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EDITORIAL

Carbon Storage: A Defense of Wilderness

Ever since 1894, when delegates to a New York State Constitutional Convention voted to keep the Adirondack Forest Preserve “forever wild,” conservationists have come up with any number of arguments in defense of wilderness. Some have been utilitarian, some populist, some historical, some spiritual. Those arguments have always been necessary, because the opponents of maintaining the Forest Preserve as lands forever wild have been many, and at times powerful. In fact, one of the few valid reasons to oppose another constitutional convention is the political fragility of the state constitution’s Article XIV, the clause that prohibits the destruction of the Forest Preserve. The more astute politicians among the conservationists have always understood that it is the better part of prudence to avoid endorsing a single defense of wilderness, thereby retaining the support of proponents of all other possible arguments. In part because of that catholic perspective, the Adirondack Park has been able to support “a multiplicity of visions,” as Dr. Ross Whaley, the co-editor of “the Great Experiment in Conservation: Voices from the Adirondack park,” puts it. But new arguments in defense of wilderness can only buttress the cause, and here’s one that’s beginning to emerge: forests offset greenhouse gas emissions and thus play a valuable role in slowing climate change. In a 2008 issue of *BioScience*, the journal of the American Society of Biological Sciences, researchers quantified the amount of carbon that Midwestern forests keep out of the atmosphere. They concluded that forests could offset the greenhouse gas emissions of two thirds of nearby populations. While deciduous forests are very good at storing carbon, boreal forests are even better, says John Sheehan of the Adirondack Council, and, he adds, the Adirondack Park contains approximately 800,000 acres of those boreal forests. That’s reason enough for New Yorkers to support the preservation of even more land, if not by new York State, than by conservancies and land trusts. But if the Adirondack Park has value as carbon storage, we asked Sheehan, could a price be attached to that value? Could the Adirondack Park, for instance, be awarded pollution credits that could be sold for the economic benefit of its residents? Here’s Sheehan’s response: “we are working with a few people right now to see what value could be placed on the global ecological benefits of lands on which we know the trees will continue to grow for centuries to come, that is to say, in the Forest Preserve and in wilderness lands on which New York State holds easements.” As to whether the Adirondack Park could be awarded credits for storing carbon that would otherwise be sent into the atmosphere, Sheehan said, that’s conceivable. “We think we can seek and win federal credit for those Adirondack communities as part of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, or in a carbon trading program adopted by congress.” While our thought was that any funds derived from the sale of credits should somehow be apportioned among local governments to offset property taxes or to create jobs, Sheehan said, “We think the state should direct the money it receives into the Environmental Protection Fund, and the communities could use the money for planning or for grants to residents and businesses for energy conservation.” But however the funds would be used, local governments might now have some financial incentive to support (or at least not oppose too loudly) the preservation of the Adirondacks. Of greater importance, understanding the role that the Adirondack Park plays in slowing climate change can only

deepen our appreciation of these woods – and of those who fought to make and keep them forever wild.