

A Park in the Forest

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Birthdays—of people and of parks—are a time for celebration. They are also a time for taking stock of where we've been and where we're headed. A review of the 100-year history of the Adirondack Park reveals a shocking lack of shared purpose and vision regarding the Park's ultimate form and function. But history also reveals the serendipitous evolution of a land protection strategy that has been a model for the conservation of lived-in landscapes throughout the world.

The Adirondacks were the world's first countryside park. In this setting, public and private holdings form an intricate pattern of natural and human communities. Working farms and forests that underpin the regional economy surround the largest wilderness complex in the Eastern United States. Yet all is not well.

Homes and businesses sprawl along many road corridors, blocking vistas and blurring the distinction between settled and wild lands. But subdividers and speculators pose a more insidious threat to the Park's backcountry, where vacation homes account for about 60 percent of the dwellings. "No trespassing" signs prevent access to many sections of lakes, rivers, and public Forest Preserve. And crushing tax burdens promote the breakup of large private holdings, where a tradition of good stewardship has stabilized the flow of forest products from the working landscape.

We must act now if we are to reverse this decline and fulfill the dream of creating a true park in the Adirondacks. To assist us in this task, we need to review some events of the past and consider some options for the future.

In 1890 the New York State Legislature appropriated \$25,000 for the purchase of lands in the Adirondack and Catskill regions, "as shall be available for the purpose of a State Park." Apparently, the legislators were planning ahead, but they didn't elaborate on their choice of words. Later that year, in an attempt to focus

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future state acquisitions, the newly-formed Forest Commission published a map on which it proposed an Adirondack Park that was outlined in blue. When the Park was officially formed two years later, its "Blue Line" encompassed 2.8 million acres, 80 percent of which was private land. The remainder was publicly-owned State Forest Preserve. Since that time, the Park has more than doubled in size, and public ownership has grown

to roughly 40 percent.

The Forest Commission originally intended to buy all the private property within the Blue Line as it became available and add it to the Preserve. But that soon proved to be fiscally impractical and politically unthinkable. Wealthy individuals and clubs secured vast tracts of Adirondack backcountry and became ensconced in their domains. Escalating land prices quickly outpaced state appraisals and depleted meager coffers. At this critical juncture, the state failed to consider how it could design a park comprised largely of private land, including tens of thousands of residents in scores of communities.

Except for the passage of a law limiting the placement of advertising signs, activities on the Park's private lands were virtually ignored for the next eight decades. In contrast, a heavy coat of legal armor was forged to protect the Preserve from all foreseeable onslaughts. Disgusted by the performance of the scandal-plagued Forest Commission, the people passed an 1894 amendment to the state constitution, which stated that the lands of the Forest Preserve "shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold, or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed, or destroyed." These words defined a covenant between New Yorkers and

*"Now entering its second century,
The Adirondack Park remains
a dream unfulfilled . . ."*

their Preserve that remains the world's strongest legal commitment to the protection of our natural heritage.

Thus shielded against the types of environmental abuses that characterized the exploitive mentality of the last century, the Preserve has largely recovered its ecological integrity. But the people of New York have a "park on the cheap" and they continue to pay the price of assuming that the good stewards of large private holdings can hold on forever. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the character of the Park is eroded as bit-by-bit subdivision and development gnaw at the fabric of open space.

Lacking a clear vision of what the Adirondack Park could, or should become, the State adopted an opportunistic, cartographic approach to acquisitions that dominated the past century. An obvious result of this approach is the hodge-podge, patchwork pattern of public and private ownership that now characterizes the region. More importantly, the Park is a jig-saw puzzle that lacks some critical pieces.

By fitting these missing ecological, recreational, economic, scenic, cultural, and historic "pieces" together, we can form an Adirondack Park that will serve as a global model for integrated land use and conservation. But first we must view the Park as an integrated whole and respect its special attributes.

Until the late 1960s most Adirondackers—including sportsmen, residents, legislators, and even conservationists—were preoccupied with the management of the Forest Preserve. Bills designed to undermine its constitutional safeguards were proposed and defeated, as were massive impoundment schemes reminiscent of the Hetch Hetchy project in Yosemite. At times, the courts were called upon to interpret fine points of law. During this period, many lost sight of the fact that the Park is not synonymous

with the Preserve. Some people, however, had a greater vision.

Laurence Rockefeller recognized that the Adirondacks were a national natural treasure, and in 1967 he proposed the creation of an Adirondack Mountains National Park. His trial balloon was peppered with shot from all quarters and quickly fell to earth with a resounding thud. After that, things were never quite the same in the North Country. It was as though everyone who had been in denial for the past seventy-five years was now ready to face up to reality.

In fact, the scattered lands of the Forest Preserve did not, and never will, add up to a true park. Private and public holdings are inextricably intertwined and interrelated. This is a unique pattern for a park, and one that Americans still have a hard time reconciling with their stereotypical image of parks as public reserves.

Near-unanimous distaste for the federal park idea made New Yorkers more willing to discuss alternate ways to proceed. Following the demise of his brother's ill-fated proposal, Governor Nelson Rockefeller appointed a Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks. After two years, the Commission delivered its report. It was the first time the state had officially tackled the complex issue of integrating public lands with the Forest Preserve to form a true park in the Adirondacks. The next year, in 1971, the Legislature created the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) to devise a master plan for the Forest Preserve and to control some of the development on private lands within the Blue Line.

Comprehensive zoning plans were virtually unknown in the 105 Adirondack towns and villages in the early 1970s. As a consequence, the first years of the APA were tumultuous at best. Twenty years later, many Park residents still view the Private Land Use Plan as the most restrictive zoning statute in the nation, if not the world. In fact, suburban communi-

ties throughout the state commonly function under zoning and permit requirements that are more restrictive. The Park Plan only regulates about one-half of the development in the region and is so flawed in its approach that the Agency now presides over what some have called the rational destruction of the Park.

When Diamond International unexpectedly dumped almost 1 million acres of Northeastern forest lands on the market in 1988, New York was hit hard. Ninety-six thousand Adirondack acres went to a Georgia-based land speculator. It took the intervention of the governor to work out a deal to protect several critical parcels, mostly through the state's purchase of conservation easements. Shock waves of concern reverberated through the environmental community and many concluded it was time to officially revive the Great Adirondack Debate. Governor Cuomo agreed and appointed a Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century.

After a year of fact-finding and deliberation, the Commission submitted its report in the spring of 1990. It was a comprehensive document, making 245 recommendations on topics ranging from zoning changes to health care and bureaucratic reorganization. And it was complicated, perhaps too much so. It addressed scores of knotty issues and was intended to serve as a vision for the distant future, not as a short-term quick fix. Unfortunately,

most Adirondackers never took the time to sift through the details before they judged its merits. The Commission Report became a rallying point for anti-Park, property rights, and development interests that continue to draw strength from the feeding frenzy of opposition that was spawned in its wake.

Celebration of the Adirondack Park Centennial in 1992 focused statewide attention on the region and provided another opportunity to balance environmental protection with the needs of residents



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and landowners. Comprehensive legislation was supported by the Governor and passed overwhelmingly by the State Assembly. But the Senate majority leader opted to treat the Park as a local issue, and his colleagues refused to act.

Curiously, forces fighting for the status quo offered no positive agenda. The opportunity to make needed changes in tax codes, school aid formulas, infrastructure funding, and economic development programs was never seized upon. Instead, they trotted out time-worn clichés about “outside elitists” and “no problem here.” And they overlooked important facts that would have told them quite a different

tale.

Over the last two decades, roughly the tenure of the APA, the Adirondack Park has steadily lost environmental ground. On average, 1,000 new homes have been built in each of the past twenty years. This may not seem like much on Long Island, but there are only about 80,000 homes in the entire Park. And the choicest sites—the first to go—have been around shorelines, in vistas, and along roadsides. During this period, sixty-five miles of shoreline and 135 miles of roadfront have been lost to development. These are the very places with sensitive resources that help define the essential character of the Park.

The claim is sometimes made that current restrictions leave no room for growth. But 500,000 houses could be shoe-horned into the hamlets and hinterlands of the Park, without exceeding today's zoning density guidelines. Under current regulations, the Park's population could increase to 1.5 million people, compared to the 250,000 year-round and summer residents who live there today. The question, then, is not whether growth will take place, but where it should occur.

A basic premise of the APA Act, and one of its major flaws, holds that virtually any kind of development is allowable anywhere. Protection of sensitive resources takes place mainly through requiring larger lots in certain areas, and not through the prohibition of incompatible uses. The net effect of this strategy is to encourage large-lot subdivision of the backcountry and the segmentation of unbroken forests into wilderness "ranchettes." In this respect, the Act reflects an archaic and counterproductive approach to land use planning. Changes in the Act are clearly necessary. But laws alone will not make a true park.

There are essentially two alternate futures for the Adirondack Park. One results from an extension of the status quo, the other from changes in policies, procedures, and attitudes. The choice is ours. If we wish to control our destiny, we must take positive action. Otherwise, the inertia of the present will carry us forward into a future we may not desire.

Many Adirondackers have already expressed their opinion on which alternative they prefer. In survey after survey, Adirondack residents have indi-

cated they like things pretty much as they are. They do not want to see all private land in the Park fully developed, and they do not like having traditional hunting and fishing areas posted against trespass. They enjoy the Park's open spaces, its scenic vistas, its wildlife, and its distinctive way of life. Unfortunately, these are the very qualities that will be lost if positive action is not taken. As we have seen from the vantage point of history, under the status quo alternative, the Park as we know it is slowly, but surely, being lost.

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Park residents also realize that young adults can't stay in their home towns to raise a family unless communities thrive in harmony with surrounding wild lands. State policies must change so that people are given the economic opportunities they need to prosper.

The alternate future which most would choose is a countryside park. To be such a place in the next century and beyond, the Adirondack Park must retain its vast areas of undisturbed open space. It must remain a sanctuary for native plant and animal species, and serve as a natural haven for human beings in need of spiritual and physical renewal. It must also provide for sustainable, resource-based local economies and for the protection of community character and countryside values.

The destiny of the Adirondacks lies with our generation and the choices we make together. For together, we will determine the future of this special place.

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