broad spectrum of opinion from its contributors.

CONTRIBUTING TO AJES

We encourage the submission of manuscripts, reviews, photographs, artwork and letters to the editor. Please send your material to Gary Chilson, Paul Smith's College, Paul Smiths, New York 12970.
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PREROGATIVE

Wilderness Trammeled and Trampled

BY GARY CHILSON

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For the next hundred years or so, we will inevitably push the boundaries of what is human deeper and deeper into the little remaining space that is not. Most ecosystems that are not ice, rock, or desert will be harnessed to our juggernaut. True, there are a few isolated bits and pieces of wilderness designated in trust for the future. These little islands of wilderness, surrounded by a rising sea of civilization, are supposed to remain wild — places we specifically allow to be as nature wills. Yet in our own bioregion, where we are responsible for what happens, the protection of our wilderness trust is inadequate. What wilderness means in the Adirondacks is still evolving, but right now it is simply a travesty — trammeled and trampled, areas where willful nature should exist are, instead, still fettered and abused.

Some people think wilderness should be a natural history museum of pre-Columbian nature, someplace that looks and feels like it did before the white man messed it up, minus only dangerous savages. But wilderness is not like that. The word does not mean that, the legal definition does not mean that, we can't maintain a biological community in stasis forever anyway, and we really need wilderness to be wild. Space constraints preclude a discussion of the word's etymology, its legal meaning, and even the interesting notion of trying to freeze ecological time. I shall focus, instead, on why we need wilderness. Specifically, why we should not allow our High Peaks to be trampled nor our wild waters to be trampled.

First, the ecological reason: nature, left free to be and do as it will, unconsciously promotes the earth's maximum potential expression of biological growth, ecological development, and ecosystem resilience — the maintenance of the planet's life support system. In the face of a very uncertain future in an indifferent universe — just think of this era of unprecedented extinctions and natural disasters — there is absolutely no way that we can know what natural processes and species will still be needed for the planet's life-support system in the year 3000 A.D., let alone some year ten thousand years into the future. We do know the planet will get there, and even biologically speaking, it isn't all that far away. Whether humanity will still be watching it all unfold isn't certain.

Applying the precautionary principle, doing the least amount of damage to the planet's life-support systems now, including the act of leaving some ecosystems to function unfettered, is one way to protect nature's processes. I sincerely doubt that we will know enough to replace Space-ship Earth's life-support system anytime soon. If we continue to make mistakes on those lands we dominate now, and I am sure we will as we have in the past, it would be nice to have a few functioning life-support systems still around and operating independently of our ignorant control. As the last great wilderness repository of a temperate forest and lake biome, the Adirondacks might ultimately prove to be the resilient reserve we'll need to help reseed the world a hundred years hence.

Second, the economic reason: some of the value of our wilderness trust lies in its existence as an information source and repository of unimaginable opportunities yet to come. Preserving wilderness for what scientific studies can teach us about ecological processes can also lead us to economic resources never recognized before. The economic value of wilderness, with less than one percent of the planet's genetic diversity examined so far, has been amply demonstrated in the past. While most new knowledge, products, and services are now being found in old growth and ancient rainforests, that is not a reason to destroy the opportunities still available in the undiscovered biological complexities of our own, recovering Adirondack wilderness. This potential economic value aside, for the present and for the last hundred years, the call of the wild in the Adirondacks has put dollars into our Adirondack businesses. The wilderness-based tourist industry helps support the infrastructure necessary to enable the rest of us to live our rustic but highly civilized Adirondack lifestyle. As the megapololi around our mountains fill with more and more people, perhaps doubling the 60 million now within a day's drive, the economic value of wilderness will only increase.

Third, the aesthetic reason: wilderness helps satisfy a very significant and truly human urge. The appreciation of aesthetics is highly personal — it's all in the eye of the beholder — and thus, the sense of it is difficult to communicate one to another. Trying anyway, because it's my Prerogative, I think at least some of the aesthetic value of wilderness lies in its presence as a distinct contrast to our busy and manipulated human-dominated environment. Whether alone, or in a small group, the experience of exploring a wilderness is different from the experience of hiking along a marked trail up a popular mountain. The experience of reaching a remote mountain brook and rewarding yourself in the pool below a waterfall is different from buying a ticket and splashing about with hundreds of others in a waterslide park.

In another aesthetic sense, some see wilderness as a kind of standard or measure to help us illustrate and experience the meaning and emotional magnitude of the words 'beautiful' and 'sublime.' With this perspective, we can assume that wherever wilderness appears ugly, or wrong somehow, it is the result of a distortion in the cultural lens we see through rather than something ugly or wrong in nature.

This cultural lens might urge us to intervene in the natural processes we experience about us — just to set things right, of course — and I think we should, in places other than wilderness. It is important to remember, however, that form follows function, and natural processes still include many functions we know nothing about. Whether we see those outward forms as beautiful, sublime, or even ugly, in untrammelled wilderness we have the opportunity to experience the insight into ourselves and our culture and maybe correct the distorted lens.

For some, the aesthetic quest into wilderness solitude is a spiritual event that leads them to experience another state or level of consciousness. The experience of being absolutely alone within the wilderness, especially if you think about it while you're there, can lead your thoughts to an appreciation of those Others who actually surround and interact with us all the time. Experiencing the reality of the Other's existence in a wilderness "all hush to the brim," as Robert Service put it, can help remind us of the glory of all creation.

Fourth, and last, the ethical reason: we are morally bound to protect the Other in its collective expression of life we call untrammelled wilderness. Many now realize that dominion does not require domination. Dominion over nature, as opposed to domination, does not require all of nature to submit and be useful to humans. Dominion recognizes and allows nature to be intrinsically valuable unto itself as well as instrumentally valuable to humans. As moral agents we have an obligation to protect and promote intrinsic value wherever we find it, even when it isn't useful.

We have been trying to do the right thing in the Adirondacks for a long time.

As Ed Zahniser's article in this issue points out, the Adirondacks even helped inspire the establishment of other designated wilderness areas throughout North America, though some of these other areas received their legal designations earlier. It wasn't until the State Land Master Plan was approved in 1972 that some of the public land in the Adirondacks became officially, and controversially, designated as wilderness to be "untrammelled by man." Since then, controversy over what constitutes permitted uses within our (still controversial) wilderness areas means that the development of protective Unit Management Plans (UMPs) is very, very difficult.

In the meantime, the eastern High Peaks are being loved to death — trampled beyond the point of recovery for some very delicate alpine communities. Either strict use-limits must be imposed to protect and regenerate the area's remaining wilderness values, or we should seriously reconsider whether the eastern High Peaks ought to remain designated as wilderness. Perhaps the goal of wilderness can't, or shouldn't, be achieved in such a popular area. The management options are much broader for Wild Forest than they are for Wilderness and would allow the kind of structures unrestricted use requires to protect at least some remaining public values. While we argue over the location and size of parking lots, and other concerns, delaying the implementation of even a grossly compromised wilderness UMP, the values of the area erode beneath our feet.

On the other issue, though we have seen and largely avoided trammeling our wilderness lands, we seem blind to trammeling our wilderness waters. Even while we trample our High Peaks we have generally let nature adjust to it as it will. The exceptions we make to this admirable approach, however, require very careful scrutiny because restoration and reclamation are not synonymous. I think restoring or promoting the wilderness by adding species to the ecosystem is different from reclaiming or taming the wilderness by eliminating species we just don't like or that don't serve us, their masters, well enough.

To illustrate, note that we have not sought to eliminate the inappropriately fragile alpine communities on the High Peaks to replace them with a more resilient and beautiful (perhaps) wildflower community. Such plant communities out West can withstand buffaloes trampling and wallowing and even frequent wildfires. Imagine, with such tough ground cover we could host magnificent parades, perhaps even nationally televised, right across the High Peaks. No, we chose not to spray the alpine communities with an herbicide to reseed it with tough wildflowers. Instead, in a heroic effort, Ed Ketchledge sought to add life to, not subtract life from, the existing alpine communities. He added some temporary species, a little fertilizer, and physically shored up eroding areas to help the existing community stabilize, strengthen, and restore itself.

Even one of our present Adirondack controversies is about adding a deliberately extirpated creature back to the community rather than subtracting anything from it. In this issue's Forum section, Nina Fascione (Pro) and Bill Hutchens (Con) argue the merits of restoring wolves to the once reclaimed and now recovering Adirondack wilderness. Whether one agrees with the idea or not, and restoration efforts certainly skirt perilously close to trammeling, at least it is a case of adding to the wilderness rather than subtracting life from it.

Let me make my point perfectly clear. Influencing nature by addition is unavoidable. Nature has always had to cope with and evolve to accommodate new circumstances. Now that humans affect the global environment, the process of accommodating humanity's influence will continue, perhaps proceeding even faster. That kind of influence, however, is not trammeling nature. Trammeling nature means to prevent or impede nature's own coping processes, to restrain nature as if it were in some kind of net or trap for our specific human purposes. I think the most egregious example of trammeling nature in our special wilderness areas is the reclamation of aquatic ecosystems.

Perhaps the recently assumed goal of "restoring" Heritage Strain brook trout, as opposed to simply improving the trout fishery for some people's recreation pleasure, is a sufficiently noble end that justifies the wholesale slaughter of countless millions of creatures. Maybe ecocide has its place in our dominion over nature. I can see it both ways, but what we choose to do in areas not specially designated as wilderness is an entirely different issue altogether. Reclamation, which means to reform, tame, subdue or rescue from an undesirable state, by poisoning the whole ecosystem and restocking the sterilized waters with a "more desirable" species, as if it were a farmer's fishpond, simply has no conceivable place in the proper management of untrammelled wilderness.

Untrammelled wilderness provides us with important values and opportunities. We should do our best not to squander these special gifts. Clearly, we need new ways to help us protect the gains this region has made, as well as to explore the further development of both humans and nature. Specifically, we can develop more protective UMP's for our Adirondack wilderness areas and we should stop trammeling our aquatic wilderness ecosystems.

In addition to featuring Ed Zahniser's historic contribution to our understanding of "The Adirondack Roots of America's Wilderness Preservation Movement" and our two Forum articles already mentioned, this issue of AJES features Elizabeth Thorndike's sequel, "The Adirondack Park in the 21st Century, Part II: Strategies for Implementing a 'Research to Inform Policy' Agenda." Our Regional Perspectives are also broadened by two diverse viewpoints in this issue. Andrea Colnes, in "Change and Opportunity in the Northern Forest," clarifies the issues challenging the integrity of the Northern Forest and helps us understand the purpose of the Northern Forest Alliance. Terry deFranco Martino documents the viewpoint of another important North Country economic institution in, "The Adirondack North Country Association: Perspectives on Sustainable Economic Development."



MARK KURTZ