

Adirondack Vision

Delivering on the Promise of the Adirondack Park

Vast and seemingly eternal, the Adirondacks may create the illusion of unchanging permanence. The peaks, after all, don't wander about the landscape. Remote natural areas are seen in satellite photos as dark expanses, sanctuaries from manmade sprawl. The region can appear to be beyond the reach of churning human affairs.

But these impressions are wrong. Anybody who has studied or lived through the controversies that swirled through the Park over the decades knows full well that the region has not kept social and political turmoil at bay.

Even the New York State Constitution's promise to keep the publicly owned Forest Preserve "forever wild," has seldom been free from challenges.

While the constitutional safeguards remain in place, the values that underlie the people's commitment to protection have evolved with time. So too, the Park's very nature, whether in wild reaches or busy villages, is continually changing.

The Adirondack Council's *Adirondack Vision Project* grows out of the need to understand and influence the forces of change within the Park. We bring long-range strategic thinking about the future of the Park, even as we remember the historical context of all the decisions that policymakers grapple with.

We can't step outside time any more than the Park can remain immune from change. But we can look beyond the daily issues that drive so much passion and energy among those who care about the Adirondacks. We will articulate values and principles that should hold true decades into the future.

An essential part of this project is to rely on those values to map out a course for the Park, beginning now, that will bring this VISION to life by the year 2050. Only long-range thinking founded on sound science can ensure the continued success of the Park. And with environmental and cultural threats already at our door the time is now.

The VISION project will turn to the best scientific knowledge available to explore subjects within three broad themes:

1. Preservation of the Natural Communities
2. Fostering Vibrant Human Communities
3. Managing the Park

Within each of these themes the VISION project will address compelling issues ranging from climate change to clean water and air; from working forests to cultural diversity; from governmental reform to strategies for land stewardship. The focus will be on the impact of these issues on the Adirondacks. Where appropriate, lessons from other regions and authorities around the world will inform and guide the VISION product.

The original 2020 Vision

The Adirondack Council took important steps through the work of George Davis to create a long-term strategy for the Adirondack Park thirty years ago when it began publication of *2020 VISION: Fulfilling the Promise of the Adirondack Park*. Many of the goals the organization articulated at that time have become reality. This is a testament not only to the insight of the proposals but also to the invaluable collaboration among preservationists and scientists at the Council, at other partner institutions and within state agencies. The experts who knew the areas of greatest biological richness largely worked for the state. It was imperative that the Council work closely with these experts.

The first volume of *2020 VISION, Biological Diversity: Saving All the Pieces*, was published in 1988. It described more than 200,000 acres of privately owned lands of "extraordinary biological value." The 64-page technical document reported the results of meticulous biological surveys of the Adirondacks supported by maps and photographs. Building on this scientific foundation, the publication proposed priority lands for the state to acquire for the Forest Preserve, placing these ecological treasures under the Forever Wild protection of the New York State Constitution.

The second volume, *Completing the Adirondack Wilderness System*, published in 1990, called on the state to enlarge the portion of the Preserve classified as Wilderness, the most pristine category of state-owned Adirondack parkland. About one third of the new Wilderness would come through reclassification of existing Forest Preserve and the remainder would come through key land acquisitions.

The Adirondack State Land Master plan says: "A wilderness area, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man--where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Recognizing that such an ambitious expansion of Wilderness would take time, the report suggested using conservation easements where necessary. These contracts between private landowners and the state would safeguard prospective wilderness until purchases could be completed.

The report envisions a decades-long process but also emphasizes a sense of urgency.

"Time is of the essence," the report reads. "Once wilderness is subdivided and developed, it is wilderness no more."

Also in 1990, the Council published Volume 3, *Recognizing the Recreational Potential of Adirondack Wild Forests*. This work calls attention to the importance of Wild Forest. These Forest Preserve lands allow a greater variety of recreational use, including motorized activities, and more facilities than Wilderness. Such lands give the public greater access to wild nature and relieve Wilderness from the pressure of more intense use. The report identifies 255,000 acres of private land the Council felt the state should purchase to fill out the Wild Forest system.

Finally, in 2007, Volume 4, *Private Land Stewardship*, explores the important role that conservation easements and other forms of preservation have come to play in guaranteeing the ecological health and wild character of the Park. It emphasizes that "protection" doesn't have to equate to "public ownership."

This represents a major shift that was happening in the field of conservation and a tremendous change from the thinking that informed Volumes 1-3. Today, not only do we

recognize that private holdings play an important role in conservation, we also acknowledge that, in certain instances, private owners are better able to protect their lands than the state.

One of the first tasks of the current *Adirondack VISION Project* was to assess how much of the 2020 Vision has become reality - and the results are stirring. Working with the New York State Natural Heritage Program, **we found that more than half of the land recommended for protection as biological reserves, motor-free wilderness and non-wilderness lands have been protected.**

These protections include purchase by the state, conservation easements held by the state, individuals or organizations, and other, less permanent forms of protection. Overall, 492,300 acres out of 907,000 acres the Council recommended now have good stewardship and protection against fragmentation and development. This accomplishment grew from the successful collaboration of property owners, state agencies and non-profits, notably the Adirondack Chapter of The Nature Conservancy.

Building on those accomplishments, the current Adirondack VISION need not concentrate as much on state acquisition - though there are still lands identified in *2020 VISION* whose purchase or other form of permanent protection would make invaluable additions to the Forest Preserve. We can turn now to a broader range of tools for planning and management as we look to the Adirondack Park of 2050 and beyond.

Time is again of the essence. Modern challenges include climate change, air and water pollution, invasive species, misplaced development, changing economics and overuse on public lands. The future success of Adirondack wilderness and communities is at risk.

Learning from history

Before we can talk about setting a course for the future, we need to understand where we have been, where we are now and how we got here.

The people of New York State have been actively debating how to understand the Adirondacks and best govern the region at least since the 19th Century.

For the purposes of the VISION project, the natural starting point for the historical voyage that leads to the present-day Adirondacks is the establishment of the Forest Preserve in 1885. This success was the result of years of advocacy and work by New York State Surveyor Verplank Colvin and others. It launched a period, from 1885 to 1895 which saw tremendous advances in the protection of the Adirondacks. (Among other sources, the following historical summary draws on the work of Adirondack historian Philip G. Terrie, particularly his book, *Contested Terrain*.)

By the time the state acted to create the Preserve, Adirondack tourism had already become popular during a post-Civil War trend toward seeking physical and spiritual health in nature. A number of influential writers popularized the Adirondacks as a destination for outdoor recreation. The publication that may have had the greatest impact was the 1869 *Adventures in the Wilderness; or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks*, by William H.H. Murray. The sportsmen and tourists who followed Murray to the Adirondacks were so often unprepared for the conditions in the mountains that they became known as Murray's Fools.

The increasing popularity of Adirondack tourism, and with it the chore of taking care of poorly prepared visitors while inspiring a wilderness ethic, was a trend that grew over the next 150 years. Tourism eventually eclipsed the forest industry and mining as the driving economic force in the Adirondacks.

Those who saw the recreational value of the Adirondacks called for some form of protection of natural resources. But in 1885 the concerns that most inspired action to protect the Adirondacks grew from rampant, irresponsible logging. Careless logging practices denuded hillsides and piled up slash that became a fire hazard.

A state commission working in the 1870s found that logging practices that cleared Adirondack slopes of trees damaged the forest's ability to store and release snowmelt and rainwater in a gradual way. The unreliable flows endangered the water supply for communities and mills and threatened navigation on rivers and canals.

In 1885 the state Legislature took the first of a series of measures critical to the protection of the Adirondacks. It created an Adirondack Park Forest Preserve. At 680,000 acres, it was far smaller than the 2.6 million acres the Preserve has grown to, and the lands were scattered. But the action led directly to the creation of an Adirondack Park special in many ways, including its mixture of public and private lands, and to the enshrining of this protection in the state Constitution.

The Forest Preserve law said these forests should be "forever wild" but was otherwise vague and did not end destructive logging in the Adirondacks. In 1890, the state approved funds to purchase more lands for the Forest Preserve. This allowed the state to purposefully choose lands for the Preserve rather than rely on random parcels acquired through tax forfeiture and other means.

After long discussion of how to define the Adirondack Park and what its purpose was, the state created the Park in 1892 for public use, watershed protection and a future timber supply. It included both public and private lands. In 1894, voters of the state approved a new state Constitution that included a pledge that the Forest Preserve would "be forever kept as wild forest lands." It stated that timber could not be sold, removed or destroyed, forever.

In the decades since, that constitutional guarantee has held firm. It survived the constitutional conventions of 1915 and 1938 without being watered down. (The second convention did reorder things so that the Forever Wild provision, originally Article 7, became Article 14.) Over the years, voters have approved amendments, many of them addressing small-scale questions, but have shown a determination to protect the fundamental concept of Forever Wild.

The map of the Adirondack Park has shifted dynamically since its birth in 1892. The original Blue Line encompassed 2.8 million acres of public and private lands, including 551,000 acres of state land. Two expansions alone, in 1912 and 1931, added more than 2.3 million acres. Today the Park encompasses about 6 million acres.

Crucially, and especially since the mid-20th Century, the amount of land the state owns for the Forest Preserve has increased through acquisitions. The Preserve that began at 680,000 acres, now contains 2.6 million acres of publicly owned land. And starting in the late 20th century, the state increasingly purchased conservation easements designed to protect the natural environment while keeping land in private ownership. Now, 781,000 acres of Park lands are under easement contracts.

Visitor use of the Park increased slowly at first. But beginning with the early 20th Century wealthy families began to create private preserves and seasonal retreats. And with the end of World War I, the state began creating trails, campgrounds and facilities to attract the general public.

Tourism became more important to the Adirondack economy at a time when the fortunes of the timber industry were declining. While both the hospitality and forestry industries went through inevitable cycles in the next decades the die was cast.

By the 21st century, the large paper companies were selling their land and withdrawing from the Adirondacks, while tourism was the driving force for employment, income and investment in the Adirondacks. One study found that in 2016, the tourism industry created one in five Adirondack jobs and generated \$640 million in wages. Travelers spent \$13 billion in the region.

By the late 1960s conservationists were growing increasingly worried about the future of private lands. They saw a danger that runaway development would spoil the Adirondack Park. In 1967, associates of Laurence Rockefeller proposed that close to one-third of the Adirondack Park, a mix of public and private land, be made a national park. Though the idea went nowhere it foreshadowed an historic step that Laurence's brother, Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, took in 1968. Rockefeller appointed a Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks to propose policies that would govern private as well as public lands. This launched the second period of rapid transformation within the Adirondack Park.

Working in an economic and social environment in which ruinously excessive development loomed as a threat, the Commission proposed the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency. The APA would write one plan to govern the management of state land in the Park, and a second to govern private lands. The Legislature created the APA in 1971. The Adirondack State Land Master Plan was created the following year and the Private Land Use and Development Plan, extremely controversial within the Blue Line, was adopted in 1973 and has the force of law.

The SLMP categorized state lands with classifications, including wilderness and Wild Forest, that defined levels of environmental protection and acceptable uses. The Land Use and Development Plan created a system of private land classification, essentially a zoning law designed to protect open lands and guide development toward villages and hamlets.

The APA is charged both with approving state management plans for public Forest Preserve lands and regulating private land development. Together with the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the APA is the instrument for state management of the Adirondacks. As such, it has often been the focus of controversy. Some critics have argued that it wields too much influence and hinders economic development. Others contend it is not rigorous enough in enforcing restrictions aimed at protecting both the tangible natural resources and the intangible characteristics of wilderness.

In the years immediately following the creation of the APA, many local residents and their elected officials bristled at the new tools for state control. The language of dissent was often fiery and some opposition included violence. Though disagreements today often divide along the same lines of local versus state authority, the tone has grown far more civil and constructive. While advocates and leaders within the Park continue to disagree on particular issues, they also keep working to cultivate areas of common ground. This change represents

the beginning of a new chapter in Adirondack history, when a shared focus on the future allows for new alliances.

Since the creation of the APA, the Adirondacks have confronted challenges in both the public and private spheres that threaten the character of the Park. Pollution carried on the wind from outside the Park in the form of acid rain and mercury contamination has damaged ecosystems in the Park.

The withdrawal of large paper companies from the Adirondacks has weakened a traditional source of livelihood but set the stage for significant enlargement of protected lands through state acquisition and conservation easements.

Subdivisions and residential development projects continue to unfold throughout the Park, often on open lands outside the hamlets. Invasive species, both aquatic and terrestrial, have the potential to devastate native ecological communities.

During this period the Adirondacks have undergone demographic change, with an aging population and a shrinking number of young families. Schools have worked to cope with falling enrollments. Services like volunteer first responders are confronting a loss in membership.

And so, dynamic change continues apace in the Park, creating the need and the opportunity for the long-range strategy the Adirondack Council's Adirondack VISION Project seeks to develop. Without such strategic planning, the future of the Park will be shaped by piecemeal decision-making subject to the political pressures of the moment.

Lasting protection requires an updated vision and roadmap to guide management decisions. To preserve the Adirondack Park forever we need consistent principles and a comprehensive plan, based on sound science. Both the need and the will exist to launch a third period of rapid transformation within the Park. When those who care about the Adirondacks see beyond the turmoil of the moment to a shared vision we can fulfill the promise of a Park, where people and nature can thrive together, protected for all time.