Prerogative

"Editorially Speaking"

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My father gets cold before I do and I get hot before he does but we can’t talk specifically about “comfortable” without reference to the height of a little bit of liquid in a graduated tube. Our different perspectives on the intangible concept of “comfortable” can then be discussed from a common vantage point —a standard measure or reference to the common ground between our viewpoints. Some kind of standard measure like the thermometer is also necessary to better appreciate a common perspective in achieving what we mean by sustainable development.

Properly managing the Adirondack Park to achieve sustainable development is difficult partly because there is no agreed upon goal or standard by which to measure proper management and success. The July 15, 1995 blowdown that seriously affected over 120,000 acres in the Cranberry Lake — Five Ponds Wilderness Area offers one dramatic and controversial example this year. Other storms of controversy are blowing through the Adirondacks as the Department of Environmental Conservation seeks to complete a long awaited High Peaks Unit Management Plan and Wal-Mart seeks to establish a beachhead within the Park. There is no question that all the various perspectives have their valid viewpoints yet balancing the competing interests and concerns is nearly an impossible act because there is no way, at present, to determine the overlapping vantage point of common ground. Sustainable development, like comfort, needs a standard indicator to measure a variant of Gifford Pinchot’s “greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time,” generation after generation to come.

There is progress toward establishing a measure to use as a common yardstick. Serious efforts to quantify the concept of sustainable development are on-going, particularly in the physical and biological sciences, and generally accepted
biogeophysical indicators of sustainability are expected reasonably soon. One of the proposed indicators of sustainability measures an ecosystem’s productivity; its ability to capture solar energy and convert it into living tissue. Despite significant progress in this area, coupling biogeophysical indicators of the life support system’s sustainability to the much less tangible social, economic, and political aspects of “development” has yet to be successfully accomplished. The social sciences are struggling with the meaning of “development” and subjective quality of life factors are proving to be far less amenable to a set of generally accepted objective measures. Even the widely known and respected Gross Domestic Product (GDP) economic indicator is terribly flawed and deceiving, leading many to challenge the entire concept of coupling economic growth with progress (see, for example, “If GDP is up, why is America down?” in the October, 1995 issue of The Atlantic Monthly).

Obviously, considerably more transdisciplinary research is required to understand how natural and social systems interact in order to establish a standard of sustainable development. Yet there are very few areas left where the planet’s natural systems are sufficiently intact to warrant close study as it interacts with one of our many diverse socio-political systems. Most of those few remaining natural areas are located in politically and economically unstable cultures making them inappropriate or even too dangerous at this time for intensive study. In sharp contrast, the Adirondacks is ideal for the study of the natural—social system relationship. Not only does the Adirondacks have a largely intact and protected ecosystem, it is located in a stable and information-rich social system ideally suited for social science research. It is here that a transdisciplinary research effort could, most productively, lead us to a generally accepted indicator of sustainable development. Eventually, it is hoped, the measure of sustainable development will be as meaningful to everyone as the amount a colored liquid expands or contracts in a graduated tube. It would provide a standard by which to measure our decisions and to speak specifically about our different perspectives from a common vantage point.

AJES is dedicated to promoting sustainable development within the region and serves as the platform for a forum of ideas and perspectives. We have seen in these pages articles from environmental and property rights advocates, religious leaders, wildlife managers, government officials, academics and private consultants. In this issue we continue the tradition with Edward Comstock, Jr. reminding us of the significant contribution private preserves have made to the Adirondacks’ history of stewardship. Michael Wilson expands on the idea of the Adirondacks as a cultural landscape by exploring the recovering wilderness of the Bog River. Dean Lefebvre returns in this issue with his perspective on the important role of local governments in the Park. Howard Aubin responds to several articles published in the Spring issue (AJES v2n1). And Phil Terrie reminds us that the contests about the Adirondacks derive from how different groups, with varying resources and power, express their understandings of and hopes for what the Adirondacks as a region is, what it has been, and what it is good for.

Correction: Mr. G. Gordon Davis, author of “Sustainable Development: Putting It into Practice...” (AJES v. 2, n. 1) is Senior Vice-President and Counsel of Ecologically Sustainable Development, Inc.
LETTERS to AJES

Dear Editors:

I enjoyed the Spring 1995 issue of AJES. I even agreed with some of it. Let me share my thoughts on the letters and articles.

Is it devolution, surrendering power to local authorities, or is it people demanding the right to exercise the authority that they have? If you are of the mind that all power rests in the hands of the population, instead of government, or that the people have the last word, you could say that last November the people exercised their power and vetoed the government. I did not see the victory for Republicans, I saw the Democrat government kicked out of office by a higher authority of government, we the people.

It is that lack of respect by government for the rights of people that is causing the most problems in the political situation in the Adirondacks. This is not environment versus development, it is not state versus local government control. This is us versus them. The ‘us’ are the people that own land in the Adirondacks, it is not local government, or developers. We are dealing with the rights of people, and more than just property rights.

My vision for the Adirondacks would include “where free people exist with the same rights as people throughout the state.” It would be sad to have to include a list of the rights. We are not possessions of the Park, and we absolutely refuse to be so. There is more to the problem than just some token representation, meaningless manipulations with the economy, or intellectual over-analysis of the issues. The heart of the issue is people.

Lee Wasserman and the rest of the environmental industry are finally realizing that the APA is a problem not only for the people of the Adirondacks but also for ‘them.’ Twenty-three years ago they got what they wanted and now they don’t want what they got. It’s too bad that they’ll never learn that this concept of a park will never work without the co-operation of the people that have to suffer the punitive affect of the Act. Again, the veto power of the people. If all we can be is the grit in the gears of their agenda then we’ll be the best grit that we can be.

Claire’s article ended with a surprise. ‘We’ have just the opposite problem. The Adirondack Solidarity Alliance and even the property rights movement has, if not a balance of male and female people heading the organization(s), it is as close as you could get. With the exception of this letter, I wouldn’t think of speaking for the group without first consulting Judy or Jerris first. When you think about it, that’s not right.

Claire could only be talking about the environmental industry and of course government. She certainly isn’t talking about a grassroots movement such as the property rights-people’s rights movement.

I would not have enough time to comment on Davis’ article nor would I want to get that argumentative. I will say that you’ll never find Utopia by ignoring reality.

Sincerely,
Howard L. Aubin