

Wilderness and the Working Landscape

Thomas Pasquarello, Robert Buerger, Gary Randorf

Thomas Pasquarello
is a member of
the Department of
Political Science
at SUNY Cortland

Robert Buerger
is on the faculty of
the Department of
Health, Physical Education,
and Recreation
at UNC-Wilmington

Gary Randorf
is a member of the
Adirondack Council
in Elizabethtown, N.Y.

Those who seek to protect wilderness constantly face challenges posed by natural resource exploitation, development, inadequate fiscal resources, and the need to protect indigenous peoples and their cultures. In response to these challenges, governments around the world are creating wilderness preserves that combine public and private land. New York State's Adirondack Park has incorporated public and private land for the past 100 years, and its successes and failures provide important lessons about this model of wilderness protection. This paper identifies the major policies that protect the Adirondack wilderness today, analyzes their shortcomings, and suggests new policies that will help the Adirondack Park to remain a model for wilderness protection in a developing world.

After seventy years of intensive clear-cut logging the Adirondack region of New York State was an environmental disaster area at the end of the last century. Today much of the Adirondack Park is again pristine wilderness. Species, such as the Moose, that were once locally extinct have returned, and perhaps the strongest piece of environmental legislation ever passed in the United States, the famous "forever wild" amendment to the New York State Constitution, stands guard over the Adirondack Forest Preserve. At the same time,

the Park's centennial decade, which began in 1985 with the hundred year anniversary of the creation of New York's Forest Preserve and ends in 1994 with the centennial of the "forever wild" clause, has been marked as much by conflict and controversy as it has by celebration.

Much of the controversy stems from the fact that the Adirondack Park is one of the few wilderness preserves in the United States that combines public (about 40 percent) and private (about 60 percent) lands, and has a significant permanent (approximately 130,000) and seasonal (approximately 200,000) resident population. Many of these residents own property and earn their living within Park boundaries, and many resent Park regulations that restrict their property rights and, in their view, their economic opportunities. In contrast, environmental and recreational interest groups (largely made up of non-residents) are concerned that development on private property in the Park threatens the integrity of the adjacent Adirondack wilderness. This sometimes uneasy marriage of environment and economy makes the Adirondack Park an increasingly appropriate model for wilderness protection in a rapidly developing world.

The key to the regeneration and preservation of the Adi-

Forever Wild: New York State Constitution, Article 14. "The lands of the State, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the Forest Preserve as now fixed by law, shall be forever kept as wild forest land. 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."

rondack wilderness has been state ownership and management of critical wilderness areas. Early abuses of state-owned lands in the Park by loggers resulted in the strong and specific protection of these lands by the "forever wild" clause (Graham, 1978). As an amendment to the New York State Constitution, the "forever wild" clause cannot be altered without the approval of the state legislature in two successive years, and subsequent approval by a majority of voters in a statewide referendum. Today, critical wilderness areas in the Adirondack Park are designated by a land use and development plan map. In general, designated wilderness areas in the Adirondack Park as those that protect or enhance bio-diversity and environmental quality, protect or enhance wilderness aesthetics such as scenic vistas and open space, and provide opportunities for wilderness-based activities and recreation. Thus the Adirondack high peaks region (with its fragile Arctic tundra ecosystems, spectacular views, and recreational opportunities) is almost entirely owned by the State, as are most of the remaining patches of old-growth forest.

Given the fiscal problems that have plagued New York State in recent years, conservation easements and purchases by private land trusts have become impor-

tant factors in protecting critical wilderness in the Adirondack Park. For example, when 1400 acre Lake Lila was donated to New York in the late 1970s by its former owner, the State was able to create a spectacular and popular primitive area at minimal cost by purchasing conservation easements that preserve the integrity of the surrounding wilderness while simultaneously providing public access to the lake through the surrounding forest products lands. More recently the Nature Conservancy Land Trust has purchased valuable patches of wilderness in the Park, hoping to eventually sell them to the State when its current fiscal crises is over.

Land use planning on an unprecedented scale for the United States is an essential part of the Adirondack model of wilderness protection. In 1971 the New York State Legislature created the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) and charged it with developing master plans that set policy for the management of state lands and guide land use and development on private lands in the Park. Under this land use plan, all private lands are mapped into six classifications with specific guidelines for intensity of development based on the number of buildings allowed per square mile. In addition, projects of regional significance (such as large condominium developments)

and projects that affect Park wetlands require special permits from the APA. The APA also provides technical and other assistance to local governments in the Park to help them develop local zoning, subdivision, and sanitary codes.

Working Landscapes are another major component of the Adirondack model. Working landscapes are "areas used for economic activities that do not irretrievably alter the natural ecological conditions, and which enhance historical traditions, environmental objectives, and scenic objectives" (New York State, 1991). The most common working landscape in the Adirondack Park is the forest products industry, which controls over 1.1 million acres of private land. Although the Park was created as a result of the exploitative timber practices of the mid-1800s, today the forest products industry is an integral part of the Park. Modern silvicultural practices have helped to create an Adirondack forest products industry that is, for the most part, an environmentally friendly neighbor to wilderness areas. The Adirondack forest products industry also provides jobs for Park residents, pays local and state taxes, leases land for recreational use (i.e. hunting and snowmobile clubs), and provides public easements for hiking and canoe trails that cross their property. Perhaps the most important con-

tribution of the forest products working landscape is the protection of the open space character of the region. Although these lands are in production, the relatively slow growth of the replanted forest insures that much of the forest products land, at any given time, is in a process of regrowth. This process insures that a part of the Adirondack Forest is constantly in transition, and this is important for the creation of habitat for some wildlife species (i.e. white-tailed deer, eagles, spruce grouse, and black bear). In contrast, over time the protected wilderness lands of the Park will become predominately climax forest unless natural forces alter the landscape.

A second important working landscape is the Park's tourism industry. This industry is composed mainly of vacation homes, private attractions, and support services (motels, restaurants, gas stations, etc.). Although the Park's protected wilderness lands provide an outdoor recreation tourism destination for many (both for outdoor recreation and a growing ecotourism industry), most tourism use of the Park takes place on adjacent private Park lands. This relationship benefits wilderness protection by focusing many types of tourism use (i.e. sightseeing, lodging, visiting attractions) on private land while reducing use of much of the public wilderness resource base. As a result, visitors can gain a personal sense of the value and importance of the Adirondack Park while in most cases never venturing into the designated wilderness areas. The exceptions are wilderness areas where access

is simplified by proximity to major roads or water corridors. In these situations heavy user impact on wilderness resources has occurred.

“In a sense,
the revenues generated by
private lands allow
the New Yorker
to have
‘a park on the cheap’
in the Adirondacks”

A third type of working landscape that is important to the Adirondack Park model is public infrastructure. Given the size of the Park (six million acres) infrastructure such as roads, utilities, hospitals, and governmental support services are essential both for residents and for the estimated nine million people that visit the Adirondacks each year. Many Park residents rely upon the infrastructure for their livelihood, and they also support the Park's infrastructure through local taxes. Given New York's fiscal crisis it is unlikely that the State could continue to support the Park infrastructure at current levels without local tax revenues. In a sense, the revenues generated by private lands allow the New Yorker to have a “park on the cheap” in the Adirondacks.

Due to the success of these policies, the Adirondack Park is an oasis of wilderness located within a day's drive of sixty million people. Its scenic beauty and recreational resources (2500 lakes and ponds, 42 peaks over 4,000 feet high, 2,000 miles of hiking

trails, 1200 miles of wild rivers, 30,000 miles of brooks and streams, 43 state campgrounds) make the Adirondack Park one of the premier travel destinations in the Northeastern United States, and an increasingly attractive location for vacation and second homes. As a result, current park policies have not been successful in protecting wilderness resources in some areas of the Park.

Forexample, concentrated use of the more famous and/or accessible Adirondack high peaks by hikers has resulted in negative impacts to their ecological and aesthetic integrity, even though the Park has a plan for visitor management and ecological restoration in place. The irony of this situation is that the stated goal of New York's Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to provide users of the Adirondack wilderness with a truly “natural” experience through low user density in a largely unaltered wild landscape is the main attraction that concentrates use and impact in the high peaks region. The result is increasing visitor dissatisfaction and growing negative impacts on this critical wilderness area. Resource managers attempting to protect critical wilderness areas in the Adirondack Park must turn to more innovative methods of managing visitor behavior. Promoting under-utilized wilderness areas, restricting the number and size of user groups, requiring users to possess low impact wilderness skills certification, and the development of an environmental ethic and a sense of stewardship for the wilderness resource base among

users are management techniques that hold potential for protecting the integrity of the Adirondack wilderness in the future. Expansion of the programs offered through the APA's Visitor Interpretive Centers (e.g. developing outreach programs for popular campsites and trailheads) is a logical place to start this process.

The decline of the Adirondack forest products industry in recent years is also cause for concern. Non-productive forest products lands are likely targets for large development projects that threaten the integrity of adjacent wilderness areas, and the loss of jobs in the forest products industry contributes to the high rate of unemployment and lower than average incomes in the Park. Several policies could be implemented to reverse this trend. Tax incentives and conservation easements, and loans or loan guarantees for capital improvements would help the Park's forest products industry to remain competitive, as would programs that encourage the forest products industry to develop and market recreational use of its lands. Programs that encourage the development of innovative working landscapes such as recreation and environmental and outdoor education camps, scientific research stations, private hunting and fishing preserves, and small scale indigenous products industries such as woodcraft, furniture making, and wooden boat building should also be established.

Land use planning is not the only way to insure that development patterns in the Park do not threaten the integrity of adjacent

wilderness areas. New York State should become an active participant in the Adirondack real estate market, creating development projects designed around strict performance standards and environmental goals. For example, the State could purchase undeveloped shoreline currently for sale in the Park and design developments with strict shoreline setbacks and screening, appropriate lot sizes, state-of-the-art septic and/or waste treatment facilities, buried utility lines, public access, recreation facilities, and wildlife habitats.

search on Park issues (Buerger and Pasquarello, 1993a) found that the majority of residents believe that New Yorkers who live outside the Park have too much control over what happens within its boundaries. Another study (Buerger and Pasquarello, 1993b) concluded that much of the statewide opposition to the 1991 Environmental Quality Bond Act (the only environmental bond act to suffer defeat in the history of New York State) was due to the efforts of Adirondack Park residents, who felt that funds from the bond act would

"If Park residents are given meaningful representation there is a much greater likelihood that they will become willing supporters of the policies and agencies that govern the Park."

Profits from these development projects could be used to finance new developments on the same model, to acquire and manage additional wilderness areas, or on any other projects that would benefit the Park.

Living and working adjacent to the Adirondack wilderness, Park residents would make ideal stewards of the wilderness character of the Park, but several barriers must be overcome before residents are likely to accept this role. First, residents feel left out of the decision making process regarding Park issues. They frequently complain about the future of the park being decided by "outsiders" who neither live in the Park nor have a personal stake in what happens to the Park. Recent re-

finance a state land acquisition plan for the Park that had been developed without their input. Finally, there has been strong resistance by residents to the Adirondack Park Land Use and Development Plan since its inception in 1972, and the APA has not been very successful in achieving its stated goal of encouraging local governments to assume responsibility for local development. Just when it looked like this situation might be improving (Buerger and Pasquarello, 1993a), Governor Cuomo appointed his Commission on the Adirondack Park in the Twenty-first Century. The majority of Park residents were convinced that the Commission did not represent their interests, and they responded to its final report with protests, civil

disobedience, and scattered acts of violence. As a result, not one of the Commissions 245 recommendations has been enacted in the four years following its report.

money for land acquisition in the Park after local governments were given veto power over acquisitions in their jurisdiction.

If residents are to be effec-

legislation, but recent events suggest that it may not continue to thrive if it cannot adapt to changing circumstances. Currently the administration of the Park is shared by APA and DEC. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this division of labor, the narrow focus of these agencies works against the development of comprehensive and innovative policies and programs. In the future, the mission of Adirondack Park Administration must be expanded to include environmentally compatible economic development, social research, and education.

“Because most Adirondack schools do not require extensive treatment of the Park’s history, ecology, and government, incorporating these topics in the required curriculum, and providing Adirondack students with increased opportunities for outdoor education may be the most far-reaching and productive method of increasing resident stewardship.”

The failure of the APA to develop a planning partnership with local governments, and Park residents’ opposition to the Report of the Governor’s Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-first Century and the 1991 Environmental Quality Bond Act is symptomatic of residents’ longstanding dissatisfaction with their lack of representation in Park governance. This problem can best be addressed by giving residents and their local government representatives meaningful roles in selecting the APA’s governing board of commissioners and in decisions about other Park issues. If Park residents are given meaningful representation there is a much greater likelihood that they will become willing supporters of the policies and agencies that govern the Park. For example, in the summer of 1993, local government representatives to the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages supported a dedicated environmental fund for New York State that included

tive participants in Park governance, they must understand its history, ecology, and governing structure. A study by Buerger and Pasquarello (1993a) found that residents’ knowledge of the Adirondack Park’s history and structure is extremely limited. Because most Adirondack schools do not require extensive treatment of the Park’s history, ecology, and government, incorporating these topics in the required curriculum, and providing Adirondack students with increased opportunities for outdoor education may be the most far-reaching and productive method of increasing resident stewardship. The APA should expand its education programs to target residents as well as visitors, and develop cooperative programs with other educational organizations within the Park (e.g. the Adirondack Museum).

The Adirondack Park is located in one of the world’s wealthiest nations, and it is protected by strong environmental

LITERATURE CITED

Buerger, Robert and Thomas Pasquarello. (1993a). “Resident’s Perceptions of Recreation Development and Land Use Issues Within the Adirondack Park.” *The Journal of Recreation and Leisure*, 12(1), 93-105.

Buerger, Robert and Thomas Pasquarello. (1993b). “The Adirondack Park: Changing Perceptions of Residents Towards Park Land Use Issues.” *The Proceedings of the Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium*. Northeastern Forest Experiment Station. Radnor, Pennsylvania.

Graham, Frank. (1978). *The Adirondack Park: A Political History*. Syracuse University Press. Syracuse, New York.

New York State. (1991). *Conserving Open Space in New York State: Preliminary Draft Plan*. New York Department of Environmental Conservation. Albany, NY, 77.