

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE MYTH OF THE ADIRONDACK ASBESTOS FOREST

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“A warming planet and changes to land use patterns mean more wildfires will scorch large parts of the globe in coming decades, causing spikes in unhealthy smoke pollution and other problems that governments are ill prepared to confront, according to a U.N. report being released on Wednesday.”¹

The history of the Adirondacks offers a valuable lesson about what can happen when widespread commercial activity intersects with episodic climate events to cause extreme forest fire danger. New York State’s response to such events has been largely successful in the past, leading to a myth that the Adirondack forest is unlikely to burn because it is an “asbestos forest”.

In 1885, New York State authorized the creation of a Forest Commission, and set aside the first public land to be protected as “forest preserve”. This effort was aimed at gaining control over a dramatic increase in wildfire numbers and severity by reigning in the destructive logging practices which fueled such fires. Despite these well intended actions, wildfires continued to be a serious problem most years. Finally, the

¹ “UN: Wildfires Getting Worse Globally, Governments Unprepared.” Wyoming Tribune-Eagle, 2022.

extreme fire years of 1903 and 1908 galvanized public support and the state enacted sweeping legislative remedies to reduce the danger of wildfire.

Among the actions approved were the following:

- creation of a fire patrol force vested with enforcement powers
- authorization to construct a system of observation towers to detect forest fires
- authority granted to the governor to proclaim woods closures and to forbid persons from entering forest lands during seasons of extreme drought
- new fire laws to control flammable materials left on forest lands
- regulations to control a key cause of fire ignitions - railroad locomotives

In 1912, the state legislature incorporated these provisions into new legislation that also replaced the field force of fire patrolmen and established a force of “forest rangers” in its place.

As the decades passed, New York State’s pioneering system of forest fire protection has proven to be a cost-effective deterrent to extreme fire episodes including the successful navigation of two periods of extremely serious forest fire danger.

The first of these events began in November of 1950 when hurricane winds in excess of 100 mph swept through eastern New York uprooting trees and causing a huge blowdown of old growth trees, affecting over 400,000 acres of public and private lands in the Adirondacks. To alleviate the danger of catastrophic forest fires in the devastated areas, emergency legislation was approved permitting the salvage of blown down timber on the forest preserve. Extra funds were also allocated to beef up the capacity of the forest ranger force to suppress any fires that might occur. These extraordinary actions, together with some favorable weather conditions over the next five years, enabled the Conservation Department to successfully overcome this threat of extreme wildfire and restore the “forever wild” status to forest preserve public lands.

The second period of extremely serious fire danger took place during the prolonged drought that lasted throughout much of the 1960s. This event was much closer to home for me because I had just been appointed as a New York State forest ranger in Glens Falls. Wildfires were frequent in this ranger district including one that made headline news in the spring of 1962 when a fire that began in West Glens Falls destroyed several homes and even jumped the new I-87 Northway which was then under construction.

In January 1964, when I began my ranger career, the memory of that fire remained fresh and worrisome - especially since the drought showed no sign of loosening its grip. As the year progressed, the dry conditions steadily worsened and fire numbers continued to rise throughout the Adirondack region. In response to this worsening fire danger, the Conservation Department expanded its fire suppression capabilities both on the ground and in the air. The Glens Falls Airport became the hub where aircraft engaged in fire suppression throughout northern New York were staged. Additional ranger positions were authorized and purchases of much needed fire pumps, trucks and other essential equipment came on line. Finally, as the drought conditions became even more dangerous, the governor issued the proclamation so feared by the tourism industry and declared the woods closed to visitors.

When the prolonged dry times of the 1960s finally ended, the Conservation Department had proven once

again that it was up to the task of wildfire control during a period of drought lasting several years through a combination of planning, training, having adequate supplies and equipment on hand, and effective teamwork that made fire suppression safe and efficient despite the extreme conditions.

New York State's success in wildfire prevention and control have earned the forest ranger force high praise for what it has accomplished. However, it has also led to worrisome complacency toward the danger of forest fires - hence, the false belief in an Adirondack "asbestos forest".

Quite the contrary, there is compelling evidence that forests all over the world are facing extremely dry and dangerous wildfire conditions with no relief in sight because mankind lacks the political will to address climate change.

In New York State, the vast forests of the Adirondack region are becoming increasingly vulnerable as global warming weakens the ability of our forests to survive attacks from invasive insects and diseases, chronic drought and the most destructive factor of all – people who are uneducated about fire safety. To control Adirondack wildfires in the hotter, drier world of the future, we must begin by making sure that we are ready with all the tools in place that rangers will need to meet this new challenge.

With that thought in mind, I offer these concerns, based on my nearly forty years of experience serving as a New York State Forest Ranger.

The forest ranger force is 137 years old this year. It is time to take a hard look at the overall mission of today's ranger force, and ask ourselves what changes need to be made to prepare rangers for the expected surge in wildfires that will accompany global warming. Some key points to be considered should include the following:

Size of force – The number of rangers must increase significantly if they are to keep up with the myriad demands that have already brought current rangers close to the breaking point. The increasing demands on rangers brought on by global warming may become overwhelming if more help is not forthcoming.

Diversity - The DEC has made disappointing progress in changing its image of a white, male dominated ranger force. This image is out of touch with America's more diverse population which will become the majority by 2050.

Current civil service requirements are in urgent need of change to align them with the goal of a more diverse ranger force. Job requirements have become too narrow, too costly and, arguably, too discriminatory in favor of white men. They present a serious impediment to creating the larger pool of more diverse candidates needed to fill future ranger positions. In order to recruit a more diverse ranger force, a more adjustable career path must be created that will accept candidates from a wider variety of work experience and a broader range of educational programs - or even a more flexible combination of both. Ways must also be found to provide financial assistance to promising ranger candidates who lack the financial resources needed to reach their dream of becoming a ranger.

A more diverse forest ranger force will pay big dividends by creating role models for the future generations of rangers who must look more like the public they serve. It will also help rangers to

build the trust they need to make them welcome in mixed communities, to teach young people more effectively, and to do the kind of community building we will need to stay safe in a hotter, drier world.

Role of Forest Rangers - Although forest rangers have always been authorized to enforce the conservation laws, in recent years their police authority has been expanded to include the full menu of police powers. This also increases the time rangers must spend on mandatory training and other policing requirements. These changes, along with the increasing demands for emergency response, have resulted in less and less time for other equally important ranger duties.

I worry that the rangers' enhanced police status may just be a prelude to yet another attempt to merge or consolidate our much smaller ranger force into a larger, more hide-bound police agency where police priorities will prevail and forest ranger priorities will not. Such a change would be ill advised, and would undermine the public trust that rangers have worked so hard to maintain. That public respect and support can often be redeemed when needed during emergencies such as forest fires and woodland searches and rescues.

Perhaps rangers are closer to being teachers than they are to being police. They seize every opportunity to remind people how to be safe when outdoors, and teach them how to reduce harmful impacts on our natural world. With global warming on the horizon, the concept of urban-wildland interface will need to become more widely adopted by people who build and live within heavily wooded areas such as the Adirondacks. Their safety will depend on it. This is a job best done by forest rangers using education to win over people while saving the tools of law enforcement for circumstances where other options fail. This approach has always worked well for the forest rangers.

Looking ahead, we need forest rangers to protect the forest and assist and educate its users. In particular, it is time to abandon the myth of the "asbestos forest" and face the stark reality of what lies ahead. The United Nations predicts that wildfires will increase by 30% by 2050. New York State must do its part to mitigate this global threat. We cannot stop global warming, but with a strong forest ranger program we can help take the necessary steps to prevent and control destructive wildfires in the future just as we have in the past. The time to prepare for climate change and protect our forests is now.