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BLOG ENTRY

Remembering Anne LaBastille's Environmental Record

BY JOHN WARREN

Author, environmentalist, photographer and former longtime Adirondack Park Agency commissioner Anne LaBastille died in Plattsburgh on Friday, July 1st; she was 75.

LaBastille was an outspoken proponent of environmental conservation whose book *Woodswoman* reached a national audience and served as inspiration for legions of women interested in the outdoors. At the same time she was a controversial Adirondack figure who served as Adirondack Park Agency (APA) commissioner from 1975 to 1993, a tenure that showed her to be a tenacious defender of the wild character of the Adirondack Park.

Born in Montclair, NJ on Nov. 20, 1935, she attended Cornell University and received a B.S. in Conservation of Natural Resources in 1955, long before environmentalism began to emerge as a force for natural resource protection. She left Cornell to attend graduate school at Colorado State University where she received an M.S. in Wildlife Management in 1961. Her Masters Thesis was *An Ecological Analysis of Mule Deer Winter Range, Cache la Poudre Canyon, Colorado*.

As the modern environmental movement began to take shape following the publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1967, LaBastille was already immersed in ornithology and wildlife ecology. During the 1960s her field work produced a number of papers on Guatemalan birds and fish including the Atitlán Grebe (*Podilymbus gigas*), also known as Giant Pied-billed Grebe or Poc. The flightless upland water bird began to decline precipitously following the introduction of invasive large and smallmouth bass into its home waters of Lake Atitlán, Guatemala in the late 1950s. LaBastille's "Recent census and observations of the Giant Pied-billed Grebe" (published with C.V. Bowes in 1962) set her on a 25-year project that tracked the decline and eventual extinction of the Poc.

LaBastille's thesis "The life history, ecology and management of the Giant Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus gigas*), Lake Atitlán, Guatemala" was accepted in 1969, the year she received a doctorate degree in Wildlife Ecology from Cornell University. She helped establish a refuge for the Poc in 1966 (the first national wildlife refuge in Guatemala) and while their numbers rose through the early 1970s they were reduced to only 32 by 1983. The last two birds were seen in 1989. LaBastille's *Mama Poc* (1990) recounted her experience with the Giant Pied-billed Grebe and its extinction. Her first book, *Bird Kingdom of the Mayas*, was published in 1967.

In 1974 she helped build her own small cabin at the northeast end of Twitchell Lake, near Big Moose Lake. While her academic work in the 1970s focused on conservation in South and Central America, particularly Quetzals and Giant Pied-billed Grebes, LaBastille wrote a series of children's books about wildlife for the National Wildlife Federation and Adirondack related

works for a general audience. She had three pieces in *Adirondack Life* in 1972, including "Canachagala and the Erie Canal," "The Adirondack Museum" and "Canoeing through time: The Eckford Chain." She continued to contribute regularly to *Adirondack Life* and other publications for the next several years, most notably "The endangered loon" and "Across the Adirondacks" for *Backpacker Magazine* in 1977.

LaBastille was part of the Environmental Protection Agency's DOCUMENTERICA Project which hired freelance photographers to document environmental problems, EPA activities, and outdoor recreation. The National Archives has digitized and placed online 370 of her photographs.

Her autobiographical sixth book, *Woodswoman*, in which she relates her Adirondack experiences in a back-to-the-land Thoreau style, was published in 1976. It drew some critical acclaim, but more enduring was the envy and respect of followers of her adventures in the woods and on the waters. Subsequent volumes included *Beyond Black Bear Lake* (1987) and *Woodswoman III* (1997). Her most recent book was *Woodswoman IIII*, published in 2003 by her own West of the Wind Publications of Wesport.

LaBastille wrote in *Woodswoman* that she came to the Adirondacks to "sit in my cabin as in a cocoon, sheltered by the swaying spruces from the outside world." In an obituary this morning, long time Adirondack guide and outdoors writer Joe Hackett described LaBastille:

"Following the publication [of *Woodswoman*], LaBastille became an instant role model for thousands of young women all across the country. Her story offered evidence that a lonely life in the forest can foster great confidence.

"Her story proved to be an inspiration for a generation of female outdoor enthusiasts, and it empowered them to be more independent and self-reliant in their enjoyment of the outdoors.

"In the process of paddling, hiking and camping throughout the Adirondacks, she became an icon of the mountains she wandered. Undoubtedly she cultivated her image, and it didn't hurt matters that she had blonde hair, a fit figure, a bright smile and a tangible sense of independence. She exuded an air of confidence, and whether she was walking into a diner or paddling across a pond, her presence turned heads. She recognized it and enjoyed it."

LaBastille received her first (an interim) appointment to the Adirondack Park Agency in 1975 during a time when, as writer David Helvarg has noted, "one of the most militant Property Rights movements in the United States... escalated from protests to punches to vandalism and an organized campaign of terror involving death threats, arson, and gunfire...". LaBastille became a prominent target.

On August 7, 1992, during the debate over the findings of the Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century, LaBastille's barns at her home in Wadhams were destroyed in a fire she believed was an act of arson by residents opposed to the APA (the Adirondack Council's offices were vandalized on several occasions around the same time).

"I'm a woman alone, so I'm a great target" she said at the time, "What's happening in the Adirondacks reminds me a lot of the death squad stuff in Central America [where the game warden she worked with was murdered]." Although she claimed at the time that she was doing so out of the demands of her career, she stopped regularly attending APA meetings and resigned the following year.

"Anne became a symbol to these people," former APA Director Bob Glennon (the man who captured arsonist Brian Gale in the act of torching an APA building in 1976) later remembered. "They'd point to her as a world conservationist and say she didn't represent the Adirondacks' point of view, meaning theirs."

During her tenure at the APA, LaBastille's predicted many of the issues that would come to the fore in later decades. She argued against the proliferation of towers as early as 1976 [pdf], even opposing the location of the 1980 Olympic ski jumps [pdf]. Her work in Guatemala influenced her early warnings about the endangered loon (which she wrote about for Adirondack Life in 1977) and the dangers of invasive species such as Coho salmon [pdf]. In 1982, she voiced concerns about building an Adirondack economy around prisons [pdf].

LaBastille took an early interest in the impact of acid rain on the Adirondacks and wrote "Death from the Sky" for Outdoor Life in 1979, the first of a series of articles she wrote about the problem for popular audiences in National Geographic, Garden Journal, Sierra, and other publications. Her work contributed to the greater awareness of the problem which precipitated the 1980 Acid Deposition Act. The law established a 10-year US government research program that produced with first assessment of acid rain in the United States in 1991. LaBastille's Beyond Black Bear Lake is considered one of the first accounts of the impacts of acid rain written for a popular audience.

LaBastille was the first woman awarded The Explorers Club Citation of Merit in 1984 and the Outdoor Writers Association of America's Jade of Chiefs Award in 1988. In 1990 she received honorary doctorates from Ripon College, Wisconsin and the State University of New York at Albany. She was given the Society of Woman Geographers Gold Medal in 1993 and the following year the Roger Tory Peterson Award for National Nature Educator. In 2008 she received the Howard Zahniser Adirondack Award given by the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks and also the the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Adirondack Center for Writing.

In the late 1990s LaBastille began spending less time at her lakeside cabin, and more time at her home in Wadhams near Westport. In 2008 the Almanack reported that she had become too ill to remain at home and her pets were put for adoption. Adirondack Council Conservation Director John Davis later confirmed that "Dear friend and Park champion for decades, Anne LaBastille is for the first time in memory missing a summer at her beloved cabin north of here, due to health concerns."

Photos: Anne LaBastille with her constant companions at her Twitchell Lake log cabin in 2004 (Courtesy Cornell University); "Rain and Mist on Twichell Lake" (Anne LaBastille, EPA Photo); Souvenir Village Old Forge c 1973 (Anne LaBastille, EPA Photo).