

AJES

Adirondack Journal of
Environmental Studies

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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

Finding Common Ground in Balanced Progress

BY GARY CHILSON

Paul Smith's College

“**B**alance” is the buzzword: a balance between economic development and ecological protection. Perhaps this is the common ground or theme many have sought in the Adirondacks. Just this year it's been heard at an environmental-economics forum, at regional meetings and conferences like St. Lawrence University's Adirondack Conference and the Adirondack Research Consortium's Conference on the Adirondacks, and at many other meetings, panels, and gatherings of organizations and agencies. The word has also been heard on TV and radio and seen in newspaper stories as well as articles in this journal. Now it's time that the balance between economic vibrancy and ecosystem integrity take on some objective measurement. It is no longer adequate to leave our idea of a “balanced” approach to just our feelings and imaginings.

Progress toward the good, balanced, overall environment is what the idea of sustainable development is all about. I am happy to report that experience with sustainable development to date supports the theoretical and methodological process for the establishment of objective measures for both ecological integrity and economic vitality.¹ These measures can then be used, as national economic indicators are currently used, to observe change, note trends, and help us predict the results of policy decisions.

There is, of course, no single, ideal sustainable development (SD) indicator that can be used to give us the balance point in the Adirondacks. SD is a com-

plex phenomenon that is expected to remain largely unique to place. Only the most broadly defined variables might become comparable from one place to another. SD, after all, combines ecological integrity with economic vitality; two very complex phenomena in themselves. We would certainly want to avoid falling into a mind-trap like the simplistic notion that a growing Gross Domestic Product, or its regional equivalent, is an unmitigated good.

Even though some struggle to develop a single Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare at the national level,² I think the scale we use to measure balanced progress toward a healthy environment should be understood at the regional level within a matrix of many indicators. In just one instance, the Sustainable Seattle project proposed 40 indicators in four broad categories: environment (including, for example, indicators for biodiversity, erosion, air quality), population and resources (e.g., population growth, water use, energy, land affordability), economy (e.g., employment, income, poverty, housing affordability), and culture and society (e.g., crime, community service, voting, literacy, library use, participation in the arts).³

Much more important than having a matrix of indicators is the crucial and very subjective process of developing and selecting the indicators we will use. I think the process must emerge out of each particular Adirondack watershed in a way that brings together the views, hopes, knowledge, concerns, and fears of

all the watershed stakeholders into a new, more holistic perspective. A new perspective that is based on an objective, measured view of their watershed from a common vantage point — the agreed upon indicators. Clearly, the process of developing and selecting our indicators is a very productive exercise in community development all by itself.

The process of choosing among all the possible indicators should be based on an agreed upon selection criteria. Borrowing from others' experience, the following is offered for discussion.⁴

1) Scientific Credibility

The non-partisan guide for leading us through the process should be a non-government academic organization dedicated to the highest standards of objectivity and scientific procedures.⁵ Everything about the process of selecting indicators, the methods used to measure them, and the information generated must be open and easily available to the public for scrutiny and discussion.

2) Issue Orientation

Each of the indicators chosen must be relevant to the concerns of the watershed community. Every issue should be represented in the selection and design of SD indicators. Other criteria, like technical feasibility (below), ultimately limit the number and sensitivity of the indices, but a matrix of 50 or more issue-based indicators is not unreasonable for a whole watershed.

3) Technical Feasibility

Obviously, this effort to establish a matrix of SD indicators for a particular watershed has to be confined to those indicators that can be derived from parameters suited to measurement in both a time- and cost-effective manner. A wish-list of indicators is only one of the first steps in developing the matrix. Many good, issue-based indicators of sustainable development are simply not available yet. Research into indicator development will be necessary because no one thought to collect this kind of data before.

4) Flexibility

As we learn more about the param-

eters we measure, we will find that it is necessary to continuously update and refine the indicators selected. New issues may supersede old issues or better information may become available. Suppose we choose to measure the sediment load of the Boquet River as a representation of erosion rates in the watershed. A labor intensive method of measurement, like daily secchi disk readings, might be replaced by a automatic meter. Perhaps we will find that, after years of erosion control efforts, the Boquet runs clean again. The reality of limited budgets would shift our focus to other issues and their indicators.

5) Early Warning Capability

The indicators chosen should not only enable us to picture existing conditions and trends in our sustainable development efforts, as economic indicators do for the national economy, they should also indicate the possibilities of impending degradation in our Adirondack culture, our region's ecological integrity or economic vitality. If the Boquet's erosion rate is high and continues to increase over time, it would indicate reduced natural productivity in the future. Clearly, an economy based on the watershed's natural productivity would decline as would our cultural opportunities as the people's livelihoods diminish and they move away.

6) Clarity

Finally, no matter how credible, relevant, feasible, flexible or predictive, if the indicators used to measure sustainable development are not understood by the public and policy decision makers, they will be very limited in value.

A process of indicator development as I've described ultimately leads us to the creation of a shared vision: a perspective of the Adirondacks from the same vantage point, the common ground of 'Balanced Progress' that we all seek. Once we have agreed on what to measure and how, we must also, then, acknowledge the common, quantitative perspective the indicators provide. Of course, we shall still have fun arguing over what the indicators 'really' mean.

In this issue's new 'Commentary' section, we renew our academic peer review process for Jon Erickson's, 'Sustainable Development and the Adirondack Experience.' Philip Terrie, the distinguished Adirondack historian, chairs the Adirondack Research Consortium's Editorial Review Board and he explains our recently established peer review process in 'News and Reviews.' AJES will, of course, continue to solicit and publish a wide variety of opinions and perspectives as we seek to foster a dialogue about this area loved by so many.

For example, in this issue's 'Forum' we present the viewpoints of both Ted Galusha, of Adirondackers for Access, and David Gibson, of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, on the issue of motorized access to the Forest Preserve. The 'Perspectives' section offers the views of our recently retired Forest Ranger, Pete Fish as well as an insightful essay by Kirk Peterson about the Adirondacks' other stewards in 'Local Voices in Conservation.' Our 'Feature' article by Jim Gould, 'Rooted in Rock: The Case for a True Adirondack Literature,' looks at the growth and development of a true, indigenous culture unique to our bioregion.

Notes

¹ See, for example, most issues of the journal, *Ecological Economics*, or Robert Costanza, (et al), *An Introduction to Ecological Economics* (St. Lucie Press, 1997).

² Richard W. England, "Measurement of Social Well-Being: alternatives to gross domestic product," *Ecological Economics* 25 (1998) pp. 89-103.

³ Walter H. Corson "Measuring Sustainability: Indicators, Trends, and Performance" in Dennis C. Pirages (Editor), *Building Sustainable Societies: A Blueprint for a Post-Industrial World* (M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996).

⁴ I.B. Marshall, H. Hirvonen and E. Wiken, "National and Regional Scale Measures of Canada's Ecosystem Health" in S. Woodley, J. Kay, and G. Francis (Editors), *Ecological Integrity and the Management of Ecosystems* (St. Lucie Press, 1993) p. 117.

⁵ Gary Chilson, "Prerogative: Academia's Role in Promoting Sustainable Development," *AJES* 4(1) Spring/Summer 1997.