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Guest Commentary  
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## Would snowmobiles be removed along with the tracks?

By Phil Gallos

Back in the 1980s, a group of men working for the Adirondack Council - Dick Beamish, Gary Randorf and George Davis - began a campaign to revive Bob Marshall's 1930s vision of a huge wilderness area in the western Adirondacks. Davis "mapped it out and put together a formal plan" while Beamish and Randorf "promoted it," according to Council spokesman John Sheehan.

Called the Bob Marshall Great Wilderness, "The Bob," as it was nicknamed, would be a 408,000-acre super-wilderness encompassing almost everything south of New York State Route 3, west of Route 30, north of Route 28 and extending west almost to the Blue Line. It would consolidate existing wilderness areas and other state lands, necessitate the purchase of large tracts of private land and, where outright purchase was not feasible, require the negotiation of easements restricting development rights to preserve wilderness values.

In 1993, "The Bob" was incorporated into the New York State Open Space Conservation Plan. Today, much of what Beamish, Randorf and Davis planned and promoted has been achieved. Two new wilderness areas have been added. Pre-existing wilderness has been expanded. Vast private holdings are protected from development by easements, and at least one more large private tract is scheduled to be absorbed into the Forest Preserve during the next decade.

As the largest "roadless" area in the eastern United States north of the Everglades, "The Bob," now temporarily renamed the Bob Marshall Wild Lands Complex, is considered the last best hope in the Adirondacks for the reintroduction of the wolf and the cougar. "An Ark in the forest," author Michael DiNunzio called it in a 1992 report to the Council.

There's just one problem. Call it an irritation, if you will. The Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor - a unique and vulnerable passageway used by countless snowmobilers and the occasional railroad train - runs right through the heart of "The Bob."

Although efforts are being made to piece together an alternative snowmobile route paralleling routes 28 and 30, the Remsen-Lake Placid corridor remains the only continuous, east-west, cross-Park snowmobile route, considered a vital link in the Adirondack snowmobile trail network. Furthermore, current snowmobile trails are just about at their cap of 848 miles on state Forest Preserve land. (Snowmobiles are allowed on "wild forest," a less restrictive Forest Preserve classification than "wilderness.") If snowmobilers were to lose use of the corridor through "The Bob," that change would not free up more miles to be used elsewhere because the corridor miles "don't count," according to Sheehan. The corridor miles are not Forest Preserve miles - at least not yet.

"Adirondack Council's understanding is that, if the rails are removed, the corridor will revert to Forest Preserve," Sheehan says, acknowledging that the interim step of revision of the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor Management Plan would have to occur first. That management plan, however, would have to be revised to allow removal of the tracks in the first place.

It is just such a revision of the management plan that Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates is seeking for the purpose of removing the rails from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake to make way for a bike path and a few more weeks of snowmobiling. This is an enormously risky move for anyone interested in cross-Park snowmobile travel. The plan is one plan, and the corridor is one corridor. An individual or group cannot selectively open a section of the plan to revise it to suit their needs for a particular segment of the corridor and keep the rest untouched. The revision process would involve the entire corridor, and it would be open to all parties with an interest in the corridor, according to DOT's Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor manager, Dawn Klemm.

If the tracks were to be pulled up through the Tri-Lakes section, there is essentially no justification for the rest to remain in place all the way back to Big Moose. Powerful voices will argue for removal. Then the same voices will argue for reversion to Forest Preserve. This is not an argument that will happen merely on a local scale. This will be an issue of national interest to a broad spectrum of environmental groups, from Defenders of Wildlife (who want to reintroduce wolves) to the Sierra Club (who had their own vision for this area - the Great Oswegatchie Wilderness). They and many other influential organizations will bring enormous pressure to bear on decision makers to assure that the corridor becomes part of the Forest Preserve. In "The Bob," that means wilderness, and wilderness means no bicycles and no snowmobiles.

A battle between recreationists and environmentalists, in the event that the tracks are removed, was anticipated by the corridor management plan. It is a battle that the recreationists are likely to lose. The cyclists and the snowmobilers will be outspent, out-lobbied and out-litigated by national organizations with very deep advocacy experience and even deeper pockets.

The Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor will become a footpath from Horseshoe Lake to Beaver River. "The Bob" will be rid of a 25-mile long irritation. Protectors of "The Bob" can reflect on a job well done. And those snowmobilers who have been using and enjoying this resource for decades will truly be left with a "trail to nowhere."

(Attempts to contact Dick Beamish regarding this article were unsuccessful.)

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Phil Gallos opposes rail removal. He favors wolf and cougar reintroduction. He has never ridden a snowmobile, and he has no affiliation with the Adirondack Scenic Railroad. He lives in Saranac Lake.