

Daily Reporter
February 4th, 2013

State opening to the public thousands of acres along the Hudson River this spring

By MICHAEL VIRTANEN Associated Press

ALBANY, New York — Before the upper Hudson River roars down through the Adirondacks in bone-jarring whitewater, it flows south from Newcomb for 10 miles through deep forests in nearly tranquil water interspersed with stretches of mild and moderate rapids.

In stages this spring and fall, the state plans to open to the public most of the wilderness along that stretch. Expected to follow are tracts the state is buying at the confluence of the Indian River and another downstream along the Hudson River Gorge.

"On the upper stretches, certainly, it feels very wild. You really do begin to lose yourself," said Michael Carr, executive director of the Adirondack Chapter of the Nature Conservancy. "The rapids are not severe and then, big stretches of beautiful, flat water."

The tracts among 18,294 acres that the conservancy sold to the state in December for almost \$12.4 million. It was the first step in a five-year state program to buy 69,000 acres for \$48 million, mainly former Finch, Pruyn and Co. timberlands in the towns of Minerva and Newcomb. The parcels include 11 lakes and ponds, nearly 15 miles of Hudson River shoreline and 8.5 miles of Cedar River shoreline.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation wants to put a wilderness designation on the river and a swath of forest on both sides, allowing for two nearby parking areas for canoeists who want to get off the water and drive away without having to carry their boats far. One would go near the confluence of the Goodnow River, 5.4 miles south of Newcomb and one-quarter mile from the Hudson. The other would be near the Indian River confluence, about 10 miles south of Newcomb.

The exit points are important because paddlers who go past them will find themselves traveling in a wild and treacherous area of the Gorge, according to the DEC. It will also provide access for a popular extreme kayaking route on the Indian River bubble, a swell of water controlled by dam releases.

Now under consideration by the Adirondack Park Agency, which is responsible for regulation inside the 6 million-acre park, the state proposal includes continuing to restrict access for float planes and vehicles into more than 10,000 adjoining acres that would be classified as wild forest. That includes the Essex Chain of Lakes.

Environmentalists see trade-offs between wilderness protection and recreational convenience that they say is less important. They want tighter restrictions.

"This is one of the most fragile and biologically rich sites that the state has acquired in the history of the Adirondack Park, and our concern is that automobile access into the center of it will cause a great deal of damage that is avoidable," said John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council. That includes pollution, possible crowds and the prospect for bringing in invasive species, he said.

Sheehan said nearby hamlets of Newcomb and Indian Lake and businesses could benefit more if parking were closer to them and farther from the backcountry, making visitors likelier to stay overnight than drive home after day trips. The land has been under lease by hunting clubs with only about 200 members altogether for the past century, so the impact from past use of motors is limited, he said.

Another tract the DEC plans to open this spring lies south of the Cedar River. A spit of public land at the confluence of the Hudson and Cedar has been used for overnight camping by whitewater rafters and kayakers on the Hudson for decades. The new state parcels will open more land for hiking and camping.

The APA's draft recommendations and environmental impact report to its board are likely in early spring followed by public hearings, spokesman Keith McKeever said. The APA board could consider revised recommendations in late summer or early fall, with any approved package forwarded to Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who has the final say.