A Vision of the Adirondack Park

George O. Nagle

To talk about a vision is to risk being ethereal and unrelated to the tugs and pulls of ordinary life. Visions are fine for those who have them, but many would just as soon be about the business of making a living or enjoying some time off. They not only have no time for visions here, there, and everywhere; they also find them irrelevant.

Visions can be only a gleam in someone’s eye, but the vision I want to discuss I submit to you for practical purposes. A vision can

• Bring different individuals and groups to a common mind through its development and adoption;
• Articulate a general direction;
• Provide a benchmark against which particular proposals can be measured; and,
• Provide a basis for on-going critique and refinement.

A clearly stated and widely accepted vision allows different people to work together. A government agency, a private developer, and a congregation that share a common vision will re-enforce one another’s actions. In that sense, a vision is practical.

Here is my vision of the Adirondack Park for your consideration:

To establish a Park in which the present open space character is preserved and enhanced, where people exist in equilibrium with nature and which, consistent with the foregoing, provides a basis for the economic well being of its residents, opportunities for recreation and refreshment, a continuing supply of timber and high quality water, and excellence in the cooperation of local, state, and federal governments.

This statement has several implications. First, the vision statement says that “the present open space character is preserved and enhanced.” The Park’s open space includes expanses of forests and farmlands, high rugged mountains and gently rolling terrain, an abundance of streams, rivers, wetlands, and lakes, all of which are interspersed with settled areas and give the Adirondacks its distinctive character. This combination is found only here. To use an overworked word, the character of the Park is unique. Only if the Park’s open space endures will the Park as we know it endure.

New York State seeks to preserve open space both positively and negatively. The Legislature enacted the Adirondack Park Agency Act. Positively, the Act provides the Hamlet Land Use Area to serve as centers for new growth and development. Negatively, the Act restricts the intensity of new development and provides a lower threshold for State project review jurisdiction in the two Land Use Areas intended to accommodate and protect much of the Park’s open space. The Act has a bi-polar thrust,
open space preservation and growth center development, complementary aspects of the same issue: providing for new development and preserving the Adirondack character.

A practical implication of the growth center/open space concept is that it frees us from choosing "between trees and people." The Act envisions that throughout the Park as a whole, although not necessarily on every tract of land or even in every town, there is ample opportunity for both vigorous growth and strong preservation.

The vision statement refers to enhancing Park open space. It is not enough to rely solely on regulatory power, which reacts to another's initiative and is defensive. Positive programs must also be developed such as preferential taxation and conservation easements.

Second, the vision is of people existing "in equilibrium with nature." We use various phrases to describe our proper relationship with our world. "Harmony" has an aesthetic connotation and brings to mind a pleasing relationship of parts to one another and to the whole. "Balance" has a juridical overtone of assigning proper weight to competing interests. "Equilibrium" has a scientific nuance and suggests a constancy amid change as, for example, the temperature of the human body despite wide variations in weather, nutrition, and exercise. Each of these phrases is worthy, but I prefer "equilibrium" since it reflects an attempt to establish a Park in the midst of changing natural and social conditions.

To exist in equilibrium with nature we may change a response that was once appropriate as conditions change. Forest fire protection today is different then seventy years ago because the forest is different, we understand the role of fire differently, and airplanes are readily available.

Since we are not able to predict on what terms we will be in equilibrium with nature in, say, a century it is important that natural diversity be preserved and we bequeath the greatest possible number of options to succeeding generations.

In seeking an equilibrium with nature we can avoid a doctrinaire rigidity and accept the appropriateness of some change. We recognize that people rightfully engage and make use of their environment. This recognition, however, is qualified by a deeper insight, that we are profoundly dependent upon nature and that, in the long run, only those activities that benefit nature benefit us.

Third, the phrase "consistent with the foregoing" makes clear that the previous two principles, preservation of open space and equilibrium with nature, are the sine qua non of the Adirondack Park.

Fourth, the Park should provide "a basis for the economic well being of its residents." "A basis," the use of the indefinite article is deliberate. In our interdependent society we hardly expect any one area to be entirely self sufficient. Many Park residents are economically involved with population centers outside the Park as, for example, Old Forge and Utica. Residents belong in the Park, and their economic well being is an important part of the equilibrium between people and nature.

Fifth, the Park should provide "opportunities for recreation and refreshment." Among other reasons, the Park was created to "be forever reserved, maintained, and cared for as a ground open for the free use of all the people for their health and pleasure" (Ch. 707, L. 1892), and it stands in relation to the State and the Eastern United States much as a city park does to the developed portions of the city.

The writer of the celebrated New York Times editorial of 1864 asked that the
Adirondacks “become to our whole community, on an ample scale, what Central Park is on a limited scale.” He described it as “a tract of country fitted to make a Central Park for the world.” To an extent the writer’s vision has been realized, and I would keep it as part of ours.

Overall, the Park can provide for far more recreational use than it now receives. We’ve talked about bikeways for a long time, but done little about them. The same is true for expanding canoe routes. We are not making good use of linear corridors such as abandoned rail rights of way some of which are appropriate for ATVs. Still, certain pockets of overuse need to be eliminated and recreationalists enticed to go elsewhere in the Park.

Sixth, the Park’s “continuing supply of timber and high quality water” represents a valuable resource. From all indications, the demand for wood and water will increase. We should encourage environmentally sensitive logging on private lands.

Article XIV of the State Constitution allows the forest on State land to reach climax and thereby increases the dependability and the quality of river flow. In so doing, the “forever wild” requirement provides exactly the watershed protection that is one of its purposes. Adirondack agriculture is also important and perhaps should be included in the vision.

Seventh, the Park should provide “excellence in the cooperation of local, State, and federal governments.” Since the Park is a geographic reality, a place with definable boundaries, the realization of the vision of the Park will involve all who are concerned with the ownership or control of lands and waters — present and prospective land owners, beneficiaries of the Park’s resources (such as users of its water), residents, visitors, and all levels of government including both single purpose agencies and those with many legislative, administrative or planning interests. The State should continue to exercise primary responsibility for the Park, but it must do so in cooperation with others. This requires listening to one another and an honest effort to work together.

The attempt to create the Park is a grand political experiment which, if successful, will serve as an important example. Not only we in the Park but our entire nation need to learn to live on good terms with nature.

To do this we must fashion practical mechanisms that give our aspirations structure and focus, and those mechanisms must work. It is audacious to think that we in the Adirondacks provide a laboratory to learn how to live in equilibrium with nature but, in my opinion, we can do exactly that.

Well, there you have it, one man’s attempt at stating a vision for the Adirondacks. Take it, tear it apart, improve it, articulate your own vision. Let me close with three requests.

We need to ground our discussions on the facts. There is exaggeration and just plain misrepresentation in the ongoing discussions about the Adirondacks. If we start from the same place we are more likely to agree on where to go.

I challenge those who disagree with the vision here set forth to advance their own vision. Tell us what you want the Adirondacks to look like decades hence and how your preferences will get us there.

Finally, let me remind you of my opening words. Only if a vision expresses itself in our nitty gritty decisions, only if we take a vision seriously enough to pursue it through tough choices only then is it worth anything at all. Only a vision incarnate makes a difference.

George Nagle is Chaplain at the Adirondack Correctional Facility in Ray Brook.