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The Role of the People in Wilderness Preservation

Shortcomings and Opportunities in Governance

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There is no doubt in my mind that support for Article 14 of the New York State Constitution should be paramount and its intent should guide in all we do with respect to the Adirondack Park. But translating the concept of Forever Wild into rules and regulations that reflect all the changes in the modern world has proven very difficult. The environmental groups have been very important in keeping government on track. But for all the activity of the past thirty years, for all the real accomplishments, I believe many mistakes have been made. Further, we are missing a guide for the future.

Naïvely, I once thought that focusing on just how much has been accomplished in the park, how little remains to be done in comparison, would put any discussions of what else is needed in perspective. The battles that are left are not very exciting; they are difficult to characterize, mired in bureaucracies, consumed by details, and lacking an icon around which to generate support. Peter Bauer wrote me, "On some level the park works despite the dysfunctional way it is managed." But we cannot ignore the problems that keep appearing.

This chapter is an edited version of "Final Thoughts," from B. McMartin, *Perspectives on the Adirondacks* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 2002), 341–48, and is reprinted with permission. Barbara McMartin died in 2005.

I asked many of those with whom I talked what they thought would ensure a positive climate for working together in the Adirondacks. Frank Murray was one of the first people I contacted, and he struck a theme I heard over and over: "Dialogue is essential, but I do not see it in the Adirondacks unless sides get together. There are extremes on both sides and if the extremes dominate, they succeed in stopping any action." Roger Dziengeleski worried about the emotional level of the debate in the park. He faulted the different groups whom he believed depend for their existence on generating emotion; "they are monsters to be fed," he said.

I think the solutions are much more subtle, and they involve bringing people together to appreciate what has been done in such a positive and uplifting way that the differences can fade and we can work together to address modern problems. And to that end, civility, humility, and mutual respect, as Liz Thorndike tried to generate, are the foundations of that cooperation.

Are we inevitably reduced to the problem of figuring out how to balance zealots in our democratic society? Polarization persists; admittedly some of it has origins in the extremes of environmentalism as well as in extremes of opposition to governmental regulation.

Why do I believe the environmentalists have been less successful than I think they should have been? In the Adirondacks there is a tremendous overlap of membership among environmental groups. While there is a commonalty of purpose, it is overshadowed by the rhetoric each group expresses in order to stake out a special role in the environmental arena. Certainly that is a way of building constituencies. James C. Dawson has commented that environmentalists have all too often *not* reached out, but have said, "we know what is right." Jim Cooper compared both poles as representatives of a kind of thinking of true believers like the Jesuits—true believers who leave no room for compromise. Environmental thought has become a "secular religion for some people," he says, and it treats every square inch of the Adirondacks as unique.

Mark Dowie, in *Losing Ground,* concludes his analysis of the environmental movement nationally by suggesting that those groups have lost their grassroots touch. That is equally true in the Adirondacks,

where a few of these groups are so far from grass roots that they have become bloated, huge, and nonresponsive except to the members of their moneyed constituencies. And money plays a huge role in what they do. Each group strives to be broadly environmental, lest any other group get ahead, but outstandingly different in some respect in order to justify their ever-increasing need for funds.

For most environmental groups any outreach goes as far as a group of sycophants; leadership "talks to the choir." The failure of environmentalists to reach out to groups that do not share their views has far-reaching consequences. How can environmentalists expect to lead if they do not even talk to all the constituents of the park? And, of course this is a two-way street.

Peter Bauer believes that the environmental groups work differently because there is no clear vision of public policy toward the park. They work independently because they have separate interests and goals and varying tactics to achieve them. But their diversity is no excuse for the cacophony of their voices; I believe they would be more successful if they worked toward a common park vision.

When environmental organizations do agree, their joint efforts and press releases are noticed and effective, but another level of cooperation is needed. The different groups have individually focused on a narrow set of problems: Adirondack Council on acid rain, Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks on quality of life, the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks on the Forest Preserve. No organization, and certainly not a group of them, is exploring the questions of what the park should be like in a way that addresses all the park's components. Adirondack Council and Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks come closest, but Council's preservationist picture does not encompass local concerns, the economy, tourism, or Department of Environmental Conservation's management problems. These organizations do not seem to recognize that it is the sum of their efforts *and* of the many local projects that can define a vision for the park.

The groups tend to react to problems and governmental misdeeds rather than taking a proactive approach to planning. As Peter Bauer has said, the environmentalists are not talking together or with others about the big issues. Why are they not focusing on the big issues? A good part of the reason is that they have had to spend so much time and effort correcting governmental problems such as insufficient legislative appropriations and administrative budgets, DEC's failures to create adequate policies to reflect the State Land Master Plan or to manage the Forest Preserve according to existing policies, Adirondack Park Agency's inability to perform the required oversight with respect to DEC's activities, and DEC's inability to manage itself or lead public participation.

Could an individual or organization lead public dialogue to a vision for the park? Ross Whaley believes that none of the major players of 2000 could do it. "Consensus," he believes, "needs more subtle advocates than today's environmental leaders."

I started out believing real public participation could be the way to arrive at policy, that closed government or closed groups could not bridge the disparate views of the Adirondacks. I became convinced that the openness of the recent past decade has not been successful because it led to fragmentation and the dominance of certain interest groups. I am aware of how challenging it is to create a framework for rational public decisions. Robert Bendick came to believe that "it is very difficult to arrive at a consensus adopting major priorities and let people have a say in the process."[1]

Could an existing government agency play a leadership role in managing public participation? DEC's attempts have been deficient; the department has listened and responded favorably to all sorts of special interest groups. APA's task forces have made the agency's outreach more successful than DEC's. But APA's efforts to update its methods have been narrowly focused and occasionally without adequate follow-through. They have been largely technical responses, operational functions, too swept up in legal details, and generally inadequate for long-range planning. Having all interests represented can't happen at agency level; there is no time. The agency's permitting and enforcement activities have prevented members from engaging in true planning.

Three decades ago, much of the opposition to regulation came about not simply because Adirondackers felt no one was listening, but because they believed that they had no access to government.

The lack of access is symbolized in the repeated calls for Adirondackers to be able to choose representatives to the park agency. The Local Government Review Board, Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, and others continue raising this symbol, despite current representation by Adirondack residents.

Stories and rumors of special access to the governor's staff or of closed-door negotiations have reawakened a belief that Adirondackers have no access. What they want in representation is really access to higher-ups, to decision-making. That is what most of the groups wanted that sprang up after the Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century. The environmentalists had access all along. The new groups were unable to gain acceptance partly because they were unsophisticated in the ways of politics. The parochialism among residents, which can be attributed to lack of exposure to the larger world, has made groups and individuals seem to harden positions before they understand issues. Those aspects have changed, but the level of access remains unbalanced.

Environmentalists see Adirondack Park Agency representation by Adirondackers as a symbol of losing control—and today the fear of losing control in the environmental movement is so great that no one wants to revisit the State Land Master Plan, despite the fact that the plan is fourteen years beyond its scheduled revision. However, there is much more to their not wanting to update the plan: Environmentalists fear that government will compromise with those asking for widening of snowmobile trails or permitting more motorized access, for instance, just to prevent confrontation.

There are many issues that a revision of the State Land Master Plan ought to address, and these issues will continue to appear: They include what new land to add to the park; numerous new problems concerning easements; proposed long-distance trails and corridor development; questions of snowmobile trail networks; motorboat use in areas that are part private, part wilderness; DEC use of motorized vehicles; and development of real opportunities for the disabled.

The persistent deep-seated distrust points out how easy it would be to rally opposition to almost anything related to the park, and how

difficult it is to bring people together. The radicals—the fringes—are quiescent, but there is no middle ground with concerns for the whole park.

The most amazing thing to come out of all the turmoil of the early 1990s is how many of the goals of the Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century have been accomplished, but not necessarily by using the specific recommendations of their 1990 report. The "score card" on achieving recommendations from the Twenty-First Century Commission includes many of those directed at nongovernmental organizations or local governments and only a few of those directed at parts of state government: roads have been improved, tourism outreach is better, sustainable forestry has been included in easement agreements, many towns are renewing local planning, community housing projects have been started, towns are really cleaning up eyesores, Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks and the agency are working on water quality issues, hamlets and villages are building local parks and tourist information centers, education has improved and there is a renewed interest in an Adirondack curriculum. The list of accomplishments is even longer. What is missing is anything that required actions by the legislature and enhanced budgets. These have been the major stumbling blocks. The achievements have come from people working together on a grassroots level.

Another reason for the relative quiet at the end of the century was that many of the groups that sprang up to fight the Twenty-First Century Commission had reason to believe someone was listening. Richard Lefebvre . . . made listening a hallmark of his term as a chairman of Adirondack Park Agency, and he [did] not [respond] inappropriately to special interest groups.

[E]veryone, from APA economist Steve Erman to local businessmen to realtors, noticed the real improvement in the 1990s. Undoubtedly the most significant factor of all was the fact that the nation enjoyed a period of prosperity and growth all through the 1990s, although an improved economy nationally does not necessarily mean the park will prosper proportionately. . . .

In the past, the state economic agencies often seemed to operate in a rarified sphere that failed to appreciate the variety of community offerings within the park. They looked for big projects. Communities looked for handouts, for businesses to drop on their doorsteps.

The synergism of three different events was required to bring about the changes of the 1990s. First, the state had created the Department of Economic Development in 1987 and enlarged its regional office. The state became much more realistic in its economic goals for the park. DED recognized that new large manufacturing operations, even those tied to Adirondack resources, were unlikely. It sought out small businessmen and entrepreneurs by encouraging people who wanted to live in the park. Jean Raymond, Edinburg supervisor, still wished the governor would get as excited about a business that adds two employees in the park as he [did] about two hundred new jobs in the capital region. DED shifted from emphasizing businesses on the fringe of or just outside the park to encouraging them in the park.

Second, many local Industrial Development Authorities (IDAs) appeared or matured and began to promote the beauty and quality of life in the park as the basis of economic development. For many years, the nay-saying of opposition to [the] Adirondack Park Agency, bolstered by a few bad stories repeated over and over, had created a climate in which businesses did not look to the park. It was not any change in regulations that improved the climate in the 1990s, it was the positive promotion of the park's values by local groups. (Essex County now advertises itself as "A Healthy Place to Grow.") The park is seen as an economic asset.

The third positive, according to Erman, is the political climate, more positive for business now under Pataki, much more positive under APA Chairman Lefebvre, who . . . created a more buoyant image for the park. "He has put misperceptions to rest," said Erman. Now the agency has an economic team, not just Erman, to focus on stewardship of the environment and economics.

From big to small, business is slowly growing in and around the park. Bombardier Corporation, producer of subway cars, is an anomalous heavy industry located in Plattsburgh. It has brought in many support businesses to the area. Several businesses have grown within the park simply because their owners want to live there: Lake Placid Industries, Inc. has expanded by producing close-tolerance machinery; Wilt Industries in Lake Pleasant has a specialty business producing machinery for glass production; General Composites of Westport started with ultralight canoe paddles and expanded from other plastic sports equipment to medical applications. Bed-and-breakfasts have proliferated.

There have been setbacks, the biggest in the Newton Falls area, where Appleton Coated Papers struggled to keep the former Newton Falls Paper Company alive. It closed, and there are no prospects that it will be resuscitated. This happened despite the fact that there are all too few secondary wood products companies, manufacturers of furniture, and the like. Adirondack North Country Association is trying to stimulate this segment of the economy because the resource could support many more than currently exist.

Also helping improve the economic scene is the Adirondack Economic Development Corporation (AEDC), a not-for-profit, started in 1984. Under Ernest Hohmeyer, AEDC has funneled loans to small businesses and entrepreneurs and offered technical assistance. For a time it was an example of a large project that failed, partly because AEDC was trying to do too much, to expand too far, to be everything for everyone, and as a result the organization faltered and lost major funding. It recovered somewhat by becoming smaller and leaner, and in 2001 was focusing on training entrepreneurs.

Such entrepreneurs are dependent on high-speed communications, and making this kind of communications possible while at the same time protecting the resource is going to be a big challenge. Fiber-optic cables are expensive and the region's towns too spread out, so that placing cables along major road corridors or railroad corridors just does not reach enough people to become economically viable.

What I found most encouraging was the fact that the Forest Preserve, with its mountains, lakes, and all kinds of opportunities, was finally considered as part of the economic base of the park. People are at least talking about economic solutions in the context of the park's natural resources.[2]

The Adirondack climate is so outwardly serene that it seems inappropriate to disturb it. Given the extraordinary birth of the Adirondack Forest Preserve and park, it is sad how one of the brightest preservation efforts in the United States descended into such a pandemonium of competing "supporters" near the end of its first century. Translating the governance of the park into modern terms and creating a structure that adapts to future change are necessary but very difficult steps, steps that would be impossible without leadership and public discussion focused on the larger issues.

Much could be accomplished by creating a special region within DEC to oversee the natural resources of the Adirondack Park. The regional structures of DEC, Department of Transportation, and Department of Health need to be recombined so that their boundaries coincide with that of the park. Those needs are obvious. But the way the park suffers within DEC's management has meant that the Forest Preserve has never been integrated into the economy of the region, and I predict it never will be unless DEC's structure and mission are changed.

It would be a monumental leap to go from analyzing the problems to deducing what else ought to be done in the Adirondacks. Besides, concluding specific recommendations seems like putting the cart before the horse. I would like to think for a while on *who* ought to be making recommendations for the future; what kinds of governmental structures are needed so people can be heard; how the public can participate and do so in a way that all voices are heard, yet consensus and action result. Determining who speaks and how they speak and are heard is essential because since 1970 no broad-based forum and no planning agency has addressed the issues affecting the park as a whole. Even when the commissions, task forces, planners, or thinkers have addressed issues, they have failed to move effectively from the general or ideal to be realized to the specifics of how to do it.

Could a new agency play a leadership role? Tom Ulasewicz reminded me of the role of planners in the Rockefeller era. A planning commission or agency for the Adirondacks might work. But it would have to be an independent, long-lasting, ongoing, regularly

reinvigorated, charismatically led agency, practiced in civility, open, and responsive to all points of view but not subservient to anyone. An Adirondack planning agency might consist of a small group of planners, based on the Rockefeller Office of Planning Coordination, made up of professionals, people with vision, full-time workers. They would not work in a vacuum, but would regularly consult all sorts of public groups. They would use what they hear to make decisions based on their knowledge and judgment in order to meld opposing views. Three to five people with long, fixed, but rotating terms and a director would suffice, if they were isolated from political whims of the legislature and changing administrations. They would have backgrounds in law, economics, forest resources, recreation planning, and above all in the values of the Forest Preserve. They would be charged with melding public and private lands, local interests and state interests; ensuring that state agencies work together; doing the impossible. Such a separate planning group needs to be independently funded, to be able to draw funds toward the park, and to oversee the work of existing agencies.

They would need a strong leader. Rockefeller focused on environmental responsibility, Pataki on fiscal responsibility. What is needed is a new leader who would be a champion for Forest Preserve and constituent responsibility. With strong leadership and a trained staff, such a group could lead to better government. Perhaps what I have envisioned is really a park service, another layer of government. It would not be an unwarranted addition if all the agencies within the park had regional boundaries that coincided with the park boundary. It would not be an intrusive layer, if it made all existing agencies and private groups more responsive, better able to integrate public participation with bureaucracies.

Experience has shown that reform has rarely made government simpler, more efficient, or effective. That has to be a goal, for Adirondack governance is mired in complexity as this history documents. I admit that there is no guarantee that any new agency can avoid bureaucratic lethargy.

Who will the planning agency listen to? Adirondack North Country Association, environmental groups, statewide concerns, the watchdogs

of the Forest Preserve, towns, counties, villages, Local Government Review Board, Adirondack Park Agency, Department of Environmental Conservation, everyone. With someone listening, there will be no need for groups to pontificate because the listeners will be most responsive to constructive ideas. The listeners will define the goals for the park, and participants will need to agree on consensus building.

There will be side benefits: Giving equal footing to all voices before an unbiased planning agency would help dispel social ills, the sense of discrimination, and class divisions, which are felt by some. That should enhance a needed sense of civility among groups. As the summary of the 1990s shows, every conceivable issue has been taken up by some watchdog group. Organizations are specializing more and more. What they are studying is wonderful, but their output must be viewed as pieces of the puzzle that when completed will spell out a way to manage the park for all, to put people in a place of protected natural resources.

To make this work people will have to step back and give proposals for structural change a chance without stumbling over the details. The planning commission will only be as effective as the support it receives from all branches of government. It will take a strong executive to make sure it stays independent and that its recommendations are adopted.

Many of the good ideas that have been developed over the years faltered because they have not reached down to the people they were meant to help. Besides planning, such a planning group must use education so that all groups can encourage their members to adopt common goals. Lots of efforts have generated good ideas, but the next step, keeping them going and bringing them to fruition, is difficult, but not impossible for such a planning group.

The failure for thirty years (1970 to 2001) to include humans in wilderness preservation philosophy has been the source of many governmental shortcomings. Only in the last decade of the twentieth century has concern for people become important. That concern has appeared in numerous small instances but not within the context of a much-needed philosophical discussion of the role of people in wilderness.[3]

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Coordination of local, regional, and state policies is largely recognized as a necessary goal to conserve the Adirondack environment, our resource-based economies, and quality of life of our citizenry. Similar efforts in the past have often been deemed "top-down"—with recommendations largely stemming from discussions between representatives of state, regional, and national environmental, industry, and policy groups. These recommendations were then typically presented to local constituencies for "public comment" and "input." However, a common critique was that local interests were not adequately represented at the outset, only as an afterthought of already well-defined agendas. Consequently, the support (or buy-in) of local interests during implementation has often been weak and could serve as a significant barrier to conservation and development in the Adirondacks into the current century.

In this chapter we review the legacy of top-down planning in the park and contrast it with the emergence of recent participatory processes. Research on agenda-setting in the Adirondack North Country and the larger Northern Forest region highlights areas of agreement as well as disconnect between community-level and parkwide or regionwide interests and priorities. This work points to a new era of participatory planning in the Adirondacks and the potential to solve coordination problems brought on by economic and environmental