

The Forest Preserve Movement versus Mechanization

BY DAVID H. GIBSON

In the 1950s, the late Paul Schaefer saw a growing emergency. Years later, Paul told me that as he fished from Second Pond Flow near Gore Mountain, he heard another in a long line of jeeps and buggies driving up the trail, which was and is steep in places and peaceful throughout, to arrive at the flow, violently interrupting the sounds of wind, and rain and fish breaking the water's surface.

He vowed he would no longer stay silent. Motorized access deep within the Forest Preserve was rapidly altering its wild forest character. Telephoning the Conservation Commissioner, Paul Schaefer surely reminded the Conservation Department of the Court of Appeals ruling in the 1930 bobsled decision, that precedent setting ruling about the state's Forest Preserve, that spoke of the inconsistency of such things as public automobile race tracks and other high speed, mechanized recreation that was "out of harmony with forest lands in their wild state." After personally reviewing conditions in the Forest Preserve, Commissioner Sharon Mauhs began thinking and seeking advice about issuing regulations on motorized vehicles, and in 1957 he closed the Siamese Ponds region to such vehicles. Sports men and women protested but, as Paul writes in his book *Defend-*

ing the Wilderness (1989, Syracuse University Press), "Adirondack residents provided horse and wagon transportation, and the storm subsided." Paul was an active hunter himself, whose hunting club has accessed this wilderness land by horse and wagon for 66 years.

Later Commissioners continued by policy and regulation to closely regulate where motor vehicles could go in the Forest Preserve. The path New Yorkers have taken for the Forest Preserve, those lands owned by all citizens in the Adirondacks and Catskills, has been walked for five or six human generations, including people who once sought and found a living on those lands. The route to managing the Forest Preserve as a wilderness has touched all those lives, uplifted many, injured some and proved resoundingly popular with the state as a whole. It has been accomplished in spite of, or perhaps in strong reaction against unrestrained human appetites to appropriate and control land and all that goes on there. These appetites are in our nature.

A sense of what forest preservation could mean evolved in response to all the manifestations of part of that nature, and I don't mean the mere cutting of trees which was done remarkably lightly in many parts of the Adirondacks. I refer more to the oft-repeated attempts to benefit from sale of the Forest Preserve, exchange of it, commercialization of it, damming of it, creating enclosures within it, running machines on it for recreation and thrills. In other words, there

was a powerful 19th and 20th century conservation response to the effort to replicate our acquisitive nature on every acre of it.

This inclination to preserve the state's lands is, then, one way that people spanning these six generations have chosen to protest their unease with unrestrained commercial expansion. As Bret Wallach has expressed in *At Odds with Progress: Americans and Conservation* (University of Arizona Press, 1991), the conservation and environmental movements have grown out of feelings of worry about the pace and direction of economic expansion. Direct expressions protesting such "progress," then and now, remain deeply problematic for many people. However, the growth of the conservation and environmental movements for wildlife conservation, water pollution laws, wilderness preservation, global climate treaties and more can be interpreted as a relatively safe way to protest the way we have, unrestrainedly, allowed our appetites to damage our life support systems.

It is through these lenses that I view the use of motorized engines in the Forest Preserve. Off-road travel of all-terrain vehicles is to me grossly inconsistent with the purpose of forest preservation inherent in the state's Forever Wild constitutional covenant. The two sentences that give meaning to that article remain unchanged since 1894, when they were adopted by the convention delegates unanimously, and upheld by popular sentiment ever since. Article 14, then,

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remains an enduring link between the wildlife and conservation movements of the 19th century and the local and global environmental consciousness now part of our daily lives.

The endurance of these feelings can be found in speeches at two constitutional conventions spanning 75 years. Listen to the words by delegate Charles Mereness of Lewis County taken from the record of the 1894 Constitutional Convention: "I have frequented the places inhabited for centuries, and until recently, by the denizens of the forest; where the deer, the moose, the black bear, the beaver and many small animals flourished. . . . The screech of locomotives can now be heard and time is fast approaching when the whole region will be made desolate and barren unless the hand of the despoiler is stayed. I implore you, do not longer hesitate to take measures to stop this outrage."

Compare these with the words of Dolly Robinson, a downstate constitutional delegate in 1967: "I speak for myself and some who have not yet heard a loon, or seen the morning mist rise from Spruce Lake, or intimately known the forest that has escaped the advance of highways, smog and overpowering noise" (from Frank Graham, *The Adirondack Park: A Political History*, 1978).

When I participate in discussions about access to the Forest Preserve I think of Wallach's words about the tension many feel between preservation and harbingers of prosperity. "We may yet learn to accommodate these two opposites and to make as much room for permanence as we do for change" (*At Odds with Progress*, 1991, previously cited). Parks and recreation areas throughout America are filled with motors. A Forest Preserve substantially free from motors and expected to be managed forever as wild forest lands is regionally and nationally distinctive and a source of great pride for all New Yorkers. The Preserve offers lasting satisfaction to all persons who at some point in their lives have needed the

Preserve for respite, for re-creation, and for reconnection with the more than human world, irrespective of their station and circumstances in life.

In addition, I consider the findings about impacts of motor vehicles and airplanes on wildlife. Reports of enormous change to wildlife migratory routes and habitats in Labrador and other formerly remote places in the world often point to the speed with which humans now access the interior rivers and lakes, physical damage caused by roads and road building, and impacts to shy, indigenous wildlife. Today's range of black bear and bobcat in New York State is largely limited to the Adirondack and Catskill mountains for these reasons.

Infirmity and disability will eventually require all those who believe in the Forest Preserve concept to reexamine their life's meaning and priorities. What was once so accessible to them now is out of sight, beyond the ridge and their physical powers. Yet, as many have expressed, it is not out of all reach of the power of memory, the power to pass on as teacher to future generations. One of the late 20th century elders of the Forest Preserve movement, David Newhouse, expressed his feelings about motorized access to wilderness by the disabled in a letter from 1988:

"The issue of motorized access to wilderness by the disabled was dealt with by Judge McCure in his decision in 1986 in *Helms-Baker v. NYS* in which he found that the benefits afforded by the Adirondack Park are accessible to the handicapped in a meaningful way and that any use of motorized vehicles in wilderness areas would be inimical to the nature of these areas; would destroy the very benefits which users seek in wilderness."

To Dave Newhouse, access to the Forest Preserve now involves more campground camping and fewer lengthy hikes into wild country than he and his wife Helen were once able to take. Yet, the appreciation for the Preserve idea and for

the opportunities that the idea and the laws built on the idea afford his younger friends still fires Dave's imagination, his motivations and his actions.

It is understandable to seek access to one's favorite areas by any means available. We all wish to connect with our past, to witness the changes wrought on any landscape. Yet, as owners in common, none of us can be long allowed to act in a proprietary manner about the Forest Preserve, or the Preserve will be deprived of its greatest value as an educational laboratory in a time of global climate change and continued rise in human population pressure, and as a bulwark against a sense of ecological and spiritual diminishment in the world. These values can and, in some documented cases, do have positive economic implications for Adirondack and Catskill communities.

These are my thoughts as I join the latest debate about motorized access, civil rights, discrimination against persons with disabilities, and the Forest Preserve. Access should be more about access to good, interesting and well-mapped information about the Preserve, wilderness services for persons of all abilities, accessible and interesting trail design, and some grounding in preserve principles. It should be less about enabling all-terrain vehicle access to entire Preserve units, or on sensitive trails. Be it the Whiteface Auto road, authorized by constitutional amendment, or the Powley-Piseco Road, there by historical circumstance, or the Moose River Plains road, there by virtue of the Preserve's industrial past, or another 50 miles or so throughout the Adirondacks, there is legal and ample road access to the Forest Preserve today. Some research shows that upwards of 90 percent of the Adirondack Forest Preserve is within five miles of a public road. It is up to persons of all abilities and generations to regulate our appetites for resorting to any technology to access the interior of these special reserved lands, and to maximize their educational potential.