

# The End of an Era:

## *An Interview with Forest Ranger Pete Fish*

BY JIM KRAUS

**R**anger Pete Fish retired in the spring of 1998. Pete began working in the High Peaks in 1975 and has seen a great deal of change. He sat down with me shortly after his retirement and talked about his job, the High Peaks, and what he plans to do now that he no longer has to work in a uniform.

*Jim Kraus:* So what have you planned for your retirement?

*Pete Fish:* I hope to do some hiking. My wife wants me to stain the house and other people are also making plans for me. I would like to continue in some capacity working as a back country educator. I enjoy talking to people and helping them with their hiking experiences.

Being just an educator would mean that I would not have law enforcement responsibilities, and I would not have a Ranger's authority to persuade people to do the right thing. But I can be convincing and I can also inform people that the area is patrolled by Forest Rangers. I was hoping that the DEC (Department of Environmental Conservation) might hire me as a back country educator, but I will also look elsewhere, perhaps the ADK (Adirondack Mountain Club) might be interested in my services.

*JK:* Can you share with us a memorable experience that you had in the High Peaks Wilderness Area (HPWA)?

*PF:* Almost every day you are in the mountains can give you elements of a memorable experience. You are of course

talking about a "WOW!" day. The clouds in the mountains have a way of producing this kind of a day. One year in March I was hiking up Marcy on a cloudy misty day and at 4000 feet I walked above the clouds. The mountains above this elevation stood in bright sunshine and I could see just the tops of the peaks above the clouds. The peaks in New England, including Mount Washington in New Hampshire, were all visible. It was incredible. It was a "WOW" day.

One can have a religious experience in a wilderness area. There is a sense of peace out there. The wind in the trees, the babbling of a brook, or a beam of sunlight on a leaf, all help to restore peace in a person's life. All of nature shows the hand of something bigger than ourselves. I think people want to feel humbled and wilderness is one of the places where this can happen.

*JK:* Do you consider the HPWA a true wilderness?

*PF:* If you are walking on a trail and there are people in front of you and behind you, it does not seem like a wilderness. But if you step off the trail and walk twenty yards through the woods, yes, you will find elements of wilderness. The eastern part of the HPWA occupies about one hundred square miles. If you calculate the area of the trails, which is very small, you see that most of the area is in a wild state. Much of the HPWA was logged and there is the impact of acid rain, but for all practical purposes the land today is in a wilderness condition.

There are as many definitions of wilderness as there are people. There are the book definitions, of course, but I prefer to think of the entire Forest Preserve as

being a wilderness, even though motorized vehicles are allowed on the portions that are designated as Wild Forest. The main idea of wilderness is that people are visitors to an area where natural processes dominate. Whether we like it or not, it is the people and what they do, that causes an area to lose its wilderness qualities.

People want wilderness because they have a need to know that something on the earth is the way it always was. But there is very little in the world that remains the same.

*JK:* Can you contrast the HPWA in 1975 with the HPWA in 1998?

*PF:* When I came to the HPWA in 1975 there was no Ranger presence in this region except for search and rescue. There were caretakers at John's Brook, Marcy Dam, and Lake Colden. There was no education taking place at this time from the DEC. There was a great deal of damage being done to the resource from camping, because there were few camping restrictions and no low impact camping education. Trees were being cut down and there was erosion along streams and trails. We had to remove lean-tos that were poorly located. There was soil compaction and tree roots were exposed in many places where people camped, and they camped everywhere and anywhere. With an increase of Ranger presence in this region there came more environmental awareness and more enforcement of regulations, and most of these problems have been solved or lessened to a great extent.

*JK:* Is trail maintenance adequate for the level of use in the HPWA?

*PF:* The answer is now closer to a "yes" mostly because we are now building trails

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with rocks instead of using wood for stringer bridges and corduroy.

With the advent of the Adirondack Mountain Club doing the major work on trail tread, the muck that I remembered from hiking in the early days is almost a thing of the past. The worst sections of trail have been built up with rock and year by year more and more sections have been hardened. Today, I think it is possible to say that we are winning the battle. I can make it up Marcy with my boots basically dry and I remember finishing that hike being a muddy mess.

I think we are getting better in everything, except that we are not addressing the larger number of people that are coming to the HPWA every year.

*JK:* Are people practicing low impact camping in the HPWA and how will it benefit this area?

*PF:* I believe that many people are practicing low impact camping in this area, but it is very difficult to evaluate its positive impact because it is hard to measure the results. We only see the negative results when people don't use low impact technology.

But I can tell you that on a weekend when we are swamped with people, you can visit these campsites after everyone has left and there is very little evidence to show that people were there the day before. This may not be a very scientific evaluation, but you can see that it is helping the environment, and the impact is a lot less now than it was thirty years ago when the hippies invaded the HPWA with their back to nature movement. The hippies went to the High Peaks without much equipment. As a result they took from the environment what they needed and their camping methods were very destructive.

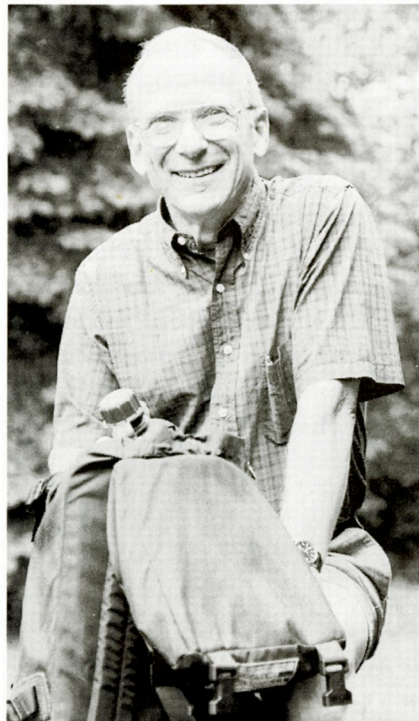
I also find that the public is picking up other people's trash and the Rangers are often not aware that there may have been a trash problem in a particular area. An educated public is making a big difference and they deserve a lot of credit.

*JK:* What were your duties as a Forest Ranger in the HPWA?

*PF:* The early Forest Ranger duties were

fire control and custodians of the state land, which included building and maintaining lean-tos, trails, truck roads, phone lines, etc. Search and rescue and law enforcement responsibilities were emphasized more in the 70's.

I started to patrol the trails in the Catskills in the early seventies and continued with this effort when I came to the Adirondacks in 1975. Most Rangers however, tend to stay close to the road and in many cases this is where much of



*Ranger Pete Fish*

their work is accomplished. But in the HPWA you have to get into the back country and talk to people.

My main duty in the HPWA was trying to protect the people from the environment and the environment from the people, so that each would survive. I did this with education. My method was to evaluate the people I met with respect to their physical condition, their clothing, and their equipment, and after considering the weather, the amount of time they had, and where they were going, I would often make suggestions that would help them to survive and to have a safe and happy experience.

My technique is to seek people's help

to protect the HPWA. I urge them not to be policemen, but to be concerned peers, and to talk to other hikers about methods that protect the environment. When I talk to large groups of hikers I often ask them how many like policemen? It is very rare that anyone says they do. Then I ask them how many feel a need for law enforcement and every hand will go up. As you can see, it is all in how you approach people.

Forest Rangers respond to search and rescue, forest fires, and law enforcement incidents because of what is often a human failure. Education helps to prevent these failures and this helps to make the Ranger's job easier, and it also means less grief for people, and less destruction to the environment. A friendly suggestion from a Ranger, like keep an eye on the weather or that you may need a flashlight if you are hiking in the evening, can go a long way to preventing failure.

*JK:* Do you think that the Rangers are doing more law enforcement work nowadays?

*PF:* Forest Rangers have peace officer powers which is sufficient to enforce regulations that pertain to the forest and environment. Now we carry a gun and when dealing with inner-city people it helps to communicate authority. But a gun handicaps a Ranger's ability to communicate with people because no one likes a policeman.

When people asked me why I wore a gun I told them because we have a litter problem. A gun brought overkill to my job and I believe it did more harm than good in my dealings with the people who use the HPWA. I have never heard of a law enforcement situation within the Ranger force that ever required the drawing of a firearm.

Traditionally, Rangers did not want to be policemen, or they would have been back in the thirties. People who want to be a policeman nowadays can be an Environmental Conservation Officer or a State Policeman. If they want to deal with the woods, then they should be a Forest Ranger. Most Rangers would rather deal with a situation verbally and it is only as a

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last resort that they fall back on writing a ticket or physical arrest. It is more important to treat people in a fair and friendly way and to give them some education in the process because this is what will prevent problems in the future.

Through the years a lot of the Rangers feel that they have not received their just due from the DEC, and as a result they feel they can get more recognition in law enforcement. Many of the new Rangers coming into the job are more interested in law enforcement than the forestry and recreation aspects of the job. They see glory in flashing lights, sirens, bullet-proof vests, and guns.

Many of my supervisors at the Albany level are, and were, more interested in law enforcement, because they didn't have a strong background in the forestry aspects of the job. When they hired people, they gave preference to people more interested in law enforcement, so now we have slightly more than a third of the Ranger force headed in this direction. The more traditional Rangers in the force will retire in a 3 to 4 year period and we are losing the traditional approach to being a Ranger. We now have some Rangers in the state that wear body armor full time and they are estranging the public with their police image.

Once a Ranger is a cop, they will be no different than any other law enforcement officer. There will be nothing that makes them different and they [top DEC policymakers] may find that there is no need to have them. Rangers will find themselves without an identity and I believe that they could then be easily assimilated by the Environmental Conservation Officers. We are being pushed into this position by our supervisors and by many of the Rangers that are presently in uniform. And I don't think they (top DEC policymakers) have a clue just how unpopular Rangers will become and how much the public will miss what they once were.

A few years ago, my wife viewed an exhibit about Forest Rangers and stand-

ing in front of the exhibit were two Rangers in full cop gear, standing with their arms crossed and wearing reflective sun glasses. She was so turned off that she walked away. They were not friendly looking and there was nothing about them that invited conversation. They were simply hostile figures.

When I started to wear a gun it began to make me into a different person, and I didn't like it. I preferred to be a people person and I had to work very hard to overcome what the gun was doing to me. A gun simply made it more difficult to interact with people in a friendly way.

*JK:* Do you consider education and public relations to be the most important duty of a Forest Ranger?

*PF:* After search and rescue and fighting forest fires it is the next most important. Education is the thing that sets Forest Rangers off from just being another cop. Rangers need to be approachable. But unfortunately, Rangers are also introverts. Before this recent interest in law enforcement, people became Rangers because they wanted to be in the woods and away from people, and this attitude often prevented them from being good educators. All professions serve people, and forestry and recreation are no different. We need to hire Rangers who are people-people and woods-people as well. But there has been no effort to do this.

The DEC provides no training for Forest Rangers whatsoever in communication skills, interpretation, and back country education. Rangers have to realize that protecting the resource is easier to do verbally than it is by physical methods or through law enforcement. There is no way a Ranger can be behind every rock to catch a violator; but when the public is educated, most people will do what is right, especially if they know that their behavior is protecting the natural environment that they love.

There is a hell of a hole in the education that Rangers are receiving, and it is not about to be changed on the present course that we are headed, a course in

which we are becoming more involved with law enforcement. In my opinion, we have to teach Rangers at the Academy the value of presenting education programs and we have to teach them the skills to do it. One of my colleagues is hoping to teach a two day course in "No Trace Camping" at the Academy and to make every Ranger an instructor in this technology. We need more programs at the Academy like this.

One of the things that has to happen in the Adirondacks is that this region needs to become more Park-like. By Park-like I mean utilizing mechanisms that communicate to visitors that they are in a special place. I already stated that Forest Rangers are beginning to communicate an image of being a policeman, which I don't think is desirable. If Rangers don't want this image, then they have to do something that enables them to communicate another type of image. If we want this image to be friendly and approachable, then this is the direction we have to go.

To be more specific, why can't a Forest Ranger pull his truck into a roadside parking area where people are present and act as a person who extends a welcome to those coming into the Adirondacks? In this capacity, the Ranger could provide information that helps people to have a safe and enjoyable visit to the Adirondack Park. Another example might be Forest Rangers or Assistant Rangers presenting an interpretive walk on a trail within their region. There is a real need for interpretive walks throughout the Park and the Rangers are a staff that is already in place.

*JK:* Are there enough Rangers to do the job?  
*PF:* Yes, and no! It depends on how much you expect them to accomplish. There are Assistant Rangers to help during high use periods and there has to be enough regular Rangers to do the job during low use periods. I think that the number of regular Rangers are presently sufficient.

*JK:* What recommendations in the UMP (Unit Management Plan) do you feel will



be especially useful in the management of the High Peaks?

*PF:* I was in on most of the discussions pertaining to the plan and I support all of the recommendations made by the Citizens Advisory Committee. The recommendations on limiting the size of groups doing a day hike and camping are especially important because large groups can be very destructive. Large groups tend to increase the widening of trails and campsites because they trample adjacent vegetation, compact the soil, and they deposit more human waste. At present we have no regulation for limiting the numbers of people that can take a day hike and we have had groups of 200 plus climbing a peak all at once. We would like to see day hikes restricted to 15 hikers.

With respect to camping there has been a lot of discussion as to whether we should limit camping groups to 8 or 10, but I think the number will be 8. Camping reservations are recognized in the plan and someday I feel that they will become a reality, but the DEC has to be ready to absorb the cost of administering such a policy. One problem that is not addressed in the plan is the distance apart that groups from the same institution must camp. Because if the distance is not sufficient enough to discourage them from getting together in the evening for socializing, then you will end up with a large group of people on the same site, and you have not solved the problem of too many people impacting a particular site.

We talked about a ban on glass containers because when glass becomes broken, no one wants to carry it out. Glass leaves a terrible mess to clean up, especially if it has been thrown in a fire.

Campfires would be prohibited because the fire ring is messy and it is often a place where trash is deposited. There is also a firewood impact. People cut live trees which is against the law, they cut dead trees in winter that leave a high stump, and they destroy trees by putting their axe into a tree because they feel it is a good place to sheath it. People like to socialize around a fire in the evening, but

many have discovered that they can also enjoy the flicker of a candle instead, and many just go to bed early.

Unfortunately, the plan has not been approved as of this date and I feel that the only person that can make it a reality is the governor himself. I am very disappointed with the approval process because the plan needs to be in place and it isn't. I would have liked to have had the opportunity to make it work.

This plan was started over twenty-five years ago when the Adirondack Park Agency mandated that there would be unit management plans for specific regions in the Park. A Citizens Advisory Group was formed that was opened to anyone who wanted to attend the meetings, and the plan that emerged for the HPWA was a mandate from the people. It is appropriate that the governor now approve what the people have dictated.

There is a problem with the state closing the South Meadows Road which the town of North Elba has been maintaining for years and wants to keep open. Many believe that the closure of this road will add to the wilderness experience because people will have to walk further to access the HPWA. In any case, the road is helping to prevent the approval of the unit management plan, which we need to solve the problems in the HPWA. There may be a lawsuit over this road, open or closed, but let's get on with it, and in the process, get the plan in place.

The plan will eventually be approved. I plan to lobby for its approval, because the people who are trying to manage this area are crippled until they have the proper tools to work with. The proper tool is a plan in place.

*JK:* Do you want to comment on the motorized access issue?

*PF:* This idea is coming from people who don't want to use their bodies. My knees are starting to bother me and I will go with my pain for as long as I can. It will be a sad day for me not to be able to hike in the High Peaks, but I will not insist that I be allowed to drive some kind of a vehicle up there.

The people who are promoting this policy have no concept of wilderness and are promoting their own selfish desires. There is also an issue with those vehicles breaking down in the back country and the question of who pays for dragging them out of there. Wilderness standards must be maintained or you will not have wilderness.

*JK:* What are your feelings about introducing species like the lynx, the wolf, or the cougar to the wilderness areas of the Adirondacks?

*PF:* The introduction of the lynx was a great idea, but it was done in the wrong place and habitat. They released the lynx at Lake Colden and there is only a six mile radius of wilderness from that area; it was not enough for those animals. The HPWA is also poor habitat for snowshoe rabbits which is a major food supply for lynx. The animals that they released had spent a lot of time in cages and around motor vehicles and they had no fear of these things and this helped to do them in. If they had released the lynx in one of the large forested areas south of Tupper Lake, I think the animals would have done better.

I would like to see wolves here, but many deer hunters will see them as a threat to the deer population, and will, no doubt, shoot them. Wolves will also take an occasional domestic animal. We also have town supervisors who were told wolf stories when they were kids and they are opposed to introducing them. I think with the proper education people will accept them. I am quietly hopeful that someday they will be here.

There have been cougar sightings in the Catskills and the Adirondacks and I think that is great. Moose have been seen throughout the Park and some Canadians have claimed that they have seen a moose in the High Peaks, and Canadians know what a moose looks like. If we can protect these animals when they come, and if they are introduced into areas where they are meant to be, they would be good additions to the Adirondacks.

*JK:* Thank you for taking the time to talk to us.