New Roads, New Directions

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How has New York State, home of the Great White Way, Wall Street and the original suburban sprawl, managed to hang onto the Adirondacks, one of the great wilderness parks in the nation? Through luck, circumstance and an incredible foresight that spans over one hundred years. But with the 21st Century upon us, and patterns of development threatening to permanently destroy this grand wilderness, New York's reservoir of Adirondack luck and foresight seems to be in short supply. The time has come for everyone who cares about the future of the Adirondacks, from whatever perspective, to replenish this reservoir and find new ways to protect the park while improving its economy.

One of the things that has made the Adirondack Park unique is that it is a park which is also home to 130,000 full-time residents; a park whose boundaries encompass more private than publicly owned land; and a park where timber companies are still one of the mainstays of the Adirondack economy. These apparent contradictions have given the Adirondacks a rich combination of human and natural history. But the contradictions have also forced New Yorkers to conduct a rolling debate about how to simultaneously meet the needs of the Adirondack people and environment.

The fluid tension generated from this debate has led to many firsts in the nation's conservation history. The Adirondacks is the first park created in the United States that combined public and private lands; the first (and only) park to grant its public lands granted constitutional protection; the first resource of its size to be governed by a management approach that attempted to balance private development with preservation. The century old juxtaposition of people and wilderness has made the Adirondacks a model for other natural areas intent on using their — resources in a way that is sustainable, both environmentally and economically.

But since New York created the Adirondack Park in 1894, the park's history has also been a model for a less noble aspect of human relations: a bitter conflict between advocates for Adirondack wilderness on one hand, and developers and many residents on the other. This tension has been driven by the parties' two distinct views of the Adirondacks.

The first sees the park as a fully functioning wilderness ecosystem; a six million acre expanse where 90 percent of the plant and animal species that exist in the northeastern United States can be found. It is a place where mountains and forests, sphagnum bogs and alpine summits, and rivers and lakes overwhelm the ubiquitous human landscapes of roads, strip malls and front lawns. A person looking out over the park from

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any one of hundreds of locations would see a view that is remarkably similar to the one shared by Native Americans before Columbus arrived. It is the only place that, with some work, could once again host a wilderness fully stocked with every species of flora and fauna including the timber wolf and cougar that existed in this type of environment before humans reached North America. This view sees the Adirondack Park as a place of inestimable natural and even spiritual value, presenting us with an ethical responsibility to maintain for generations a hundred years hence what previous generations enabled us to share.

When those holding the second view of the Adirondacks look out over the same vistas, they see mainly government oppression. The accuracy or inaccuracy of this perception is beside the point. Generations of Adirondack residents have grown up feeling abused by a series of regulatory restrictions and processes that deny them unfettered choices about what to do with their property and when they can do it. Common questions include: Why should a resident be forced to answer to the Adirondack Park Agency when he or she wishes to build on private property? Why can’t a community decide whether development proposals are in their own best interest? Why do residents from outside the community, whether members of the APA, state legislators, or environmental organizations, feel entitled to dictate the future of private property use? A hundred years after creation of the park and nearly twenty five years after creation of the APA, those holding the second view of the Adirondacks have still not heard satisfactory answers. Despite these questions, and the concern they represent, the environmental health of the Adirondack Park is in decline.

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Over the past decade, there has been a heightened urgency and caustic nature to this debate. The latest rise in volume was sparked by the expressions of alarm from the conservation community over an accelerating pattern of development on private land in the park, particularly along Adirondack lakes and rivers, and in the most sensitive wild areas. If allowed to continue unabated, many environmental advocates firmly believe that the wilderness ecosystem and character of the park will be lost.

Even during the recent recession, construction starts climbed to a level that is now three times the rate of building in the rest of New York State. An average of 1,000 new houses have been built in the park each year since completion of the Northway (187) in 1967. Beginning in 1987, this number grew to 1,200, where it remains today. It was not surprising, therefore, that in the Adirondack Park Agency’s most recent annual report, its chair, John Collins, called current land use projections “a feeble instrument” that cannot save the Park.

This intensity of site clearing, road building, septic tanks and home construction is taking its toll. The Freshwater Institute of Lake George has documented a twelve year decline in the water quality of the “Queen of American Lakes.” The development pattern has dramatically increased the levels of algae, phosphorous and aquatic weeds, while reducing oxygen levels, recreational appeal and the lake’s long-term viability. And Lake George has plenty of company. The Governor’s Adirondack Commission reported in 1990 that “the sequence of events in Lake George is particularly disturbing when one considers the magnitude of the water resources elsewhere in the park that is subject to similar pressures” from the creeping suburbanization.

The Northwest Frontier of the Adirondacks — a nearly two million acre region that the legendary conservationist Bob Marshall recognized early in the century as one of the last places in the nation capable of sustaining a healthy wilderness ecosystem — is facing its greatest crisis since
the Park’s inception. The changing global economics of the forest products industry, which owns much of this land threatens the stability of property ownership here. While much of the Northwest Frontier may continue to be used for growing trees, the segmentation and development haunting the rest of the Adirondacks will inevitably destroy Bob Marshall’s wilderness vision and with it any hope of

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restoring the wolf or cougar.

The growing danger to the park’s wilderness has led environmental organizations to advocate that the state design regulatory approaches capable of addressing these latest threats. Since 1990, the organizations have had varying degrees of success convincing key state officials of the need to save the park’s wilderness. Despite the criticism he received from some in the Adirondacks, Governor Cuomo proved to be only a fair weather supporter of greater park protection. He expended little political capital or leadership on the issues after quickly backing away from his own commission’s conclusions. Then Assembly Speaker Saul Weprin was one of the park’s greatest champions of late, but his unexpected death in 1994 created a major leadership void on the issue.

But by far the greatest obstacle to more adequate park protection has been the state Senate. They, like some residents of the Adirondacks, do not believe that the state should have much of a role in protecting the park’s environmental values. Despite the area comprising nearly one fifth of the state and being recognized nationally and globally as a natural resource of profound importance, the Senate still views the park strictly through a home rule lens.

Many local officials, developers and citizens have of course applauded the Senate for stopping proposals they see as the latest in a series of insults to their local autonomy and ability to make a living. In addition, they have asked the Legislature not only to reject these measures, but to roll back a number of the protections already in place. These demands have ranged from abolishing the park altogether, to limiting the jurisdiction of the APA, to including more local residents as Agency commissioners (which would be picked by local officials, rather than the Governor, as is now the case).

These contretemps have led to a situation commonly found at all levels of government these days: gridlock. The state Senate continues to rebuff any attempt to improve protections of key areas in the park, regardless of their environmental significance or the clear dangers they face. On the other hand, the state Assembly is just as resolute in its determination to prevent any change to the composition or jurisdiction of the APA, or to allow enactment of a measure favored by Adirondack officials that would reimburse local governments for tax abatements granted certain landowners under state law.

This holding pattern shows no sign of breaking. Even if Governor Pataki made sweeping changes to the parkagency’s mem-

bership, any shift in agency perspective may be short lived. The basic legal framework, which many local residents find objectionable, would still be in place, and the next governor could return more conservation minded commissioners to the Agency. I think that there is virtually no chance that the conservation community will be able to convince many local residents that greater protections are justified for their own sake. Ultimately, this is a matter of assigning a value to the importance of maintaining a wilderness ecosystem, which, despite sound economic development prospects related to wilderness preservation, is a subjective exercise. Conversely, those Adirondackers opposed to greater protections have no chance of convincing the conservation community that a zoning statute less onerous than many found in a variety of New York suburbs should be undermined at the expense of the park’s natural resources.

Given the commitment to our respective positions, it is important for us to finally recognize that there can be no progress on any of these issues until we figure out how to accommodate everyone’s interests, regardless of whether we recognize the legitimacy of each other’s concerns. If no one interest can be politically all powerful, then at least we can
be pragmatic. To start this process of accommodation, there is one thing with which everyone involved in the Adirondack debate can agree: the current regulatory scheme is failing. As previously noted, from an environmental perspective, the APA’s regulations are only managing the rate of the park’s decline, they are not protecting it.

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From an economic development view, although the regulations are inadequate to save the park’s wilderness character, they frustrate even appropriate development due to the uncertainty and delay they engender, and don’t allow local governments to control their own destinies.

I would like to think that if we can agree that no one likes the current regulatory framework, we could jointly work to revise it in a way that simultaneously advances all of our interests. The first step in this process should be to bring all parties to the debate, Adirondack residents, local and state officials, the timber industry, developers and environmental groups to work toward achieving a set of goals that recognize the interrelatedness of the park’s ecology with its economy. Such goals could include:

1) Empowering park residents to have greater control over economic and natural resource decisions affecting their lives;
2) Managing the park on a naturally functioning ecosystem basis; preserving, and restoring where appropriate, the wealth of biological diversity and natural ecological processes within the region;
3) Enhancing economic development that capitalizes on the park’s unique natural and cultural values;
4) Protecting and, where necessary, restoring the park’s outstanding water resources; and,
5) Streamlining the APA’s regulatory process, making it more responsive to residents of the Adirondacks.

With these goals in hand, the parties could then work toward creation of a new, comprehensive approach that deals with both the environmental and economic imperatives facing the park. Everyone’s past assumptions and bottom lines about the APA, its current regulatory approach, the composition of the Agency and the need for greater environmental protections would have to be put on the table.

To assure that no one’s prerogatives are ignored, no plan would move forward unless there was a consensus on whatever plan was developed. By having everyone at the table and forcing mutual agreement, there could be no hidden agendas or attempts to gain undue advantage. Rather, the process would ensure that we all succeed together, or not at all. The process would reinforce what has been true all along: just as the long term health of the Adirondack environment and economy are inextricably linked, so are the respective goals of environmentalists and local residents.

Is this scenario possible? With pragmatism as our guide, none of us have much to lose by trying. The wilderness cannot survive current development trends much longer. Meanwhile, the region’s economy is traditionally one of the state’s most depressed, and shows no signs of producing the jobs or wealth common to other communities in the country that exist within or near spectacular natural resources areas.

It’s time for a new approach. If Great Britain and North Ireland, and Israel and the Palestinians can bridge their divides, this can’t be that hard. Closer to home and more relevant, we have much to learn from similar controversies in the Pine Barrens on Long Island and the Pinelands in New Jersey. It was a determined process of consensus building coupled with a recognition of the tremendous natural values of these two areas that led to effective environmental protections and economic improvements.

Dealing with the issue comprehensively and inclusively would recognize the immutable connection between the Adirondack’s environmental and economic health. It would enable all parties to obtain their most important goals by recognizing that some compromise on everyone’s part will be necessary. Perhaps most importantly, reaching a consensus could finally close the deepest fissures over the future of the Adirondacks. The region could once again assume a leading role for the nation and world by demonstrating how people and wilderness can not only coexist but flourish.

After all the years acrimony, it is a lesson well worth relearning.