

The Adirondacks: An Overview

Howard Aubin

The Adirondacks may be viewed by some as an enormous wilderness area, an undeveloped island in an industrialized world, and a new kind of park. But to many of the people living and working within the boundary of the Blue Line, the Adirondacks are simply home. These people generally do not live in a park, nor do they call a park home. In fact, to many "Adirondackers," their land is not a park.

When the Adirondack Park was formed 100 years ago it was a completely different kind of park. There was no state-enforced land use regulatory agency. The Adirondack Park consisted of individual pieces of property inside an area marked by a blue line on a map. It was in name only a park. Through a gradual process the blue line expanded several times, engulfing a much larger area. People, their homes, and their property were included in these expansions, resulting in the area that exists today.

Twenty years ago, through that same system of gradualism, we inherited a new unwanted guest, the Adirondack Park Agency. This new guest is bossy, demanding, and threatening, and it has the authority of the State to back it up. The animosity created by clashes with this agency developed into the local resentment of the state park. It was and is the very existence of the Agency that results in no progress in the Adirondack de-

bate.

The present hostility stems from the process by which the park was established. There is a direct conflict between the Agency's role and the authority of local governments. Local governments within the Blue Line are denied the same rights as local governments outside the Blue Line. Instead of reacting to that situation, local governments within the Blue Line have ignored the problem, the result of which has placed the individual in the middle of an unfought struggle over who has the right to regulate land uses in the Adirondacks.

If the 21st Century Commission did anything, it marked the start of the second generation of the conflict, this second battle being fought with different faces and in a different style. The Northway rallies, Crane Pond Road, and other meetings that were shut down led to much of the publicity that made Albany more aware of the dissatisfaction of the proposed legislation.

As time goes by, more people become victims of the Agency and will learn to hate it. With the exception of people who use the Agency as a bully for hire, few people have a pleasant experience in dealing with it. It is doubtful that any small changes will correct the problem, which in turn leads to a future filled with more confrontation, anger, and hostility.

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A fresh start is needed to correct the problem. First, we must be able to understand and identify the cause of the hostility toward the Agency. An honest attempt must be made to address the issues.

Simply to try passing bill after bill designed to tighten up control, or to do some window dressing, will only further aggravate the situation. It is time for the system of gradualism to be replaced with a process of good government. Only a grass roots effort and local involvement can lead to a successful outcome.

The State needs to establish a clear vision of what it wants to accomplish in the Adirondacks. Goals must be stated and defined. The Agency is now operating without any policy, making decisions project by project. Local concerns must be incorporated into any policy on the Adirondacks. Presently, there is no definition of "undue adverse impact," and decisions are being decided on a whim. The system is failing, but there has been no ability or desire to change.

State policy on the Adirondacks needs to be examined. Promoting the tourist industry as a clean industry and one that complements the concept of the park is not all that true. Besides the wastes that have to be disposed of, there is the effect of the tourist industry on the second-home market. They

come, nine to ten million visitors per year, they see, and some of the tourists buy a piece of the Adirondacks from their friendly realtor.

The Agency, by protecting the character of the region, in turn protects the investment of the second home owner, and by supporting the tourist industry the state is bringing prospective customers to the real estate industry.

Needed is more of a dependency upon the resource-based industries, not on the tourist industry. Can the tourist industry in the Adirondacks support itself at its present level without the State promoting it as

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it does? If the answer is no, is the tourist industry "sustainable?"

Also, there is the question of the always-expanding forest preserve. This has the effect of taking more land out of production from any resource based industry trying to exist.

Coupled with the Agency's unofficial policy toward any resource-based industry, the effect is to change the economy of the area from one dependent upon the resources to one based upon State dependency. Few new jobs are created

that are dependent upon the resources of the area unless they are tourist-related, and those jobs are subsidized by advertisement.

Two fairly new terms being pushed by the environmental industry lately are "sustainable development" and "biodiversity." Sustainable development is a phrase that could be described as a method by which the economy and all land use in any given area can be controlled by some unelected regional governing body.

The environmental industry defines it somewhat differently. As with most of the environmental industry's pushes, achieving sustainable development requires the urban vote to enact a law that establishes some regional body appointed by parties outside the area to be affected by the subsequent regulations.

This results in no representation by the affected geographical minority target, with one group of people voting away the rights of another and the elimination of the rights of the individual in favor of the rights of the collective.

In the Adirondacks, by virtue of the ever-expanding forest preserve, resource-based industries are faced with a shrinking pool of resources. How then does one define sustainable when available resources diminish not because they are being used up but because they are being locked up? How does an

economy based on these resources plan for the future?

Biodiversity falls down the same line. There is a push to regulate private lands to promote, preserve, and enhance biodiversity, yet at the same time the forest preserve is not being managed to preserve biodiversity.

The forest preserve will someday return to the state of a climax forest. The name Adirondack stands for "bark eater." The climax forest that was here lacked the biodiversity that exists today.

Much of the biodiversity in the Adirondacks has been enhanced by man. An example is the Clintonville pine barrens, which were caused by a fire started because of the adjacent railroad tracks.

The fire destroyed hundreds of acres that grew back with pitch pine, blueberries, and other species of plants that thrive after a burn.

The white pines will eventually overtake the pitch pine, and this transitional forest will transform that manmade ecosystem back to its natural state, unless it is managed to preserve that ecosystem. Management ironically consists of highgrading the area, (removing the white pine), a frowned upon logging practice, and then burning the land periodically (a practice frowned upon in the Amazon).

Should this area become forest preserve, it could not by law be managed to preserve this transitional forest. The State's no-management policy would slowly destroy this ecosystem.

A climax forest also produces acid. The acid is helping to destroy many Adirondack

ponds. Different strains of native brook trout are becoming extinct. The forest preserve law not only stops treatment of this acidification but it also helps cause the problem.

Whether or not the acquisition of land for the forest preserve, or the State's policies have any adverse affect on the character, culture, economy or the people of the area is not and has not been considered.

If it had not been for the noise generated by the local population, changes would have occurred that just might have been devastating, not only to the relationship between the people and their land, but also to sustainable development and use in the area, and to the biodiversity of the land in the Adirondacks.

Much has been written about the affect of the people on the character of the Adirondacks; less is written about the affect of the creation of the park, or the actions of the agency, upon the people of the area.

It has been easy to recognize the increasing polarity between the sides in this Adirondack debate. We are miles apart with no chance of ever coming together (common ground) while on this route.

This concept of a park will not work without the cooperation of the people who reside here, so to myself and others there is a certain amount of comfort in knowing that an informal stalemate exists, while the rift is getting wider.

Because we have little hope of winning this fight, that stalemate becomes acceptable. Our only other current alternatives are either submission or revolution, and neither is desirable.

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