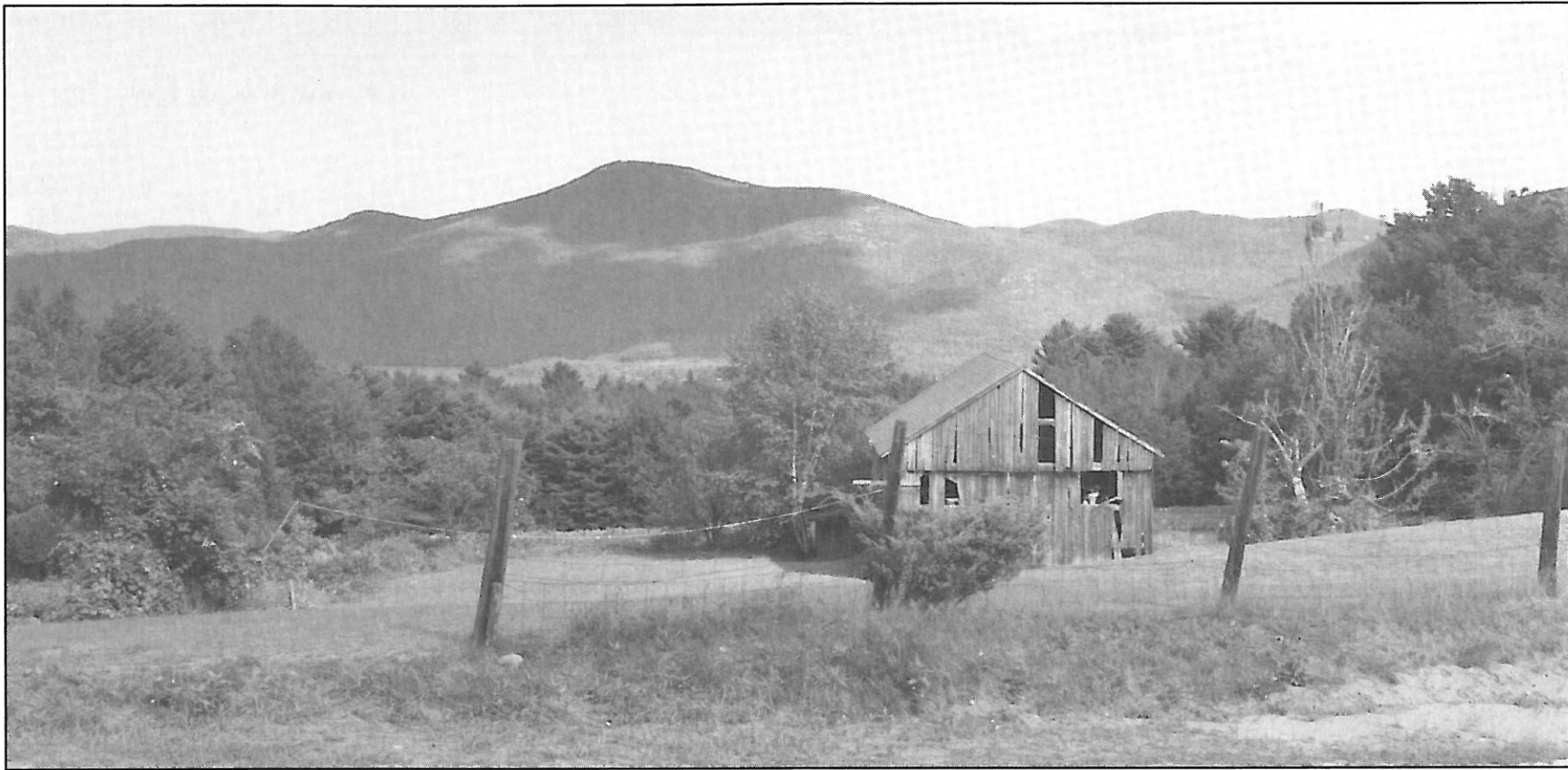




# WINDOWS ON THE PARK

Scenic Vistas of the Adirondacks

The Adirondack Council



**Above:** Looking across Lake George at State-owned lands in the Lake George Wild Forest from Coolidge Hill Road in the Town of Bolton. Ownership of this viewshed is shared among the State and more than a dozen individuals. Scattered hill farms dot the Adirondack landscape, adding to the visual and cultural diversity of the Park.

**Cover:** Beaver Brook Valley and Whiteface Mountain from Route 86 east of Wilmington. Surprisingly, this sweeping panorama has not been designated as a regionally significant scenic vista by the Adirondack Park Agency. Consisting mainly of private land, the valley is one of the most biologically diverse sites in the Park. Future development could destroy its unique scenic and natural qualities.

The Adirondack Council wishes to express its deep gratitude to the Norcross Wildlife Foundation, Inc., which generously supported the creation and production of this publication.

# WINDOWS ON THE PARK

## Scenic Vistas of the Adirondacks

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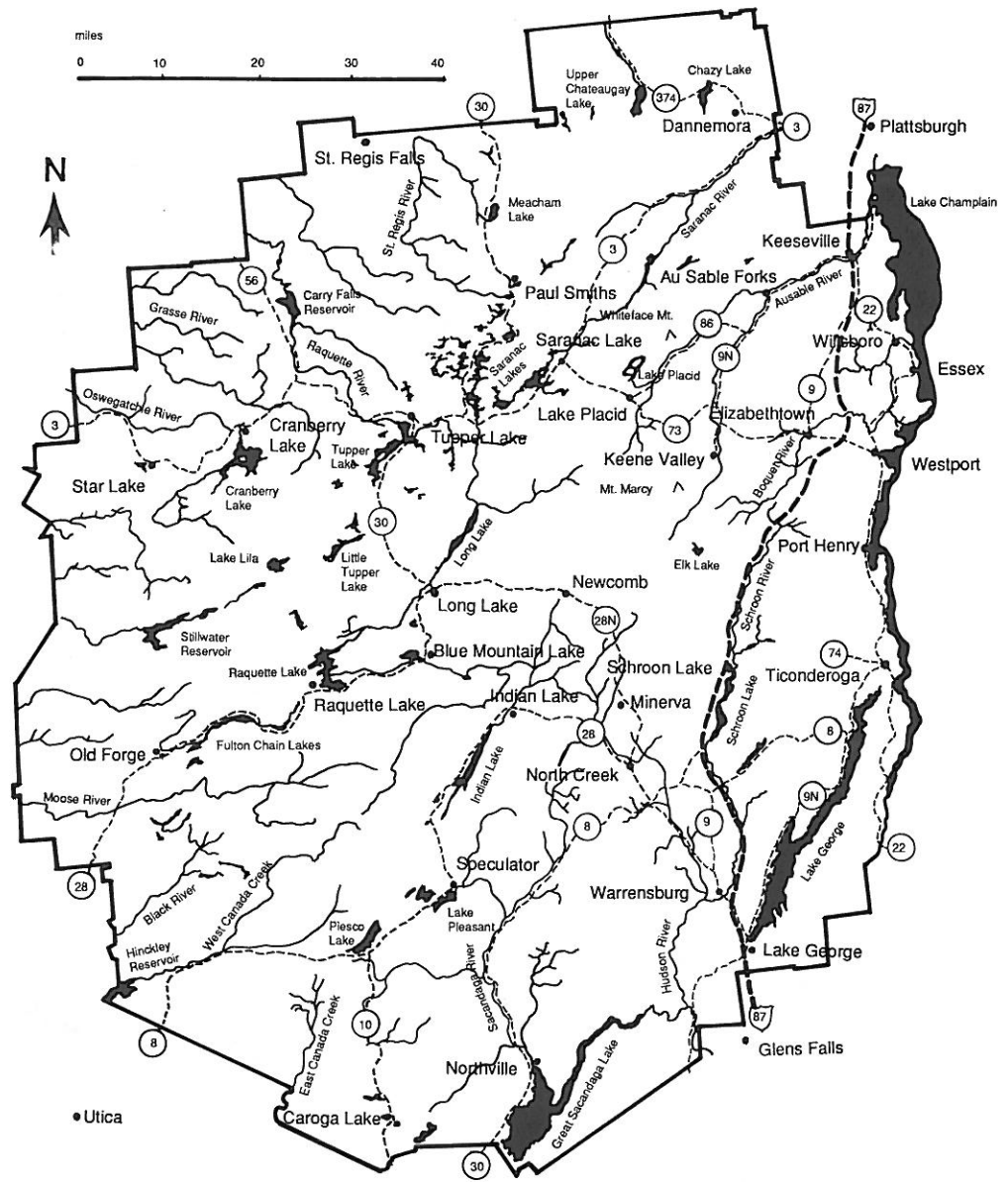
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The Adirondack Council  
1991



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ADIRONDACK PARK

Albany

Map by Sheri Amsel

## THE ADIRONDACK PARK

The Adirondack Park is the largest public park in the contiguous United States. It contains six million acres, covers one-fifth of New York State, and is equal in size to neighboring Vermont. Few people realize that the Adirondack Park is nearly three times the size of Yellowstone National Park.

Some 58 percent of the Adirondack Park is private land, devoted principally to forestry, agriculture and open-space recreation. The Park is home for 130,000 permanent and 210,000 seasonal residents, and hosts an estimated nine million visitors annually.

The remaining 42 percent of the Adirondack Park is publicly-owned Forest Preserve, protected as "forever wild" by the State constitution since 1895. One million acres of these public lands, representing one-sixth of the entire Park, is designated as Wilderness, where a wide range of non-motorized recreation may be enjoyed in an incomparable, natural setting. The majority of public land—more than 1.3 million acres—is classified as Wild Forest, where motorized uses are permitted on designated waters, roads and trails.

Plants and wildlife abound in the Adirondack Park, many of them found nowhere else in New York State. Uncut ancient forests cover tens of thousands of acres of public land. Ironically, much of the Park is more wild and natural today than a century ago, when irresponsible logging practices and forest fires ravaged much of the yet-unprotected Adirondack region. Someday, all native wildlife, including those extirpated in the last century, such as the wolf, cougar, lynx and moose, may live and breed here.

The western and southern Adirondacks are a gentle landscape of hills, lakes, ponds and streams. In the northeast are the High Peaks, 46 of them above 4,000 feet, eleven with alpine summits that rise above timberline.

The Adirondacks include the headwaters of five major drainage basins: Lake Champlain and the Hudson, Black, St.

Lawrence and Mohawk rivers. Within the Park are 2,800 lakes and ponds and more than 1,200 miles of rivers fed by an estimated 30,000 miles of brooks and streams.

Embodied in this and other Adirondack Council studies is a vision of an Adirondack Park that will serve as a global model for integrated land use and conservation. In the next century and beyond, the Adirondack Park must continue to offer vast areas of undisturbed open space, a sanctuary for native plant and animal species, and a natural haven for human beings in need of spiritual and physical refreshment. It must also provide for sustainable, resource-based local economies and for the protection of community character and countryside values.

Protecting the Park's scenic vistas, the windows by which its beauty and grandeur are revealed to all of us, is but one step in the Park protection process. Through continuing public education and advocacy for the protection of the Adirondack Park's natural character, the Adirondack Council hopes to advise public and private policy-makers on ways to safeguard this last remaining great expanse of open space in the eastern United States.

## OUR SCENIC HERITAGE

When viewed from a great height, the landscape of the Adirondack Park unfolds to the horizon, its vast forests punctuated by mountains and bejeweled with lakes and waterways. It is a land characterized by open space, where natural forces predominate over evidence of human endeavor.

Unfortunately, there are few ways we can gain such perspective, short of hiking to a remote summit or flying in an aircraft. Most of us, residents and visitors alike, gain our perception of the Park while traveling along some of the 5,500 miles of public roadways that link its settlements with the countryside and the cities beyond.

Forests line most of these corridors, and panoramic vistas are surprisingly few and far between. The Adirondack Park Agency has designated only 39 official vistas throughout the entire six-million-acre Park. Additions to this list can, and definitely should, be made. But the fact remains that scenic vistas in the Park are rare and they are extremely vulnerable to changes in land use or management. Placement of a single structure in the foreground, or use of highly reflective materials or obtrusive shapes further away, can severely degrade the scenic beauty of a vista.

Despite their importance, rarity, and vulnerability, vistas in the Adirondack Park receive scant protection. Incredibly, the fact that a building project lies smack in the middle of a vista has no bearing on whether a permit is required. Only when a project requires a permit for some other reason is a vista ever considered during the Adirondack Park Agency's review. Otherwise, it is simply a dot on a map.

The bulk of the land adjacent to State and interstate highways (89 percent) is privately owned. Any subdivision or building activity in certain narrow segments of these corridors requires a permit. But less than one-half of the private road frontage falls into this category.

Vistas typically encompass tens of square miles of land and as many different landowners. Publicly owned "forever wild" State Forest Preserve is normally a critical element in any scenic viewshed. In recognition of the fact that the beauty of the Preserve is part of our natural heritage, we share the cost of keeping it "forever beautiful" with our taxes. Thus, vistas are a form of commons, owned in part by all New Yorkers. Like any commons, however, they can be used for personal gain at the expense of the general public.

The scenic splendor of the Adirondack Park is diminished wherever a dwelling, sign, or utility line is sited without regard for its visual impact on the surrounding area. We can, and must, act soon to stop, and reverse, this trend.

Right: Lake Pleasant and the hills beyond, as seen from Lake Shore Road near Speculator. This viewshed is typical, in that it includes a mix of public and private holdings managed for various purposes and subject to differing land-use regulations. Commercial timber lands surround the State-owned Jessup River Wild Forest in the background. More than 30 individuals own shoreline within the vista, most of which is zoned for intense development. The scenic qualities of vistas such as this will remain in jeopardy until all development within their viewsheds conforms to a uniform set of performance standards and guidelines designed to minimize or eliminate adverse impacts.









## VANISHING FARMLANDS

Previous Page: Fields and hedgerows near Whallonsburg in the Champlain Valley Town of Essex. Privately owned farms and forests comprise a bucolic "working landscape" that extends to the hazy ramparts of the mountains in the distance. From left to right, the backdrop includes the Giant Mountain Wilderness, the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area and the Jay Mountain Wilderness.

Mainstay of the local economy for generations, dairy farming is slowly dying away. These lands are coming on the market and the choice parcels are being subdivided and sold for vacation homes and farmettes. Tragically, the cultural and scenic diversity of the Park is being lost in the process.

Seeking to conserve open space and to preserve the agricultural heritage of the area, a regional land trust has joined forces with a national conservation organization. Together, the Adirondack Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy have protected thousands of acres of Park lands, many of them in the Champlain Valley. Using a legal tool known as a conservation easement, they work with landowners to fashion agreements that limit future development of sensitive landscapes. When the State buys these easements, landowners receive a substantial payment for their promise not to subdivide and develop. As an added bonus, the State pays a share of the taxes for all time.

## ON THE BLOCK

Right: *Scenery for sale!* This view of Whiteface Mountain, and the McKenzie Mountain Wilderness, is one of many vistas imminently threatened with subdivision and development. Like so many of the scenic locations along Park roads, this spectacular panorama is not one of the 39 official vistas shown on the Adirondack Park Land Use and Development Plan Map. It lacks even the meager protection that would be afforded by such designation.

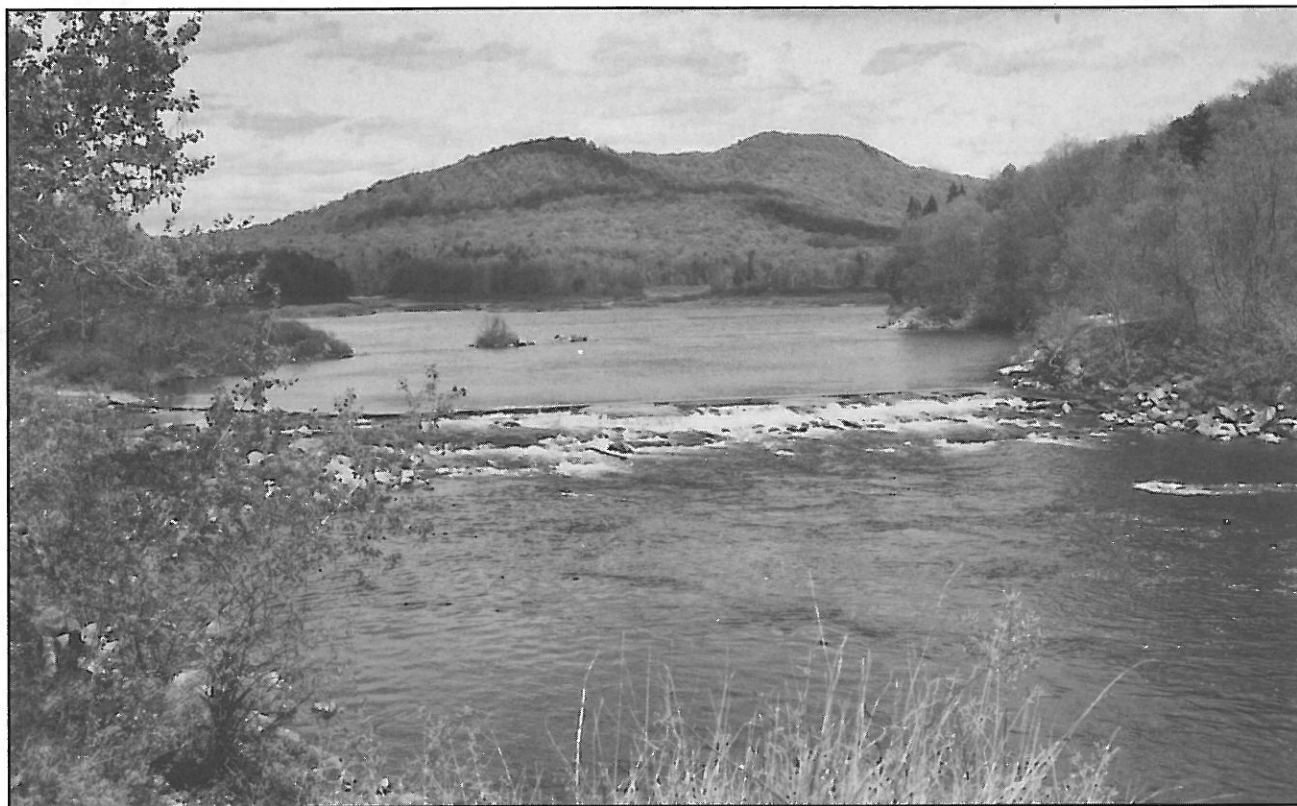


## SAVED

Looking upstream on West Canada Creek toward Fort Noble Mountain in the Town of Ohio. In 1987, the entire watershed consisted of Forest Preserve, except for the parcel in the foreground, which was offered for sale. Moving decisively to protect the vista, the Adirondack Land Trust purchased the land and then sold it to the State. Only three of the Park's 39 official vistas are fully protected from development.

When the State purchases land within the Adirondack Park, that land becomes part of the Forest Preserve and is protected as

“forever wild” by the State constitution. It can never be sold or leased, and its timber cannot be cut. Adding land to the Preserve is one way of protecting vistas, but it is seldom the method of choice. Most often, such land is purchased for other reasons. Conservation easements usually provide sufficient protection of scenic landscapes and allow the owner(s) to continue using the land for a number of purposes. Easements also allow management of a vista's foreground vegetation, so a situation won't arise where the public can't see the forest for the trees.



## TOO LATE?

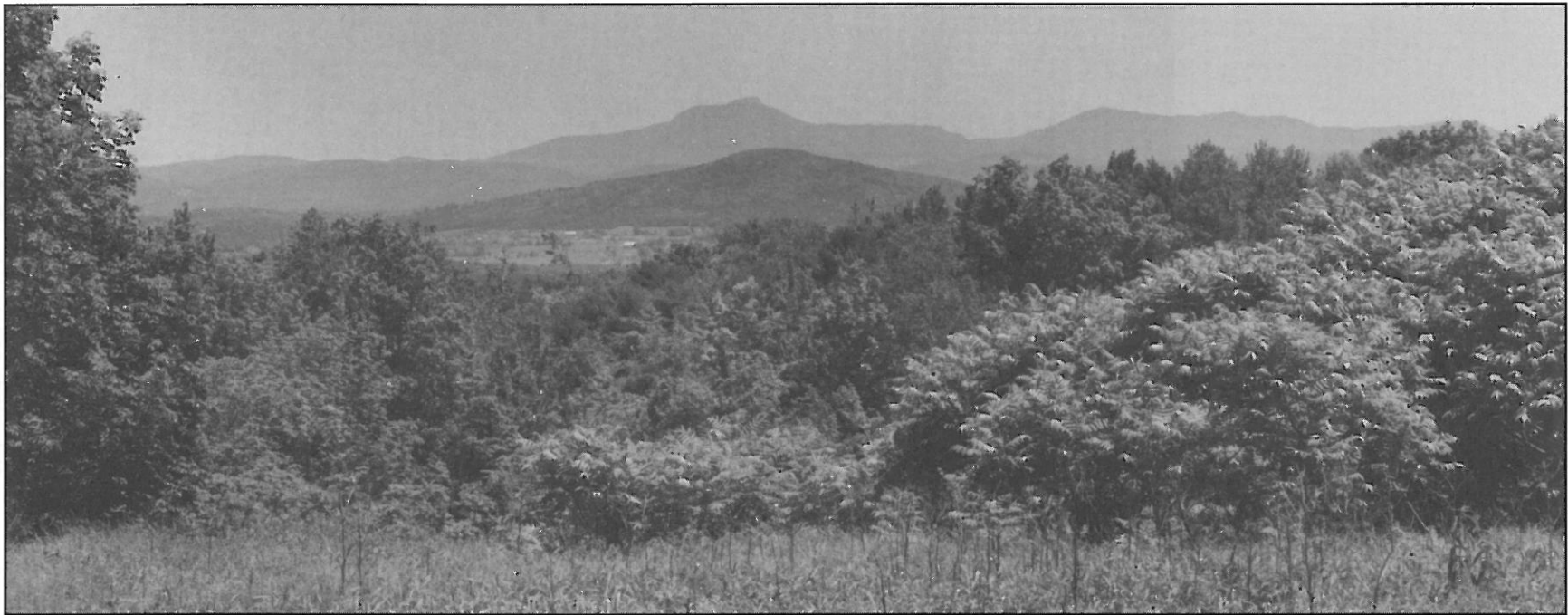
The Adirondack High Peaks can be seen in panoramic splendor from Route 86 outside Lake Placid. One of three gateway portals to the village, this magnificent vista was compromised by the construction of the 70-meter and 90-meter ski jumps for the 1980 Winter Olympics. Over 100 building lots, part of a much larger resort hotel and recreation complex, are planned around a new golf course in the foreground of the vista.



## FADING VIEWS

Below: The distinctive outline of Camel's Hump, in the Green Mountains of Vermont, dominates this vista from Lake Shore Road in the Town of Essex. A clone of staghorn sumac is spreading into the unmown field and soon will obliterate the view if left unchecked. Conservation easements can be crafted to ensure such views are kept open. Lacking these agreements, landowners should be encouraged to maintain them. Stewardship funds may be needed to pay for mowing and trimming in certain designated areas.

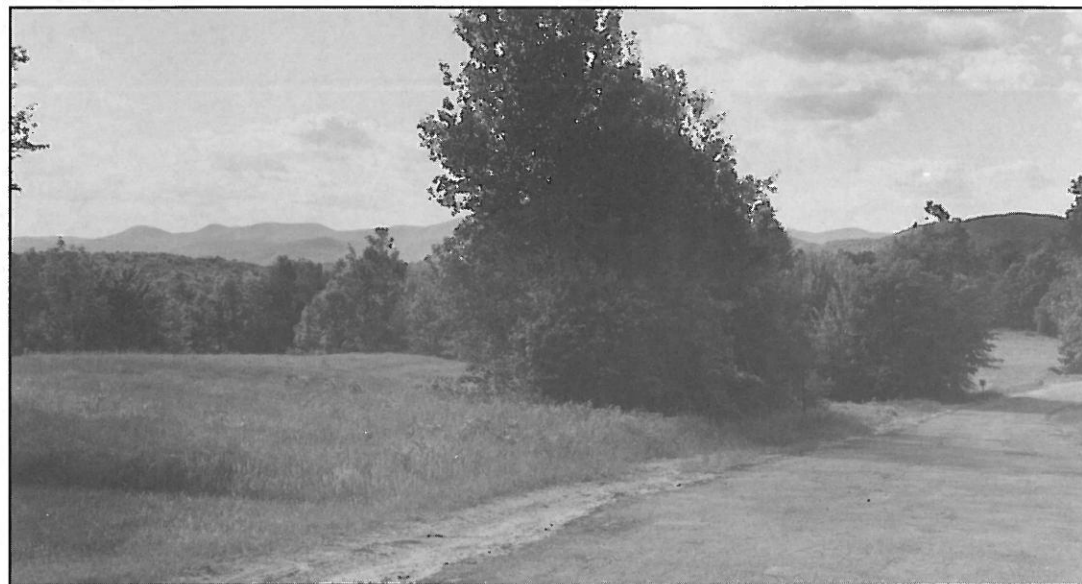
Right, Above: Trees have nearly obscured this view of the Siamese Ponds Wilderness from Route 28 in the Town of Indian Lake. The State constitution prohibits cutting trees on the Forest Preserve, but judicious trimming of branches along roadsides may be allowed in certain circumstances.





## PLANNING NEEDED

Right, Below: Intermittent views of fields, forests and mountains reward the traveler on Route 10 in the Town of Day. Wholesale cutting of this roadside vegetation would detract from the special quality of the vistas. Each vista in the Park should have its own management plan that takes such factors into account.



## LOCAL STEWARDSHIP

The mountainous southern flank of the High Peaks Wilderness rises above private timberlands, forming an inspiring backdrop for a town park in Newcomb.

Frequent mowing, associated with use of this park, ensures that the vista will remain open. Public ownership at the local level thus serves the needs of the community and visitors as well.

Local government ownership does not preclude timber cutting and other land-management techniques, which are prohibited on the State Forest Preserve.



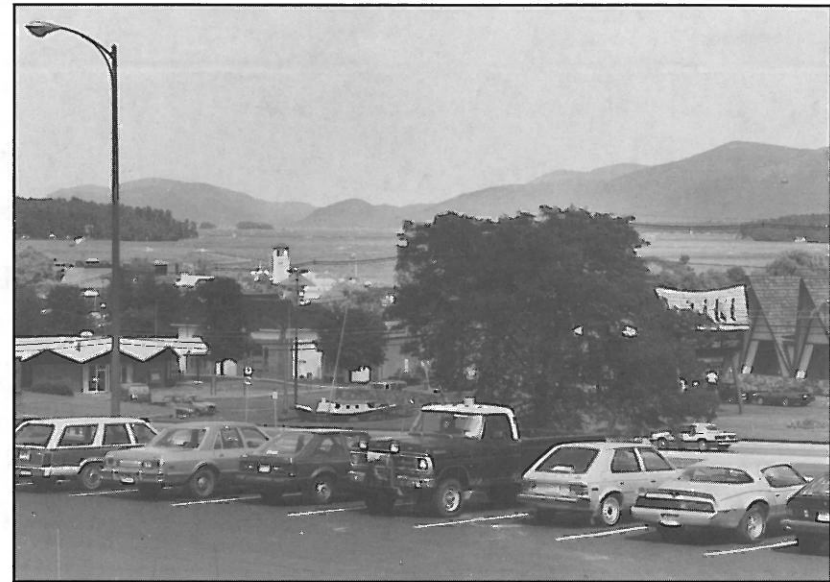




## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Right: Guardian of the western portal to Lake Placid, a giant Viking dominates the roadside clutter that obscures an otherwise spectacular view of Whiteface Mountain. There are two other entrances to the Olympic Village, each originally endowed with great scenic beauty. One is now marked by ski jumps that rise above the skyline for miles around, and the other is part of a massive development scheme. Communities must make hard choices about the types and locations of development they will allow along the entranceways that form the first impressions of all who come to stay or visit. Without such planning, they risk losing the special, park-like character of their community.

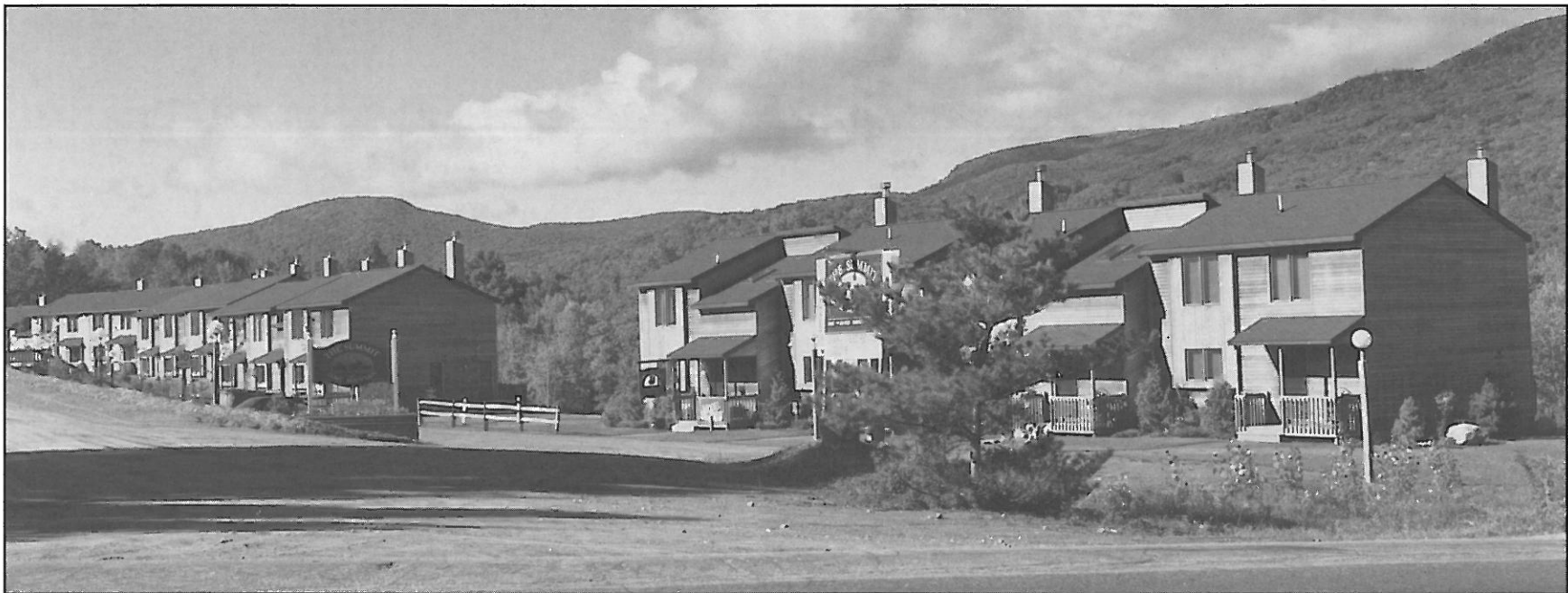
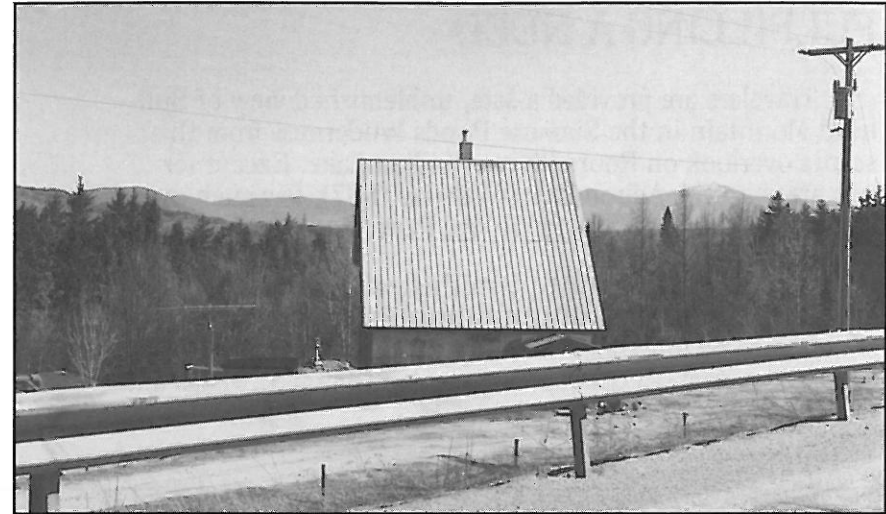
Below, Left and Right: Villages that lie at the periphery of the Adirondacks play a special role in greeting visitors to the Park. Some towns seem to be bent upon filling every open space with pavement, theme parks, and honky tonks of every description. Respect for visual amenities seems lost in the rush to provide urban amusements to tourists.



## WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Right: A glaring example of a single structure severely degrading the quality of a vista. All development along Park roadways should require a permit, either from the Adirondack Park Agency or from a local government. Permit conditions should conform to a set of guidelines and performance standards. Structures within a set distance from the road should be screened with vegetation or by using natural terrain features. Reflective surfaces should be minimized and utility lines screened or buried.

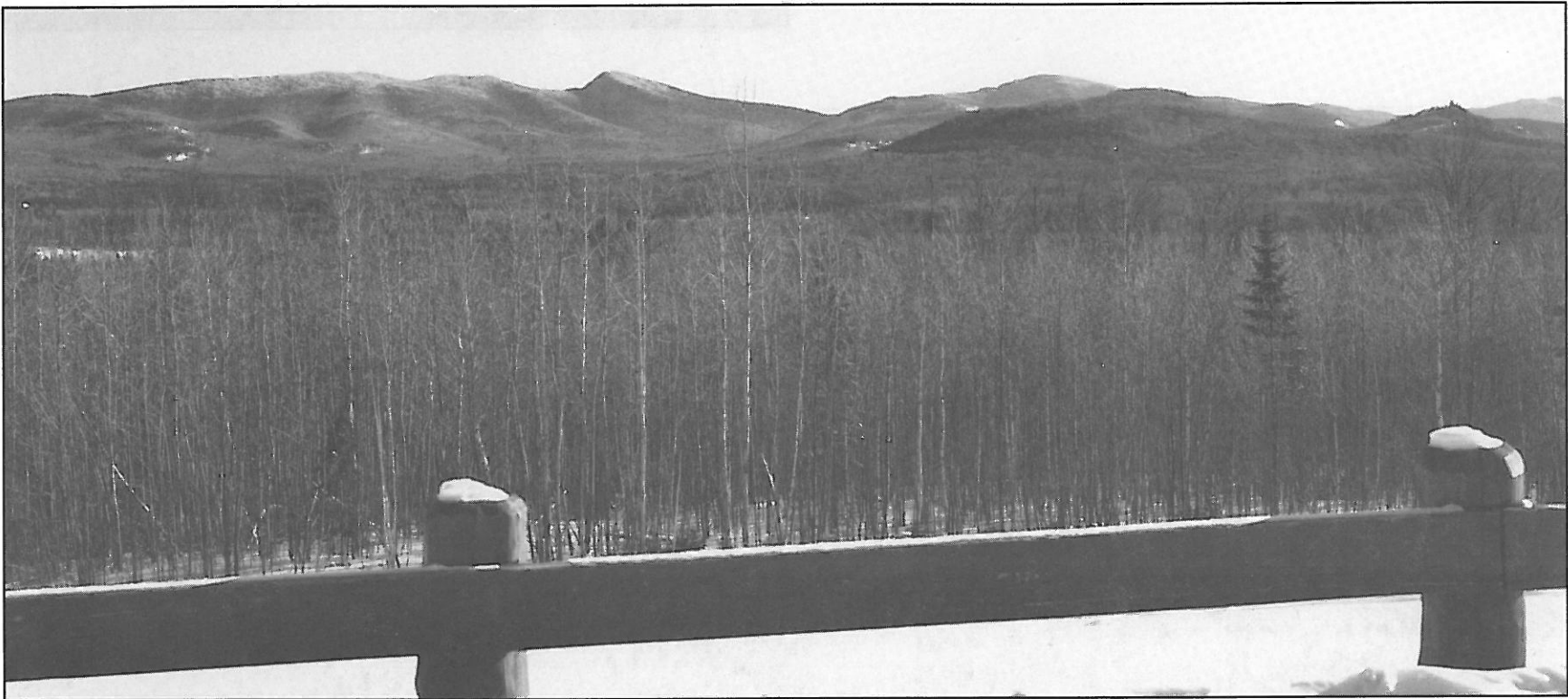
Below: Often, Adirondack communities have the power to shape the quality of their scenic environment. These condominiums in North Creek serve a questionable double duty of intruding upon both the entrance to the village and the vistas of public land, which only the condos' owners are able to view clearly.



## FULFILLING A NEED

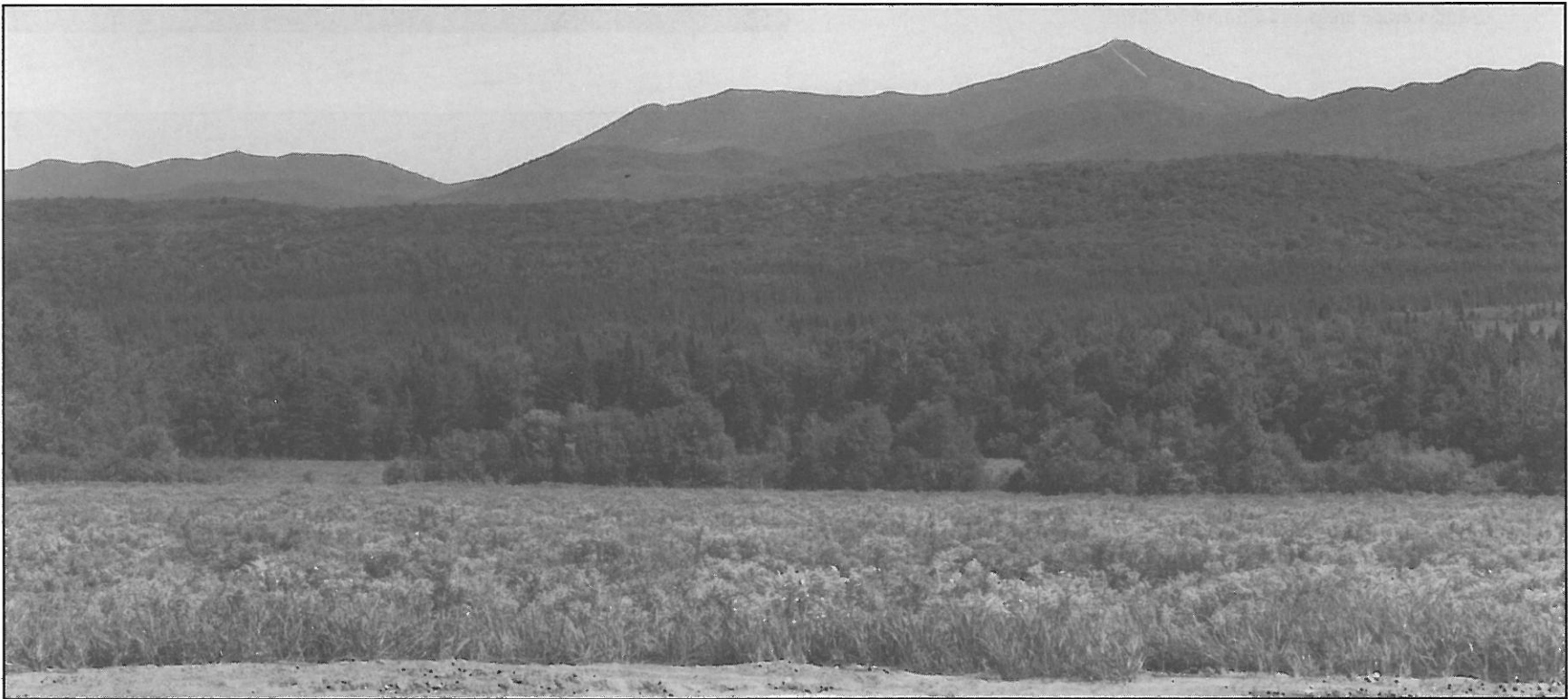
Travelers are provided a safe, unblemished view of Bullhead Mountain in the Siamese Ponds Wilderness from this scenic overlook on Route 30 near Indian Lake. Except for rest areas on the Adirondack Northway (I-87), few such overlooks have been constructed in the Park.

All overlooks should be furnished with information about the natural and cultural history of the area. They should also be integrated within a Park-wide interpretive overlook system—a comprehensive plan to protect vistas and explain their significance to travelers.



## NO, THANKS

Whiteface Mountain and the McKenzie Mountain Wilderness from Route 192, north of Saranac Lake. Although the State was willing to construct an overlook at this site, local residents voiced concerns about public use of the area, and the project was abandoned. Except for the foreground, the majority of the vista consists of State land.

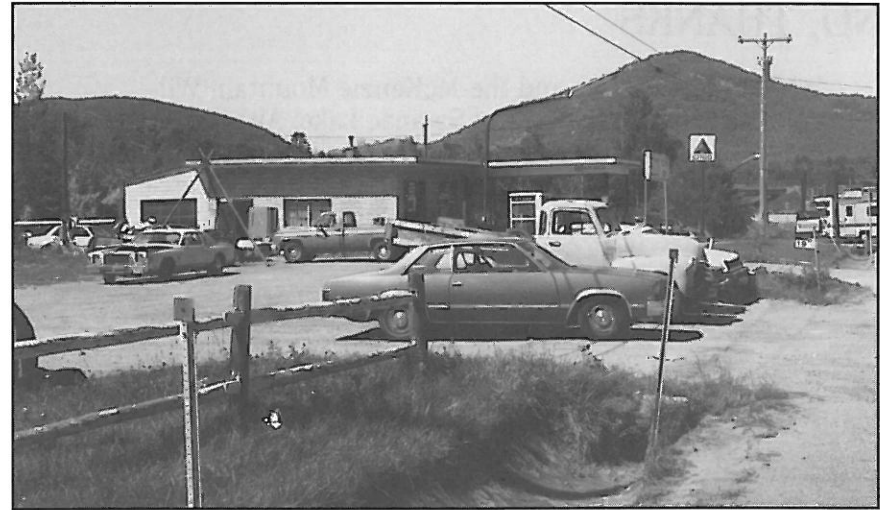


## CONFUSION AND CLUTTER

Right: Commercial development at Exit 31 of the Adirondack Northway. When the Northway was built in the late 1960's, the State purchased scenic easements in the immediate vicinity of several interchanges within the Park. This establishment was built just outside the protected zone. It highlights the need for a comprehensive plan to protect the scenic quality of the Park's highway corridors.

Below Left: Utility lines and poles clutter an otherwise unobstructed vista on Norman's Ridge near Bloomingdale. The State should adopt a policy of screening, or burying, utility lines in scenic highway corridors—at least in the vicinity of designated vistas.

Below Right: Sand and gravel pits, such as this one on Route 9 in North Hudson, should be screened from the highway, as should salt- and sand-storage areas and equipment sheds.



## A SCENIC ROADWAY SYSTEM

Scenic vistas are the windows through which most travelers see the Adirondack Park. As such, they are vital to the tourism-based economy and deserve special care and maintenance. But the fact remains that Adirondack vistas are quite rare and atypical. They are really part of a larger public transportation network that extends along more than 5,000 linear miles of rural roadside. Like the Wild, Scenic and Recreational River System set up by New York State to protect and manage river corridors, the Adirondack Park needs a scenic roadway system. To achieve lasting protection for the wild and scenic qualities of the Park's travel corridors, certain sections should receive special designation as scenic highways. A vigorous program of scenic easement

acquisition should focus upon the most vulnerable and critical portions of designated roads. All development along designated highways should conform to setbacks and screening regulations. Signage, both State and private, should be minimal and should contribute to a park-like atmosphere.

Below: The Boreas Highway sweeps west from North Hudson toward Newcomb, along which millions of tourists will travel on their way to the Adirondack Park Agency Visitor Interpretive Center on Rich Lake. In order to preserve the essence of the Adirondack experience—a wild, open landscape—it is essential for an Adirondack Park scenic highway plan to be drafted and adopted.



Windover Lake on Route 8 near Bakers Mills.





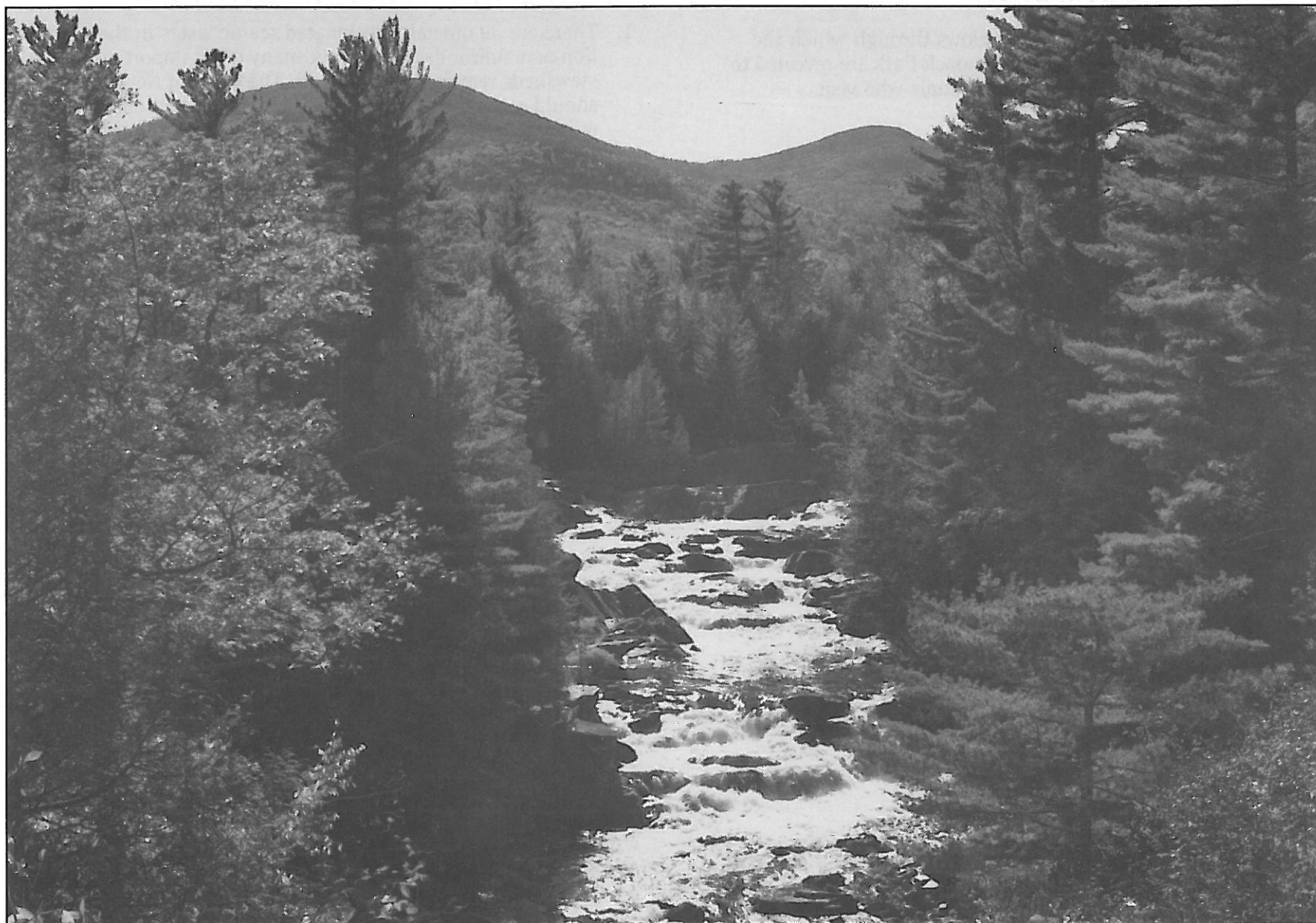
## POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. Scenic vistas are the natural windows through which the beauty and grandeur of the Adirondack Park are revealed to us all, including the nine million people who visit each year.
2. Most of the Park's vistas are owned by more than one individual.
3. State ownership of an Adirondack vista places it within the constitutionally protected Forest Preserve. Removal or destruction of trees that obstruct views on such land is prohibited.
4. One inappropriately designed or poorly placed structure can destroy a vista spanning tens of square miles.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There are 39 officially designated scenic vistas in the six-million-acre Adirondack Park, but many other important viewsheds remain unrecognized. The State of New York should expand its list of sites deserving protection, soliciting public input to help decide which new vistas should be included.
2. Official scenic vistas receive little protection from degradation. Legislation should be adopted to give vistas statutory protection from inappropriate development.
3. The State should develop a management plan for each vista to protect its integrity for all time.
4. The State should develop a comprehensive plan to protect the scenic beauty of road corridors throughout the Park, especially given the fact that eighty-nine percent of the land adjoining state and federal highways here is privately owned.
5. Public ownership at the local level, conservation easements, stewardship agreements with private landowners and stricter land-use controls are all potential vista-protection tools. The State should develop a program to work with local governments, land trusts and private landowners to facilitate voluntary protection strategies.
6. The Adirondack Park Agency Act should be amended so that all development along the Park's road corridors requires a permit which applies performance standards that protect scenic beauty.
7. The State should establish regulations which require that the configuration and placement of utility lines and signage comply with road-corridor-protection standards.
8. The State should develop a comprehensive Parkwide interpretive system, complete with explanatory signs and educational aids for all roadside overlooks.
9. All State-agency projects along the Park's road corridors should conform to the same standards set for private landowners.

West Branch of the Sacandaga River on Route 10 in Hamilton County.



# THE ADIRONDACK COUNCIL

Founded in 1975, the Adirondack Council is an active not-for-profit organization dedicated to protecting the natural and open-space character of the Adirondack Park through public education, interaction with government agencies and lawmakers, and legal action when necessary.

The Council receives moral and financial sustenance from its 18,000 individual members and from private foundations.

Individual memberships begin at \$25. Membership benefits include regular newsletters, special reports, and action alerts.

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