

AJES

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

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Prerogative

“Editorially Speaking”

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Here in the Adirondacks we have a better than usual opportunity to appreciate the value and meaning of natural capital. Only a few people in our modern industrial, mass-producing economic system depend so clearly on nature's largesse. Most people in America now live in urban and suburban areas where nature's free gifts seem overwhelmed by the human-built environments of economic capital. Yet the source and foundation of all our economic activity, our very livelihoods, still stems from our use of nature's capital. So here in the Adirondacks it is also easy to understand that equitable access to nature's free gifts is every bit as important as is the equitable sharing of our society's environmental costs.

Unlike natural capital, manufactured capital—factories, tools, roads, water systems, etc.—must be constantly maintained, repaired and upgraded. Despite these efforts, our costly human-made capital degrades, becoming less valuable in productive capacity. Once degraded, privately-owned manufactured capital becomes just so much more junk for disposal. Their rotting, rusting remains, potentially available for recycling, are usually left to become just another socially accepted environmental cost of our economy.

Nature's capital, in contrast, is alive and potentially renewable free of cost to us or is not alive and perpetual, like sunlight and the tides, or nonrenewable and available for cautious withdrawals. In some few places like the Adirondacks, nature's potentially renewable capital is even improving or appreciating over time. Most of nature's renewable capital produces an annual income we all use most obviously in the lifeforms we consume as food and for fiber and structural materials but also for oxygen production and water purification as well as a source of beauty and a lure for tourists.

Our economic use of this renewable gift can exceed Nature's annual ability to produce—much like borrowing and spending more than our children's trust fund can earn. If trees are cut faster than they grow eventually there will be no sizable and high quality trees to cut. If fish are caught too

fast the fishery will collapse. If too many visitors erode the trails or spoil the campsites or intrude on solitude then the natural attraction that brought these tourists is lost. If strip development and too many vacation homes clutter nature's free gift of beauty then nature's Adirondack visitors will avoid our hamlets and villages.

Sustainable development clearly requires a base or foundation upon nature's free gift. But continued growth in economic activity beyond this base must come from essentially non-material, low-energy activities or we risk spending down the principle rather than living off the interest. The mass production and consumption orientation of industrial society's material level of prosperity is inherently limited by nature.

Fortunately, economic value is not limited to material production and consumption activities. Indeed, the post-industrial or mature society is emerging as a service and information-based economy of computers and electronic communications. Also, such low intensity activities are released from constraints of geography and much of nature's renewable and nonrenewable forms of capital.

Our matter-based economy has grown like our bodies grow through infancy and adolescence and into adulthood, in spurts between periods of quiescence. Eventually, however, the material size of our bodies and our material-based economy must stop growing. At some point enough must be enough. Nevertheless, we can continue to grow as persons, expanding not our bodies but our minds and our

abilities and our experiences. Continued development in the mature economy should not be of the flesh or it will surely be a cancer.

As our economic dependence on tourism and forestry reaches some optimal material level, well within the sustainable interest income of the region's renewable natural capital, something else must take over if economic growth is to continue. Already the eastern High Peaks show signs of overuse, an indication of too many people suckling from nature's wilderness values. Already the strip developments along the approaches to our towns threaten the special character of the Adirondacks. As nature's limits here are approached it is not surprising that access to the distribution of nature's free economic benefits is becoming a very important issue in the Adirondacks.

Most of us are well aware of the unequal distribution of what is apparently socially acceptable environmental costs. Our society tends to impose its landfills, highways, incinerators, hazardous wastesites, junkyards, etc. onto persons of color or low income because they have the least amount of political and economic power to oppose the imposition. As the limits to nature's benefits are approached, however, we see another form of environmental injustice emerging. Not only are society's environmental costs being laid at the door of people of color or low income, now even access to nature's few remaining teats is restricted as well. Restrictions on the use-rights of land including the number of subdivisions, shoreline restrictions, kind and number of structures, allowable

activities, etc. are all examples of exclusion. Our society is now denying access to nature's capital and the income necessary to support less powerful people's material prosperity.

If the Adirondacks is to stand as a model of sustainable development for the world than we would do well to remember that environmental justice must be an important component of that model. However necessary restraint in nature's use must be, the question of who is being restrained and how can they be properly compensated must be addressed. Here in the Adirondacks just being shielded from the worst of society's environmental costs may not be enough. Without society's intent to compensate those restrained, after due and careful process, denying Adirondackers access to nature's free benefits is simply not fair. Environmental justice is required or political unrest and its barriers to progress and sustainable development will continue.

In this issue of *AJES*, Bryan Higgins and Richard Kujawa present results that argue that as different natural conditions are found throughout Lake Champlain so too can different social conditions be found throughout the Lake's watershed. Richard Sage Jr. tells of a major change in the Adirondacks' biological community that has occurred almost unnoticed by the general public. William Burch shares his perspective on the "curiously courageous Adirondack Research Consortium that boldly plans to go where few academics have gone before." Mike DiNunzio, of the Adirondack Council, continues our tradition of a Forum focused upon visions of the Park.