

Interpreting the Adirondack Forest Preserve as a Cultural Landscape

The Uses of Bog River's Ruins

Michael Wilson

What Must Be Preserved?

From the time a special 1872 legislative commission recommended the creation of an Adirondack Park to its ratification twenty years later, New York's nascent conservationists could not have foreseen what they were bequeathing us. Part of the reason is because from the beginning, rife with competing motives, the idea of a park was more blue-line dream than practicable plan. The region's most astute historian has observed that while the framers of the park law sought to "legislate a status" for all lands in the Adirondack region, regardless of ownership, "how the state was to acquire that land, what its status would be as privately owned but nonetheless inside the new park, what would become of the people living inside the Blue Line, what would happen if the state was in fact unable to acquire all that land—these questions were not even raised, let alone answered".¹ Nor does anyone vaguely awake to events during the twenty-two years since the implementation of the *State Land Master Plan* believe those questions are yet adequately answered.

The resulting six-million-acre checkerboard of public and private lands is often proudly

characterized by its proponents as unique or anomalous among parks in this nation, as if its identity were established or secured; at the same time (and often in the same breath), however, it is universally regarded as an incomplete project, deficient in some essential quality or characteristic. Unanswered questions combine with a complex and sometimes obscure political history to justify multiple, often conflicting identities. To conservationists whose roots are in the Constitutional Convention of 1894, the Adirondack region remains a promissory Park, an unfulfilled intention to consolidate the 42% of fragmented, Forest Preserve lands which are its origin and integrity. On the other hand, a recent generation of Park defenders finds authority in legislative acts which since 1970 have attempted to implement through regulation the 1890 Forest Commission's intent to secure "one grand, unbroken domain." These more activist proponents also see a Park manqué, but at least in part because significant expansion of the Forest Preserve seems increasingly unlikely, they construe the necessity of mixed ownership as a virtue, and focus their concern upon the inadequacy of current regulations to limit development which will inevitably compro-

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mise the open-space character of private lands.² The Park's opponents include some who regard it as a stillborn fiction or worse, a political abortion by redundancy of state, regional, county, town, and municipal prerogatives. Even many who value protected public lands see the Park as a bureaucratic imposition by outside interests of gratuitous restraints both upon individual owners' rights to pursue a livelihood and corporate rights to pursue profits (a critical distinction without a legal difference).

Historians of culture and nature seek a longer view of a century's regional disputes. Geological, climatic, and biophysical episodes have combined with nearly four centuries of colonial history to maintain a sparsely populated, ecologically diverse, protected island in the most crowded corner of the nation. Current conflicts among land-use interests are a legacy, not an anomaly, adumbrated in an ancient human history of territorial contest, and increasingly recognized as embracing the full range of conservation issues in both developed and developing countries. In this view the Park's human history appears fraught with fortuitous inadvertency: it has created the oldest, largest, and best documented land use laboratory in

the nation, politically unique among global Biosphere Reserves because the mixed motives and evolving contests of interests during the Park's century-long formation reflect both formative changes in cultural attitudes towards nature and the capacity of democratic institutions to adapt to those changes.³

Whether or not the privately owned lands in the Adirondack Park retain either their open space character or their built cultural heritage, at least beyond historical sites and museum artifacts, is an open question. But the question of biological heritage is a far more compelling order of retention, for it is the very basis of all human culture, more *vital* in the root sense of that word than anything else. This retention is now assured only by public ownership and constitutional protection of State Forest Preserve lands. Protected areas elsewhere in the nation were carved by more ephemeral legislative measure out of undisturbed lands with little evident market value, usually for their scenic beauty, sometimes as "watchable wildlife" sanctuaries; born of economically valuable but degraded industrial lands and commercial motives, however, New York's Forest Preserve was designated

"forever wild" on the one hand through the support of constitutional delegates who regarded Article XIV as a temporary measure to protect timber and water resources, but on the other by widespread, anti-utilitarian public sentiment.

Sweet are the uses of inadvertency. During the past century not one of the legislature's many proposed amendments calling for significant intrusions on the Forest Preserve has passed public referendum. Thus has constitutional protection thwarted short-term, economic impulse by building what one jurist calls "a perspective of time into social decision making."⁴ The result is a recovering ecosystem containing ninety percent of all the plant and animal species of the Northeast, with its most strictly protected areas constituting twenty percent of all designated federal and state wilderness east of the Rocky Mountains, and eighty-five percent of the designated wilderness in the eleven northeastern states.⁵ The central premise of this argument is that as we enter the new century, it will become increasingly evident that the essential, the highest purpose of the public lands within the Adirondack Park is as species, ecosystem, and genetic sanctuaries for the biological diversity once en-

demic throughout the northern forests.⁶

The greatest obstacle to securing these sanctuaries looms in the growing public appetite for recreational opportunities in wild nature. Throughout the country, in remote places where the threats to biological integrity of logging, mining, grazing, or dam-building were eliminated by public acquisition and protection, the threat today is from industrial-strength recreation and tourism. Over just four years the number of backcountry camping permits issued by the National Park Service increased fifty percent, to 2.4 million. As urban congestion grows, so does the hunger for escape to open spaces, and conservationists who only a few years ago believed increased recreational use was a "nonexclusive" way to build a constituency for wilderness protection are not so certain today. Social scientists grope for quantifiable measures of aesthetic appreciation and solitude so that national park supervisors can justify simple traffic regulation at overrun natural attractions, or rationing systems to ensure the backcountry experience that the 1964 National Wilderness Preservation Act intended to provide. The "Watchable Wildlife Coordinator" for the Federal Bureau of Land Management, which administers over three times as much land as all the National Parks combined, characterizes the recreational onslaught as a "combat management situation."⁷

Whatever the reasons New York's Adirondack region has not yet experienced the pressures on protected lands in

the West, exponential population growth and dwindling open space will inevitably, inexorably bring them to bear on the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Measures to disperse recreational use to "underutilized" Forest Preserve areas may suffice for a few decades, but growing public needs will eventually press the DEC to manage the entire Forest Preserve—Wilderness, Primitive, and Wild Forest areas alike—for recreational purposes above all.⁸ The long-term, large-scale stakes, the causes of impasse and delayed action, and the glint of a solution can all be anticipated in the current threat to rare alpine vegetational communities on the high peaks from concentration of the most benign, non-motorized form of recreation. Here, where ignorance, lugged soles, and the old appetite for a sense of dominion hard-won is subduing a ten thousand year-old biological inheritance of just eighty-five fragile acres on twenty summits, stopgap stewardship has come from private initiative. Even after a long process of deliberation by a committed Citizens' Advisory Committee and in numerous public hearings, disputes over access have delayed DEC attempts to implement protections in a High Peaks Wilderness Area Management Plan.⁹ In addition to sheer numbers, the other major threat to broader ecosystem protection is foreshadowed by the widespread resentments of their exclusion from designated wilderness areas among snowmobilers, mountain bikers, float-plane guides, and among weekend hunters, fisherman, and even trappers who want

easy motorized access.

Beyond the growing public appetite for recreational opportunities, other obstacles to protecting the Park's natural heritage must be confronted: the absence of state policies, plans, and education for field personnel to protect sites of high and distinct biological diversity; the inherent challenges of interpreting ecological processes on a landscape scale; the conceptual difficulties of "biodiversity"; and not least the inclination of the state to conceive its own role on behalf of the public interest merely as a referee who at best can only ensure a level playing field for disputes between special interests. Statutory instruments for protecting biological diversity exist, but the will to implement them does not.¹⁰ Only a carefully conceived, long-term program of public education and interpretation will persuade the future electorate to embrace the special interests of non-human communities when human population is vaulting toward double its current numbers in the first few decades of the next century.

But underlying these obstacles, and in fact creating most of them, are dichotomies of culture and nature, of civilized and primitive that are the warp and woof of Western thought. Informed by the mechanistic determinism of Enlightenment science, and validated by the evident power of ingenious technologies, these divisions authorize pervasive cultural convictions that humans somehow exist independent of nature, and, most dangerously, are thus somehow exempt from the laws which govern all other species. The *State Land Master*

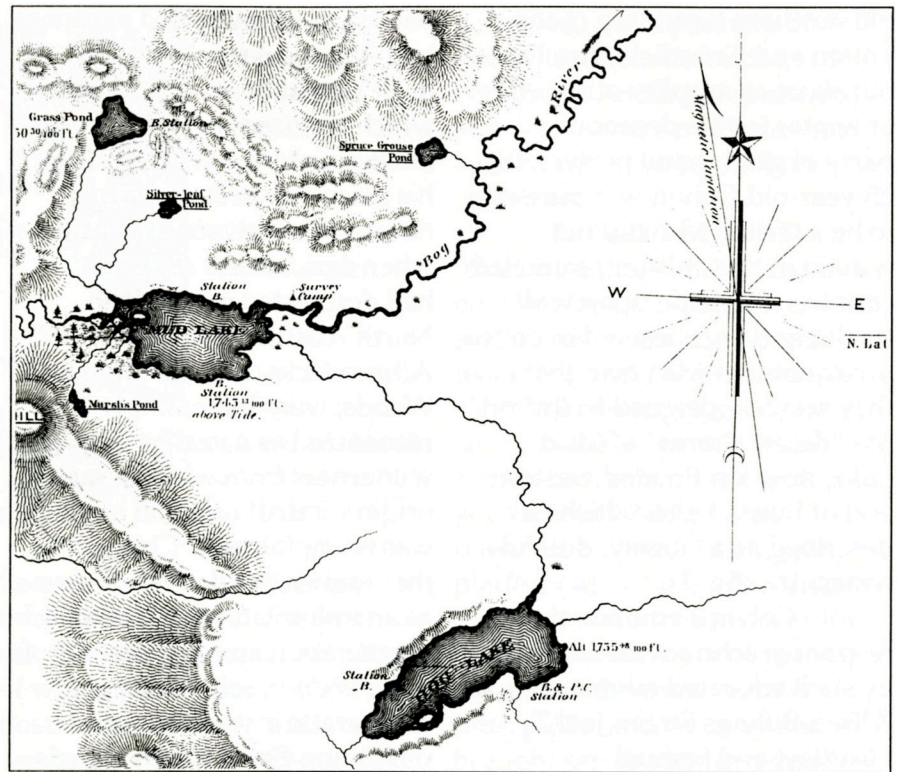
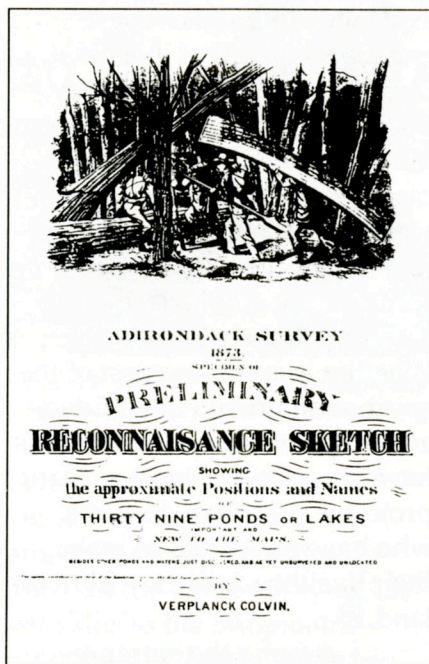


Figure 1: Colvin's Bog River-Five Ponds area sketch, in *Topographical Survey of 1873*.

Plan, more far-sighted than most such public documents, supports "human use and enjoyment" of Forest Preserve lands "so long as the resources in their physical and biological context as well as their social or psychological aspects are not degraded" (1). The problem with human use derives from the profound disparities between the "physical and biological context" of wild nature and the "social and psychological aspects" of wilderness as a culturally constructed ideal. "Wilderness can hardly be the solution to our culture's problematic relationship with the nonhuman world," the environmental historian William Cronon notes, as long as it serves primarily as a "reflection of our own longings and desires. . . . In its flight from history, its siren song of escape, in its reproduction of the dangerous dualism that sets human beings somehow outside

nature—in all these ways, wilderness poses a threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the 20th century."¹¹

Bog River: Creating a Cultural Landscape

One way to make such philosophical abstractions concrete, and to approach a solution to problems that obstruct the protection of biological diversity, is to suggest how, for example, the Adirondack Park's Bog River Flow might be interpreted in a manner suited to the predominant character of the Forest Preserve, by incorporating human with "natural" history. The argument is that the 10,000 acres of the Flow that were purchased by the state in 1985 are, like most of the Forest Preserve, best viewed not as a primitive area (to be "upgraded" to wilderness), but as a cultural landscape that will show the marks of human

intrusion for centuries to come. Those marks are in fact necessary interpretive tools: the romantic appeal of human artifacts succumbing to natural processes is a time-tested lesson in humility, a powerfully affective vehicle for invoking non-specialists' interest in natural succession on a landscape scale, for instilling basic understandings of the scientific and socio-economic issues involved in protecting biological diversity. Public awareness of the mutually determinative relations between culture and nature is the key to preserving vital continuities in both.

Those familiar with Adirondack history will not be surprised that the first detailed account we have of the Bog River area is State Surveyor Verplanck Colvin's in his first official report to the Legislature. Seeking among other things in 1872 to plot the elusive, century-

old northern boundary of the Totten and Crossfield purchase, but short of supplies at the edge of winter for his demoralized party of guides and porters, the 25-year-old Colvin was pleased to be a visitor who did not remain in this still-untrammelled country. He came upon wolf tracks, and encountered deer "so unacquainted with man that they scarcely deigned to fly" on the "desert shores" of Mud Lake, now the flooded western end of Low's Lake, which he described as a "lonely, doleful water"¹² (fig. 1).

Colvin's emotional responses echo earlier accounts by such educated adventurers as Alfred Billings Street, Joel T. Headley, and Samuel Hammond, for whom the Bog River headwaters were a Romantic, New World version of Old Testament wilderness; the "dismal scenery" around Mud Lake was "the gloomiest sheet the wilderness contains" where "each member of the insect tribe holds high carnival." Like Colvin, Hammond felt that the vast marshes and bogs were of "indescribable loneliness" and "weighed on the spirit." For these early picturesque travelers the allure of the Bog wilderness was, like the precipices of the High Peaks, a test of spiritual fortitude, an ultimate encounter with sublime otherness that obliged the aesthetically educated to examine their emotional and moral responses to a nature that clearly was not made for humans.¹³

Adapting discourses that had emerged in reaction to England's earlier agricultural and industrial revolutions, American writers and painters were constructing their own

paradigm of unspoiled nature as both the secular sublime and the deist's great book of God, to which civilized, industrial man must go in order to reconstruct his jaded urban soul. During the era of westward expansion, when agricultural settlement had deforested most of the North Atlantic seaboard, the Adirondacks, like the Maine Woods, were increasingly recognized as a vestige of the wilderness from which a sacred origin myth of national identity was being formed. Charged by the frontier ideal of wilderness as an unlimited source of moral regeneration and a guarantor of independent, self-creating democratic institutions, the remaining Great North Woods acquired a poignant mythos from its proximity to the industrial civilization that was subduing it. Here nostalgia for nature's vanishing otherness could be readily experienced firsthand, an essential complement to a distant and receding, but still illimitable Western frontier. Here that same nostalgia also served to define the present within an historical process that continues to depend upon the alienating re-creation of urban, industrial humanity.¹⁴

This wilderness was regarded differently by the guides whom such urban clients idealized as "doctors of the wilderness" and "leatherstocking the second." Men who otherwise carved their subsistence from a harsh environment made intermittent, seasonal wages from getting their "sports" into and out of difficult terrain; their preoccupations were safety, logistics, and meeting the expectation that

their services would provide sufficient ease for educated sensibilities to contemplate exigency without having to endure too much of it. For Street's guide Harvey Moody, Bog River's tortuous meanders, innumerable obstacles, and carries through bog and marsh were principally a test of physical stamina, one of "the confoundest crookedest consarns in the woods." Whether as a sublime test of the spirit or an uncultivated Eden, archetypal visions of wilderness have since Theocritus been a projection of urban dwellers who have never had to make their livelihood directly from the land.¹⁵

Among the entrepreneurs whose industries promised to make Adirondack subsistence dependable was Abbot Augustus Low, who first appeared in Bog River in 1892, rather late in the rich man's land rush that resulted from the 1885 establishment of a public domain in the Forest Preserve.¹⁶ Scion of a prosperous Brooklyn import enterprise that had ruled the exotic China trade, Low was a legitimate descendant of the first merchant capitalists of Renaissance Florence and Holland who propelled the economic expansion of Europe with investments in North American real estate.¹⁷ Certainly Low shared nineteenth-century America's vision of its wilderness as a limitless repository of marketable raw materials to fuel the nation's new industries and to build its new cities—a utilitarianism without whose destructive exploitations the dichotomous cult of wilderness re-creation would not have arisen.



Figure 2: Abbot Augustus Low inspecting his new Horseshoe Forestry Company railway, 1897. (Courtesy St. Lawrence Co. Historical Association)

Rather than attend college, young Low worked in his father's Burling Slip shipping office, all the while applying his best skills to the burgeoning technology of American industry. In the old Brooklyn Bank building that was his workshop, Low experimented with mechanical typesetting machines, kerosene engines, electric heaters and stoves, carbon arc lights, submarines and boats of all kinds, automatic pilots and compasses, and for the needs of a new urban life, a wastepaper basket that compacted trash, and a rat trap that could both electrocute and drown its victims. At first more interested in developing than applying his inventions, Low was second only to Thomas Edison in the number of patents registered during his life.¹⁸

Perhaps because the family shipping business had been sold in 1886, Low turned his fascination with technology to the Adirondacks in 1892 with an unparalleled efficiency. Within just four years, he acquired 46,000 acres that encompassed the headwaters and most of the watershed of Bog River; built a summer home on the

Lake he built a new station with telegraph, ticket, and freight service, and a federal post office of which he was appointed Postmaster. Among today's campsites on the northwestern shore of Horseshoe Lake, only the foundations remain as evidence of Low's busy railhead community.

In 1897 Low built a fifteen-mile railroad from Horseshoe to Hitchens Pond, and acquired two locomotives, flatcars, and a steam-powered crane, shovel, and log loader to serve his new Horseshoe Forestry Company, which had begun logging his Mud Lake tract (fig. 2). The next year saw the construction of another rail station at the southern terminus of his line called Hitchens Park, serving a mill complex more sophisticated than any other so remote in the mountains. This was a large bandmill to cut both hard and

western shore of Bog Lake, with access from a whistlestop named "Robinwood" by his wife, located on William Seward Webb's recently completed Mohawk and Malone Railroad; and at Horseshoe

softwood, and a panoply of specialized woodworking equipment, included re-sawing and box-making machines, and a stave and heading mill for a cooperage.¹⁹

In 1898-99 Low's Bog River enterprises expanded to embrace bottled spring water and maple products. Specially patented, returnable bottles of "Virgin Forest Spring Water" for city markets were packed in returnable crates at the spring works, then lifted by steam-powered escalator to a loading platform at railside. The first evaporator was constructed for the production of maple products. Low devised "a system of tubs, pipes, and troughs that brought sap to railside where it was transferred to large tanks mounted on flatcars and transported to the evaporator, "a marvel of mechanical floats and baffles worthy of a patent" (fig. 3). By 1907 three evaporators were producing up to 20,000 gallons of syrup in what was probably the most extensive and sophisticated sugar bush operation in the nation.²⁰ The evaporators were also used to produce preserves from at least four kinds of berries, for which cut-

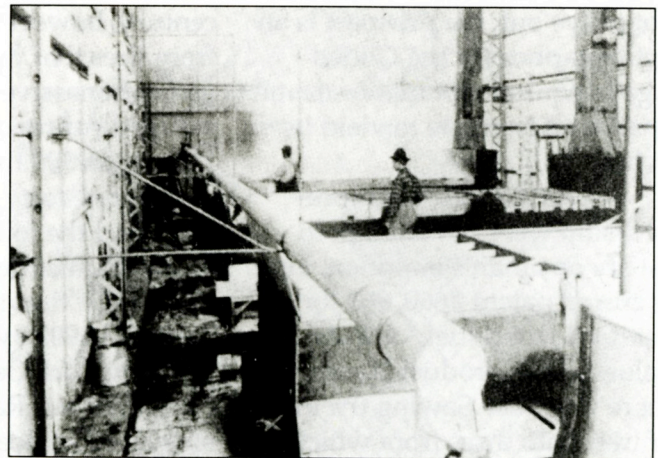


Figure 3. First Evaporator, Maple Valley, 1899. (Courtesy St. Lawrence Co. Historical Society)

over lands were well suited, as well as apples and cherries. For these products Low invented and patented various containers, including what he described as a "secret-sealing means for vessels . . . which contain liquids to indicate if they have been tampered with."²¹

Supplementing the town of Long Lake West (now Sabbatis) to the south, where over a hundred of his lumber-jacks "sprunged out," and his Horseshoe community to the north, Low built a three-story boarding house and several cottages at Hitchins Park for his growing labor force. Further domestication included a new family dwelling on nearby Silver Lake, renamed for his wife Marian, and a replica at Horseshoe Station of his hometown depot in Garden City, Long Island. Commodity production also expanded to include Horseshoe Mill and Staff of Life cereals, potatoes from a 200-acre farm, and wines made from grapes brought by rail from the Finger Lakes. In May of 1903 Low even filed a locator's claim in Canton describing the character and the location of his new gold mine. Although the sample sent to Philadelphia did not prove out, the prospect is an apt metaphor for the Gilded Age's requirement that undeveloped land be made to yield its riches.

As if all this entrepreneurship were not enough to satisfy one man's ambition, Low acquired patent #660, 863 for "natural wood fuel," a truly value-added product if ever there was one. Sawing the limbs of trees into discs from which the heartwood was removed, stringing twine through them

and packing them in burlap bags, Low marketed this product as "Physic Coal."²² Although his expectations that this product would find a large market in the coldwater flats of Northeastern cities were dashed, one can only admire Low's hope that it would provide an incentive for removing the incendiary carpet of slash left behind by logging. As it turned out, his concerns were ironically prophetic.

In order to to transport logs from the upper watershed, and to employ the new technology of hydroelectric power, Low built two large dams in 1903 and 1907. Together these raised ten miles of Bog River enough completely to flood the meandering upper drainage and numerous ponds that Colvin had struggled upriver to map. No doubt then as now, many people regarded this effacing of hundreds of acres of wetlands as an aesthetic improvement; certainly most marveled that the march of progress could illuminate a remote center of industry with electricity at a time when some cities were still in the shadows of gaslight.

A pall hung over Low's enterprises after the turn of the century, however, in the smoke from fires that were tearing through massive clearcuts in ravaged Adirondack forests. More than 300 fires were set during one forty-day period in 1903, and the following year Low was awarded damages of \$21,500 for fires set between 1899 and 1903 by locomotives of the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad. Annual snowfall had been light in 1908, drought had prevailed throughout the summer, and a year of

devastating fires (350,000 acres in all) crescendoed to September 27, when the great Long Lake West fire destroyed the entire town before it swept through Low's Mud Lake and Big Trout tracts.²³

What must have been heroic effort saved the Hitchins Park and Horseshoe buildings from the blaze, but the loss in standing timber was fatal to the economic engine of Low's enterprises. The maple products were not in themselves sufficient to guarantee profits, so in 1909 he did what sensible businessmen in such straits must do: he liquidated the Horseshoe Forestry Company and left the mountains to spend his remaining four years back in Brooklyn. Although more dramatically abrupt than most, the end of Abbot Augustus Low's empire had the same consequences for his employees as so many other unsustainable industries have had for the Adirondack folk who depended upon them.

Low's Bog River lands ultimately shared the fate of many large private holdings acquired at the end of the last century. Beginning during the First World War, Low's descendants sold their inheritance in large parcels over a half century, using only the Hitchins Park boarding house as a family retreat from the twenties until 1973, when the Suffolk County Boy Scout Council purchased the last piece.

Interpreting the Cultural Landscape

Since the 1985 additions to the Forest Preserve have enabled public access to the entire Bog River Flow, it has

become one of the most heavily used canoe routes in the Adirondacks. Few recreationists have any idea that they are entering an area that is, in biological terms, in the early stages of recovery from heavy industrial use and a devastating fire. Usually available at the lower dam registration box, the DEC publication on the Flow is largely devoted to a map detailing approved camping sites and regulations governing public use (figs. 4, 5); all that visitors learn of Low's empire are the dates of the dams, part of their purpose (power generation), and the assertion that they provide the "navigability" for "a quality recreational experience."

To elide human history in this fashion is a policy of deliberate omission with statutory imprimatur. The *State Land Master Plan* designates Hitchens Pond and Low's lake as Primitive areas, "essentially wilderness in character," where either "the ultimate goal is clearly to upgrade the area to wilderness at some future time, however

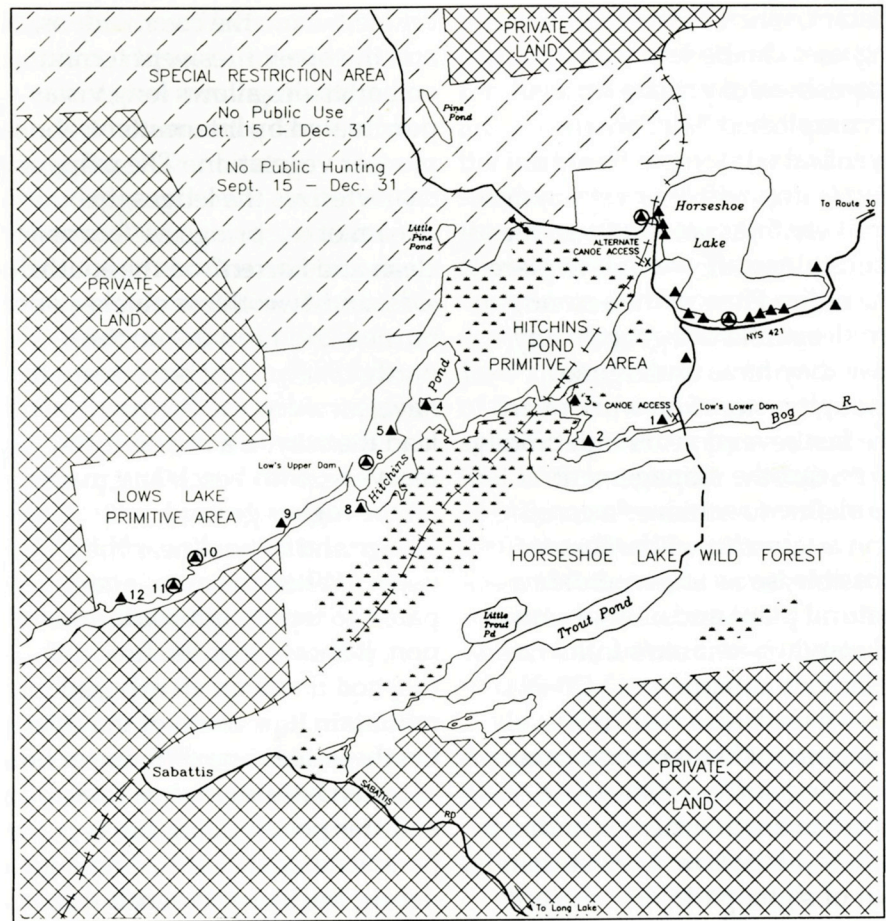
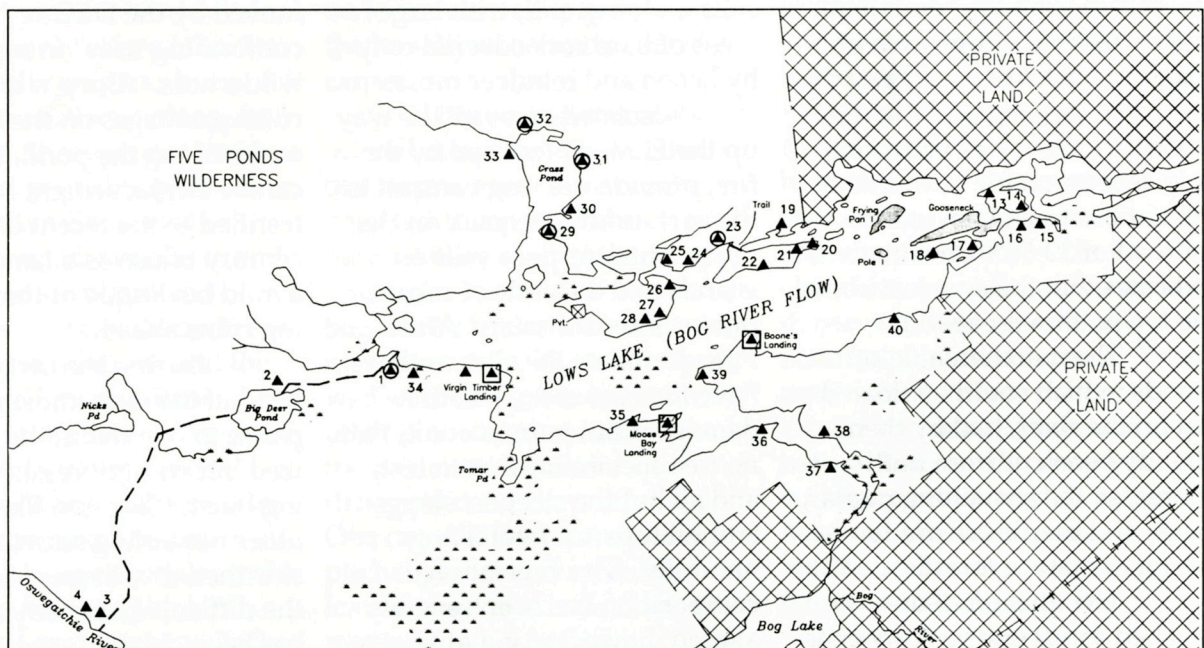


Figure 4: DEC recreationists' map, Hitchens Pond and Low's Lake Primitive areas — eastern section.

Figure 5:
DEC
recreationists'
map,
Hitchens
Pond and
Low's Lake
Primitive
areas —
western
section.



distant, when the non-conforming uses can be removed and/or acquisition of private tracts is accomplished," or "where eventual wilderness classification is impossible or extremely unlikely." As we shall see, the dams alone are enough to place the entire Flow in the second, irredeemable category; in any case they have undergone enough restoration work over the last several years indefinitely to thwart the management guideline to achieve "a condition as close to wilderness as possible, so as to perpetuate a natural plant and animal community where man's influence is relatively unapparent" (20-21). As we shall also see, "relatively unapparent" embraces a generous range of "possible closeness" to a wilderness "condition." Once Low's lower dam is out of sight, paddlers who are seeking the illusion of wilderness will indeed find little obvious evidence of human influence. For the first mile or so, the natural river channel is deep and narrow, with only a few marshes on the south bank and occasional old-growth pine snags and stumps to suggest the history of logging and flooding. A 1912-13 survey of merchantable vegetation for Low, documentation for a claim against the railroad of 30-50% devaluation, indicates that the area just above the lower dam escaped the fire.²⁴ The merchantable softwoods, which could be floated out on the river, had by then already been cut from both shores, so the remaining poplar, birch, and maple are predominant in a mature forest.

The illusion of untouched forest ends as canoeists approach the New York Central

bridge, where the river widens, and the open, fireswept terrain on both sides allows long vistas punctuated by intermittent, pioneer vegetation. The map characterizes the ledges upstream of the bridge as "burned clean and barren" on the south side, and "worthless patches of burned 2nd growth" on the north. The yellow birch seem to have survived the fire best, and lead the way in a mixed-forest recovery, with beech and maple on the higher ground, and spruce and balsam near the water. When the map is compared to topographic information, it shows that the fire touched down on all exposed mountain tops north of the river. On these sites one difference between natural regime fires and this post-logging fire is perspicuous: fueled by logging debris, the blaze scorched the thin soils to bedrock, so that it slid off the steepest slopes. On Silver Lake and Graves mountains the recovery of scattered conifers and paper birch is slow, and the process of rebuilding soils is slower still, with large areas of bare rock covered only by lichen and reindeer moss.

Isolated areas all the way up the Flow, untouched by the fire, provide a strong contrast to the surrounding terrain; on the dryer, nutrient-poor soils on islands and the ends of eskers, pure stands of Eastern White Pine dominate the sites as they have for centuries. The fire damage is not permanent in that no tree species have been lost, and all but the steepest slopes and hilltops are reforesting naturally. The vegetational composition has been severely altered, however, and at least a few more centuries are required

before the so-called climax species have achieved their original numbers. Unaided by some interpretive device, however, most recreationists cannot recognize a landscape profoundly altered by the long-term, large-scale effects of human intervention on natural succession.

Nor are visitors predisposed to such observations, for they seek—and are told they will find—terrain at least approaching a condition in which "the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man"; but a few more miles' paddling brings them up Hitchins Pond to the tailrace of Low's upper dam, where "the imprint of man's work" is substantially noticeable. Those who elect to carry canoes from the boat landing first notice a curious row of rectangular depressions in the concrete landing. Although the landing itself is too substantial to be demolished easily, the brass memorial plaques to generations of Low family dogs were removed by the DEC as "non-conforming uses" in aspiring wilderness. Along with the rotting cottages on the hilltop overlooking the pond, these canine elegiacs might have testified to the recent half-century of use as a family camp, a mild burlesque of the imposing ruins ahead.

During the carry to the head of the dam, most paddlers pause to wonder at the vandalized but still impressive boarding house. Because like most other remaining structures, it is sheathed in asbestos shingles, the difficult and costly removal has been delayed. An excuse to set down a heavy load quickly

becomes an object of inherent interest: such domestic details as empty stonework flowerboxes lead the eye to the stone walkway overgrown with lilac and lilly, and thence to a decorative well on the tailrace, all evoking ghosts of the thriving community that had appeared almost overnight in the wilderness. Surprise, and sometimes affront, at such unexpected, emphatic signs of civilization in a remote place, supposed to be "essentially" untouched, give way in most observers to absorption and reflection.

Demolition and recent construction work on the dam have effaced most traces of its original building complex; but with no more incentive than the unexplained structure, most canoeists delay their upriver departure long enough to explore the decaying remains of Low's Hitchins Park rail station as if they were the romantic ruins of an old world civilization.

Thorough demolition in the twenties and a vigorous recovery of pioneer hardwoods have completely effaced the site of Low's mill complex; but a mile's walk northeast along the old rail bed, through stands of Scotch pine, probably planted by the Civilian Conservation Corps on burned-over land, and now ravaged by blight and porcupines, one can discover the crumbling foundations and the moss-covered marble floor of the evaporator plant on the rail spur to Maple Valley. Here rusting hoops and rotting staves hidden amongst the ferns, gnarled apple trees and concrete cellar walls fractured by birch roots, are all prominent artifacts of industrial activity. But Bog

River yields artifacts of a deteriorating natural system as well.

If few among the thousands who annually canoe and camp Bog River have any knowledge of Low's ventures, fewer still who carry over an obstruction about a mile above the upper dam are aware that it is a dismembered relict of a decaying ecosystem. The dams floated many acres of the original bog mats off their natural moorings. Those who go on to explore the south shoreline of Low's Lake will find the largest remaining piece six miles up the flow, anchored in offshore shallows north of Moose Bay landing, slowly breaking up under relentless assault of wind and wave. They might even be surprised in open water by an unexpected check when their canoe runs onto a vagrant carcass of mat floating just under the surface. But most will not recognize the origin of the piece that drifted far downriver to lodge in the narrow channel, its decay hastened by those who examine the curious vegetation on foot, or are simply drawn to the novelty of an undulating carpet.

The original bog mats offered temporary footing for black spruce and tamarack, destined to topple and sink as they mature; nesting for many bird species; and a habitat for bog laurel, leatherleaf, and other members of the heath family, as well as cotton-grass sedge and other plants that are adapted to the acidic environment and droughty conditions of a bog. One can still find "carnivorous" pitcher plants and spatulate-leaved sundews, but not for too many more years. More delicate flowers like grass pink, rose

pogonia, and white-fringed orchids are already hard to find, for the remaining bog fragments are in deep decline, poisoned by the increased oxygenation of moving water, which disrupts the mat's ability to maintain its characteristic low Ph, and hastens its decomposition. An ecologist might characterize Low's Lake as a palustrine ruin of the boreal acid bog, a site-specific, open-canopy wetland that is an interacting assemblage of plants, animals, and microorganisms. This is an absolute loss of biodiversity which, even if the dams were removed tomorrow, would take millenia to restore.

Bog River is, and will be for many generations to come, a place of intertwined human and natural ruins. Like the idea of wilderness that statutes enjoin it to emulate, this area can be defined as much by absences as by the presence, for instance, of the second-largest loon population in the state. Tradition holds the original Mud Lake as the last stand in the mid-1860s of the extirpated Adirondack moose, and golden eagles nested on the ledges of Grass Pond Mountain not too many years ago. Simply to remove all obvious signs of human history does not, *ipso facto*, make it wilderness aborning, any more than its classification as Primitive makes it, *ipso jure*, a site of ecological restoration. Indeed, these measures reinforce the perceived dualism of human and natural history, the deeply held cultural conviction that wilderness and civilization are alien, antithetical realms, nurturing a delusion that obviates the understanding necessary to protect biological integrity.

The problem of alienation can be traced to the mixed terms in which wilderness is defined as a standard by which all other Forest Preserve lands are measured.²⁵ The standard is on the one hand essentially biological and non-human, with the goal "to perpetuate a blend of natural plant and animal life in which man's influence is not apparent"; on the other it is socially defined, with the purpose of providing "outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation" (15-16). To invoke human absence as an essential criterion is to imbue the landscape with a cultural mythos of wilderness. The recreational meanings it seems to offer us — freedom, self-discovery, spiritual fulfillment, etc. — are not inherent in the physical landscape, but are projections instead of our needs to recreate ourselves in its complex otherness. The basis and the purpose of wilderness classification are in fact officially characterized in phenomenological terms, involving "... certain intangible considerations that have an inevitable impact upon the character of land. Some of these are social and psychological — such as the sense of remoteness and degree of wildness available to users of a particular area, which may result from the size of an area, the type and density of its forest cover, the ruggedness of the terrain or merely the views over other areas of the Park obtainable from some vantage point. Without these elements an area should not be classified as wilderness, even though the physical and biological factors would dictate that the limitations of

wilderness management are essential" (11). Because in this rubric they so depend upon the alienating re-creation of alienated, civilized perception, biological systems appear as pristine, self-renewing "forces of nature," existing somehow independent of human influence, a timeless ideal where one must be "a visitor who does not remain" in order not to "trammel" them. But as we now must recognize, humans have made themselves an ineluctable presence in natural systems everywhere, trammeling them in atmospheric pollution and, in ways we cannot yet comprehend, changing the very course of evolution by altering climates and habitats. For all but a few scientists, such global considerations will remain incomprehensible abstractions, as remote as the mythic wilderness until we can unpack our needs to create

"More campsites should be closed on more frequent, longer cycles to permit their recovery, ..."

local Arcadies, and re-cognize places like Bog River as locales with natural histories profoundly altered by human activity.

To create the alluring illusion of human absence in the Bog River landscape makes the goal of ecological restoration in a Primitive area much more difficult to achieve. The recreational pressure on the Flow is already heavy, and will only grow heavier. The Suffolk County and Hiawatha Councils of the Boy Scouts, who are still

major Bog River landowners, maintain developed central campsites, require vehicular access, and have posted their exclusive rights to such prominent sites as Frying Pan Island and Virgin Timber landing near the carry to the Oswegatchie, where the duff is pounded fine by the intensity of their use. Most of the public campsites that can accommodate larger groups (the limit is 10) show signs of heavy use, with eroded banks, compacted soils littered with charcoal around overflowing firepits, and the surrounding forest barren of anything that will readily burn (or renew soil). More campsites should be closed on more frequent, longer cycles to permit their recovery, but soon this will be impossible without rationing their use on a permit system.

How Bog River recreation is managed, and how its landscape is interpreted, are both representative and uniquely high-stakes concerns in the Forest Preserve, for it is the eastern gateway into Five Ponds Wilderness. The recovery of ecosystems from human disturbance in the Flow should prepare recreationists in transit to appreciate natural succession on a landscape scale, because the southern half of the adjoining Wilderness contains the largest contiguous area of unharvested forest in the Northeast, with 47,326 acres representing over eighty percent of the remaining old growth ecology of the pre-settlement landscape in the entire northern forest region. Hard hit by the recent windstorm of July 15, for instance, the undisturbed blowdown in this old growth is an essential field-study control for determining

how salvage logging on private lands can be conducted on a demonstrably sustainable basis. Moreover, the biological ruins in Bog River should instill an appreciation of rare and fragile ecosystems, for just a few miles east of Low's Lake and north of the Oswegatchie River, in the heart of Five Ponds Wilderness, is a near-image of the Bog River headwaters before their flooding and logging. One of only three such areas remaining in the Adirondacks, the Oswegatchie Plains are a 150-acre, savannah-like area of swamps, bogs, and fens.²⁶

The recent DEC draft of a "Forest Preserve Public Use and Information Plan for an Interpretive and Information System" offered an opportunity to address public education. But among the six goals and twelve principles in the general introduction, protection of the Forest Preserve's biological character is mentioned only once as a subtopic, perhaps because protection and "use and access" seem irreconcilable goals. Although a brief paragraph on "interpretive themes" mentions the reciprocal relationship between human and natural processes, everywhere else—in a proliferation of objectives, goals, strategies—"human history" and "natural history" are treated as separate categories, yielding separate knowledge and meanings. Elsewhere, however, the Plan calls appropriately for inter- and multidisciplinary research teams to find "creative approaches" to "instill long-term stewardship in the minds and actions of visitors and residents" in order to protect "the ecological integrity of the area."²⁷ This essay is an answer to that

call.

We need to interpret, not efface ruins like Low's and the Pruyn family's at Camp Santanoni, deliberately to employ them as tools to educate recreationists to the interdependence of nature and culture. The need to see ourselves reflected in nature's otherness is at least as old as Mediterranean agricultural civilizations, and shows no signs of atrophy. Rather than constructing an ahistorical, ideal wilderness that stands in opposition to culture, however, ruins employ romantic nostalgia to incorporate biological resilience within an historical process. They ask us to find meaning in the remains of human ambition, decaying at the strangely promising rate of roots moving darkly, one ring of growth for each year of light. Elegiac reflections operate as a kind of imaginative homeopathy, shifting a measure of otherness from nature to culture, the ironic distancing enabling us to reconsider our role in natural processes from outside near-sighted conventions of human history, to regard presumptions of mastery or ideologies of progress with healthy skepticism and due humility. From this perspective the story of Abbot Augustus Low's Bog River Empire appears as the parable of a latter-day pilgrim with the naive capitalist's holy mission of making the wilderness bloom and fructify, or the visionary industrial inventor whose faith in technological prowess ultimately fostered only disaster. Western culture exhausts its myths quickly, requiring constant reconfigurations to cushion the losses of faith, to dampen the

shocks and accept the changes that rush upon us.

Far more effectively than nature trails and museum or roadside ecological exhibits, ruins in a recovering wilderness evoke a visceral intuition that roots shouldering over foundations—like decaying bog mats, reindeer moss creeping over fire-stripped bedrock, and rotting nurse logs rebuilding soil—bespeak a natural history that is unavoidably human as well. From this intuition can emerge the understanding that biological cycles operate on larger scales and far longer chronologies than our impetuous market economy and its attendant sciences can yet accommodate, and that sustainable living turns upon reconciling the differences. Ruins enable us to see the otherwise invisible system of protection that civilization gives us, and by manifesting its dependence upon healthy natural systems, they can persuade us of the need to protect from our own appetites a few places where nature's economy can operate as much as possible by its own laws. Human and natural ruins combine to imbue a new science of biological complexity with the morality and humility implicit in the poet's old, ironic enjoinder to master

the passions

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The hand which mocked them, and the heart that fed:

And on the pedestal these words appear:

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

NOTES

1. Philip G. Terrie, "Behind the Blue Line," *Adirondack Life* (January-February, 1992): 49.
2. New York State Forest Commission, *Report for 1890*, 57. For a thoughtful examination of the mixed and shifting motives underlying the creation of the Adirondack Park, see Terrie, "'One Grand Unbroken Domain': Ambiguities and Lessons in the Origins of the Adirondack Park" (Schenectady, NY: The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, Special Report No. 14, December, 1988). In addition to the much-maligned recommendations of The Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century, *The Adirondack Park in the Twenty-First Century* (Albany, NY, 1990), some useful considerations of how to convert anomaly to a functional model are represented in "Managing Growth and Development in Unique, Natural Settings," ed. John F. Sheehan (Elizabethtown, NY: The Adirondack Council, n.d.), the proceedings of a Fall, 1990 conference.
3. William R. Burch, Jr., "MAB, Maps and Method," a perspective in these pages that complements the argument of this essay. For other observations about the Adirondack Park in relation to UNESCO's MAB program, see Thomas L. Cobb, "The Adirondack Park and World Heritage," in *Wilderness and People: The Future of the Adirondack Park*, ed. Linda M. Champagne (Schenectady, NY: Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, 1993), 13-17.
4. Joseph L. Sax, "America's National Parks," *Natural History* (October 1976 Supplement): 79. For the history of the Forest Preserve and Article XIV, see Frank Graham, Jr., *The Adirondack Park: A Political History* (Syracuse UP, 1978): 123. An indispensable chronology is Norman J. VanValkenburgh, *The Adirondack Forest Preserve: A Narrative of the Evolution of the Adirondack Forest Preserve of New York State* (Blue Mountain: The Adirondack Museum, 1979); also useful is Eleanor Brown, *The Forest Preserve of New York State: A Handbook for Conservationists* (Glens Falls, NY: The Adirondack Mountain Club, 1985). Louise A. Halper offers copious research in "'A Rich Man's Paradise': Constitutional Preservation of New York State's Adirondack Forest, A Centenary Consideration," *Ecological Law Quarterly* 19: 193 (1992): 193-267.
5. State of New York, *Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan* (1972; Ray Brook, NY: Adirondack Park Agency, 1989), 16.
6. Distinguished ecologists and conservation biologists have justified this premise far beyond my abilities. See, for example, E. O. Wilson, ed., *Biodiversity* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1988); Michael E. Soule, *Conservation Biology: The Science of Scarcity and Diversity* (Sunderland, Mass.: Sinauer, 1986). Those who seek a cogent, jolting primer might read Wilson's "Is Humanity Suicidal?" *New York Times Magazine* 30 May 1993: 24-28. Ever since the 1970 report of the Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks, growing awareness of national and global degradation of atmospheric, terrestrial, and aquatic systems has lent increasing urgency and ever higher priority to their protection and restoration on a landscape scale in the Adirondacks. See, for example, George D. Davis, *Biological Diversity: Saving All The Pieces*, Vol. 1 of *2020 Vision: Fulfilling the Promise of the Adirondack Park* (Elizabethtown: The Adirondack Council, 1988); The Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century, 9, 11, 13, 17, and 82-83. Even the industry-oriented Northern Forests Lands Council finds place for a recommendation (number 21 of 37 devoted largely to economic measures) to "develop a process to conserve and enhance biodiversity across the landscape," in *Finding Common Ground: Conserving the Northern Forest* (Concord, NH, 1994), 61-64. The preponderance of private industrial ownership of the four-state northern forest region makes this process a distant dream; meanwhile, New York's 2.4 million-acre Adirondack Forest Preserve comprises the most unified two-thirds of all publicly owned lands dispersed throughout the 26-million-acre study area.
7. Jerry Adler and Daniel Glick, "No Room, No Rest," *Newsweek* 1 Aug. 1994: 46-52.
8. For a description of these distinct classifications and guidelines for their management and use see the *State Land Master Plan*, 15-30. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.
9. For the point of view of an ecologist who conducted the field research leading to a restoration program for these alpine communities, and who helped to initiate the stewardship program, see Edwin H. Ketchledge, "The Next Century, The New Challenge" in *Celebrating the Constitutional Protection of the Forest Preserve, 1894-1994: Papers Presented at the Silver Bay Symposium, Lake George, 30 September, 1994* (Schenectady, NY: Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, 1994), 67-71. For useful observations about the educational and information needs of the Forest Preserve, see David Gibson, *Association [for the Protection of the Adirondacks] News* 11:1 (Winter, 1995): 5-6.
10. E.g., see the "Biological Diversity Bill," sponsored among others by then-Senator Pataki, and signed into law by Governor Cuomo in July, 1993. S5072-5 (4 May 1993) is "An Act to Amend the Environmental Conservation Law, the Education Law, the Parks, Historic Preservation, and Recreation Law, and the State Finance Law in Relation to Identifying, Restoring, and Conserving the State's Biological Diversity." The goal of perpetuating "natural plant and animal communities" first appeared in Recommendation 36 of the Temporary Study Commission, *The Future of the Adirondacks*, Vol II: *The Technical Reports: Private and Public Lands*, Vol. B (Blue Mt. Lake, NY: The Adirondack Museum, 1971), 25. Although he acknowledges that even in its statutory definitions, wilderness is an indeterminate concept, Philip G. Terrie interprets the growing propensity to protect biological integrity as "the institutionalization of a wilderness aesthetic" in *Forever Wild: Environmental Aesthetics and the Adirondack Forest Preserve* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1985), 150-165.
11. "The Trouble with Wilderness," *The New York Times Magazine* (13 August 1995): 42-43.
12. Verplanck Colvin, *Report on the Topographical Survey of the Adirondack Wilderness of New York for the Year 1873* (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons, 1874), 54 and 60. For a vivid evocation of Colvin's experience and the archetypal resonance of Bog River as wilderness, see Christopher Shaw, "Empty at the Heart of the World," in *The Nature of Nature*, ed. William H. Shore (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 273-292.
13. All qtd. in Paul Jamieson,

Adirondack Canoe Waters: North Flow, (Lake George, NY: Adirondack Mountain Club, 1975), 93. Unusual among contemporary interpreters of Bog River, Jamieson is sufficiently attuned to aesthetic tradition to express ambivalence about the advantages for canoeists of today's flooded Bog wetlands: "A desolation so complete, like anything absolute, should have been preserved" (93). His 19th-century sources are the detailed accounts in Alfred Billings *Street, Woods and Waters; or the Saranacs and Racket* (1860; rpt Harrison, NY: Harbor Hill, 1981); Joel T. Headley, *The Adirondack; or Life in the Woods* (1849; rpt Harrison, NY: Harbor Hill, 1982); and Samuel H. Hammond, *Wild Northern Scenes; or, Sporting Adventures with the Rifle and the Rod* (NY: Charles Scribners, 1857). For the painterly and literary sources of the European aesthetic categories which these journalists were framing for their readers, see Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (NY: MLA, 1935); Elizabeth Manwaring, *Italian Landscape in Eighteenth Century England: A Study Chiefly of the Influence of Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa on English Taste, 1700-1800* (1925; rpt. London: Frank Cass, 1965); Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1963); and Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (NY: Oxford UP, 1980). For some examples of how these aesthetic categories shaped popular attitudes toward the Adirondack wilderness, see Terrie, *Forever Wild*, chs. I-IV.

14. As early as 1823 this nostalgia was evident in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*, the first of his five *Leatherstocking Tales*, which introduced a 70-year-old Natty Bumppo as the archetypal frontiersman, and old Chingachgook as the last Indian in a frontier settlement. The price of civilization is vividly depicted as heedless destruction of nature; Chingachgook dies in an apocalyptic forest fire, while the old hunter, punished for violating the new game laws, lights out for the frontier where his death-in-exile occurs in *The Prairie* (1827), the third in the series. Formative myths of the American frontier are familiar to students of American culture in the writings of Leo Marx, Hans Huth, Roderick Nash, Perry Miller, and

Richard Slotkin, to name a few (see Terrie, cited n 14: 167-171 for citations and other related sources). For the perspective of British scholars, see, e.g., Howard Mumford Jones, *O Strange New World: American Culture; the Formative Years* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1965), and Robert Clark, *History, Ideology and Myth in American Fiction, 1823-1851* (London: MacMillan Press, 1984). For Thomas Cole's use of a changeless ideal of wild nature as a context for unsettling historical change in his epic landscape histories, see the essays by Allan Wallach and William H. Truettner in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. Truettner and Wallach (New Haven: Yale UP and Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Museum, 1994). And for a current examination of ecological recovery in the Northeast and its implications, see Bill McKibben, *Hope, Human and Wild* (Boston and NY: Little, Brown, 1995); the discussion of "Home" in Chapters One and Four are anticipated in his "An Explosion of Green," *Atlantic Monthly* April 1995: 61-83.

15. See Max Oelschlagel, *The Idea of Wilderness from Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991), and Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Yale UP, 1982). Also see Peter Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Oxford UP, 1969).

16. Terrie (cited n. 1) and Halper (cited n. 4) describe the land rush among the wealthy and well-connected that resulted from the state's conversion from a seller to a buyer-protector of forest lands in the Adirondacks and Catskills.

17. A brief history of A. A. Low & Bros.' clippership business from 1829 to 1886 is Ellen Fletcher Rosebrock, "Abiel Abbot Low—A New York Merchant in the China Trade," *Seaport: The Magazine of the South Street Seaport Museum* 14: 2 (Summer, 1980): 15-17.

18. Low's career as an inventor is examined in Tom Hughes, "A Patent Genius," *Adirondack Life* 21:3 (May-June, 1990): 36-41.

19. Most of the historical facts in this essay about Low's short-lived, Bog River industrial empire are drawn from F. Mark Clark, "The Low Dynasty," *The Quarterly* (of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association) 19:1 (January, 1974): 9-15. Also

see *Adirondack* 52: 6 (July, 1988), comprised largely of short articles enticing canoeists to this recent addition to the Forest Preserve.

20. Armand Valliancourt, reminiscences in ts. 359-2496, Adirondack Museum Collections, Blue Mountain Lake: 3. Valliancourt was caretaker for the Low estate from 1926-1973, and claims (4) that Low's maple products were so successful that they provoked officials of Vermont state fairs to ban out-of-state products.

21. Qtd. Hughes, 39.

22. Patent application and schematic drawings of this and of the mechanical system for evaporating pans reproduced in Clark, 11.

23. Articles in the *Tupper Lake Herald* provide vivid glimpses of the losses suffered by the neighboring community. See especially the edition of 2 Oct. 1908.

24. Map 85-18, collection of The Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, NY. I am indebted for some of the field research and many of the observations in this essay to a better naturalist than I, John Friauf, Jr., with whom I guided trips from Sagamore Institute into Bog River from 1991-94.

25. Terrie, *Forever Wild*, 156-59 discusses the process that established wilderness as a statutory "standard of purity."

26. For the biological significance of the Five Ponds old growth and wetland plains, see Davis, *2020 Vision*, 55 and 57; the draft strategic plan for biodiversity conservation of the Adirondack Chapter of the Nature Conservancy and Adirondack Land Trust, *Adirondack Conservation Plan* (Keene Valley, NY: ANC/ALT, 1994); and Michael G. DiNunzio, "The Role of the Adirondack Forest Preserve in Sustaining and Enhancing the Biological Diversity of the Adirondack Park," in *Celebrating*, 79-88. The biophysical effects, and the economic and political implications, of the July 15 blowdown are briefly considered in Elizabeth Folwell, "Lowdown on the Blowdown," *Adirondack Life* (Nov.-Dec., 1995): 48-52.

27. NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, *Preliminary Draft—Year One: Adirondack Forest Preserve Public Use and Information Plan Interpretive and Information System* (Albany, NY: NYSDEC, 1994), 18-20, 41.