

Crossing the Blue Line

Claire Barnett

Crossing the Blue Line is an experience in extremes: the largest park . . . , the largest remnant old-growth forests of the northeast . . . , the most restrictive density zoning . . . , the most rural area of New York State . . . , the highest unemployment . . . , the smallest school district Six million acres and only 130,000 people.

The Adirondack Park, conceptualized twenty-five years ago as a place where rural communities could harmoniously exist on six million acres of largely uninhabited and untouched earth, should today be a model of sustainable development. The opportunity has always been here to discover how people and nature can co-exist rather than auto-destruct. Realizing the opportunity requires a commitment to coordinating key state policies, a commitment to environmental and social justice, and a commitment to ensuring that policies and practices are widely understood and broadly accepted. The reason that three state agencies—the Department of Economic Development, the Department of State, and the Department of Environmental Conservation—sit as members of the Adirondack Park Agency is to promote the broad inter-agency understanding and cooperation required to realize a whole Adirondack Park.

Crossing the Blue Line is, however, another experience in extremes: nothing is ever routinely coordinated; the extent of poverty

and the conditions of hamlets are dismaying; consensus on policies is exceedingly rare, and only occasionally rescued from extinction.

Today we have a fragmented Adirondack Park: an incomplete Forest Preserve, some large private land holdings protected by conservation easements, many hundreds of thousands of open-space acres which could be “parcelized,” misunderstood and neglected hamlets, and an intolerant political environment. What happened to the model of sustainable development?

For a century and more the Blue Line has bounded land of special interest. The Adirondack Park debates have centered on traditional, hierarchical, domination and control issues: how much land should be wilderness, how much land should be wild forest, how much land should be managed for resources, who should buy the land, who should own the land, who should regulate the land, and who should pay taxes on the land.

These are very, very important questions. Indeed, many good men have spent many long years staking out policy and advocacy positions along the boundaries of all these traditional questions. Men have built entire careers and large organizations around Adirondack land debates.

That these questions are heavily supported and widely regarded as serious environmental questions is necessary. It is also limiting and perhaps self-defeat-

Claire Barnett was a member of the Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks in the 21st Century and now directs the New York Healthy Schools Network

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ing. What do we learn about sustainable human habitation from buying up land and setting it aside as Forest Preserve or placing it under restrictive zoning? Not much. None of the traditional Adirondack Park environmental questions and debates have led to analyses or answers about how human communities and the Park's natural ecosystems can co-exist. We know how to go about buying land, setting it aside in Forest Preserve and calling it “environment”, but we still don't know how to live harmoniously with each other or on the planet.

family and earning a living, what key state policies and programs need to be modified or retained to meet a sustainable model goal?

Retention of key policies and programs is a new problem. In Washington and Albany, new directions are being proposed which could restructure support for education, nutrition, work force training, environmental standards and mitigation, and public health and safety. Historically, unbridled self-interested capitalism has not served the common good of the Adirondacks or other rural areas well. Thus, along

alone can create a whole Adirondack Park, or off-set the economic dislocations of Park communities. During the roaring 80's, the rich got richer and poor got poorer both inside and outside of the Park. The externally driven pressures to subdivide and build second homes in the Park's back-country and countrysides far outstripped the internal growth of the hamlets. We now need to ask ourselves, which key programs should be retained; what key programs need to be created?

The Adirondack Park Agency has never conducted an



The much harder questions are really ecology questions: should economically diverse people live year-round in the Adirondack Park, can they support themselves, where and in what kind of housing should they live, what should the school systems look like, who should assure that health care is available, what kinds of community or Park infrastructure is appropriate, are there nonpolluting ways of raising a

with limits on uses of the land in the Park, there is a well-recognized need to offer appropriate incentives or off-setting supports which promote healthy, productive communities in a way which minimize the call for additional land regulations.

It is clear that, based on the fragmentation we see in the Adirondacks today, neither the State acting alone nor rural isolated local governments acting

in-depth assessment of any of these questions, nor has the Local Government Review Board. In fact, it is clear that neither legislatively enabled group and that no Adirondack advocacy group has ever pursued any of these questions. Do we have an inventory of all the sources and uses of state supports for people and their communities in the Park? Are these effective? Appropriate? Which could be cut? Is something else

needed instead

In 1989, I directed a conference series and survey on Adirondack North Country community revitalization, in cooperation with several county planning departments, the Department of State, the Department of Economic Development, and the Adirondack Park Agency. We found an overwhelming interest in regionally coordinated technical assistance to small communities. (We also found that the smaller the hamlet, the less likely it is to have water and sewer infrastructure, and the less likely it is to be interested in population growth). For many reasons, that popular recommendation and other quality of life recommendations emerging from documented community needs and funneled through the Commission of the Future of the Adirondack Park in the 21st Century got lost during the raging debates on the domination and control of the land.

If the Adirondack Park is to succeed as a model for sustainable development, then we need to start finding out what kinds of public policies and programs are effective and essential to assuring a well-protected landscape with environmental and social justice built in. But for the hope the Park sustainable living model holds out, the hamlets and isolated local governments are just like dwindling rural crossroads everywhere—in a prolonged, sorry, rural economic dislocation, competing without sufficient assets in the global marketplace of tourism and natural resource extraction.

What would happen if we asked and answered different questions? Would we come closer to achieving a Park we could all live with?

For example, what would

happen if state policies for the Park were actually coordinated? For answers, it is useful to look to what happens in the absence of coordination, how that adversely impacts local opportunities, and how lack of opportunities fuel the control of the land debate.

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- The Park should have economically viable communities, yet community planning funds have been annually deleted from the state budget; no Park-specific economic strategies or development tools have ever been identified or institutionalized; water and sewer infrastructure is lacking in many hamlets. Five years ago, the Commission on the Future of the Adirondack Park called for community development funds, historic preservation, and a “main street” hamlet revitalization program. Today, local independent businesses, the engines of job creation and the enterprises with local profits to reinvest, have no institutional support in their losing battle against mega-retail sprawl.

- The Park should capture more tourism dollars, yet the Department of Transportation rarely creates highway bike lanes; scenic pullovers and roadside parking are rare afterthoughts; historic, small bridges either can't be repaired or are transformed into mega-spans worthy of an urban

beltway; signage is jumbled; reliance on road salt is corroding vehicles and poisoning vegetation. The Division of Tourism and the Department of Environmental Conservation allow public and private tourism sectors to be marketed independently of each other, without coordinated messages, and worse, to be marketed to different tourist market segments, almost guaranteeing tourist disappointment.

- The Park should keep large land tracts intact, yet local schools with curriculum mandates, huge energy costs and no economies of scale rely on regressive property taxes; value-added natural resource based industries are elusive; alternative agriculture struggles without sufficient technical support.

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- The Park should have healthy communities, yet there has never yet been a baseline assessment of human health status for the Park as a whole. The health report developed by the Commission on the Future of the Adirondack Park found significant health problems in an underinsured population marked by poverty, although it could access information for only 8 of 12 Adirondack counties.

Today, five years later, multiple health planning networks operated by big hospitals outside the Blue Line avidly compete for Park patients needing facility-based high profit/high tech care, and less enthusiasti-

cally attempt to deliver in-Park primary and preventive health care.

- The Park should encourage and restore native flora and fauna in its ecosystems, yet various federal and state agencies regularly landscape with, stock streams, or make available at discount prices competing, nonnative flora and fauna.

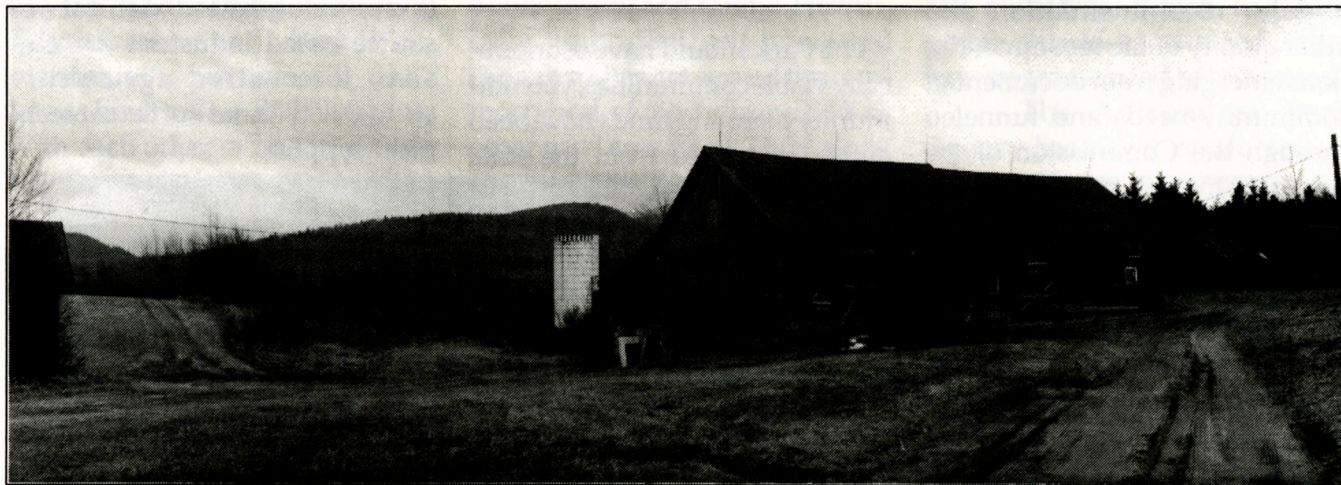
- Communities of the Park and private citizens should be reducing their consumption of toxic and hazardous products that pollute their own and the Park's water, air, and soil, and burden local land-

venues; worse, because of second-home development in prime locations, traditional forest, field, and water access points are being posted or built over; long-distance field trips to sample stop lights, elevators, museums, or the crowds of urban streets are an impossibly expensive undertaking.

Children, home, family health, community: traditionally, these are women's concerns. One wonders if the reason why no one pays any attention to Park quality of life issues such as pesticide and other toxics uses in the Park, landscaping with native species, community beautification, Park-wide

leading role in negotiating state policies and in weaving together natural resource and community programs in a way that creates a whole Park from the fragments of hope we have today.

My child's permanent health problems come from pesticide and solvents exposures. Thus, I learned in the most painful way possible what happens when we pretend that we can separate "people" from "environment". If the "environment" of the Adirondack Park is only those places set aside as Forever Wild, then we have all lost an enormous opportunity to rethink the larger issue of how we are to live. As just



fills.

Today, not even public agencies are practicing cost-effective least-hazardous supply purchasing policies or implementing least-toxic pesticide programs.

- Children growing up in the Park should know about their unique natural heritage, could experience if not excel at various outdoor sports, and should graduate ready to compete in a more urban world. Yet, there is no Adirondack Park natural resource curriculum integrated into all Adirondack schools; only a few children have ever sampled the Olympic sport

primary and preventive health care, educational quality and school finance is because there are virtually no women engaged in any substantive way in advocacy for the Adirondack Park.

Since so many good men have already staked out their positions on the traditional land questions, perhaps it is time for good women to work on identifying the Park's unique answers to the ecology questions. Ecology is naturally a women's issue: women are always close to the cycle of life from birth to death, to the peace and happiness of their neighbors. Importantly, women could take a

one more animal species on the planet, we are neither exempt from nor immune to the multiple lethal impacts of pollution. How we choose to lead our lives, how we live, how we work, what we purchase, consume and dispose of, can and does have a profound influence on our own health and on the health of our ecosystems.

It is time for more women to try Crossing the Blue Line, to insist on adding our traditional concerns to the traditional concerns of men, to integrate, to coordinate, to negotiate consensus, to weave a model Adirondack Park from the fragments.