

New State Lands - The Long Road To Boreas Ponds

by Phil Brown

Boreas Ponds lives up to expectations, but getting there is not easy, even by car. It would be much harder if the state decides to close the seven-and-a-half mile dirt road that leads to the mile-long lake, which affords stupendous views of the High Peaks.

This Sunday I visited Boreas Ponds for the first time as part of the band of reporters accompanying Governor Andrew Cuomo and other state officials. Boreas Ponds is not open to the public now, but it will be sometime in the next five years.

The state intends to buy Boreas Ponds and the surrounding timberlands—some twenty-two thousand acres in all—from the Nature Conservancy sometime in the coming years. All told, the state will buy sixty-nine thousand acres from the conservancy, nearly all of it former Finch Pruyn land.

Environmentalists want to see the Boreas Ponds tract added to the High Peaks Wilderness, but that raises questions about access. Roads are not allowed in Wilderness Areas, so if Boreas Ponds does become part of the High Peaks Wilderness, some environmentalists might argue that the road should be closed. However, there is a way around the regulations: the state could classify the tract as Wilderness but leave the road open as a Primitive Corridor. Another option would be to classify part of the tract Wild Forest, a designation that allows roads.

So Boreas Ponds has two possible futures. In one scenario, it becomes a remote backcountry lake that only those willing and able to hike seven-and-a-half miles will ever see. Most likely, only die-hard paddlers would carry or wheel canoes there.

There is a certain appeal to this scenario. Visitors would be more apt to find solitude (in addition to a campsite), and the remoteness would add to the wild splendor of the lake.

But state Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joe Martens told Sunday's gathering that the state wants to make Boreas Ponds accessible to everyone, not just the fit and hardy. That suggests that the state will keep the road open. In an interview afterward, however, Martens said no decisions have been made about the road or land classifications.

A compromise would be to close only part of the road. This would keep Boreas Ponds somewhat secluded but shorten the hike in to something more reasonable.

I'm told that one idea is to allow people to drive as far as LeBierre Flow, a still water on the Boreas River. From here paddlers could canoe up the flow and portage along the river to Boreas Ponds. Hikers would reach the ponds by walking along the closed section of road.

This option would require keeping open more than five miles of road.

Neil Woodworth, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club, has said he'd like to see the road to Boreas Ponds kept open to provide access to paddlers. Other environmentalists are less receptive to this idea.

"There should be no driving to the ponds or parking at the ponds," David Gibson of Adirondack Wild said this morning.

However, Gibson said he might support keeping some of the road open if doing so won't harm natural resources. "I'm not prepared to say how far," he said.

John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council, said the council would like to see the whole tract classified as Wilderness, but the environmental group will listen to arguments that the road should be kept open.

"We'd be willing to talk about these things, but we are going to push for as much Wilderness as possible, and we'd have to be persuaded that there is a conservation reason for doing this, not just a recreational reason," Sheehan said.

On Sunday, a paddle around Boreas Ponds revealed knockout views of mountains. Rising nearby were the North River Mountains to the west and Boreas Mountain to the east. A bit farther away, to the north, were the High Peaks: we were bowled over by a vista that included Marcy, Skylight, Haystack, and Gothics, with its bedrock slopes glinting in the sun.

However you get to Boreas Ponds, views like these will make the trip worthwhile.