

Wilderness measures are worth celebrating

By Stephen Williams
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I've had my breath taken away by the scale of Colorado peaks still snowcapped in August.

Closer to home, I've boulder-hopped Adirondack streams cautiously, knowing breaking a leg a half-dozen miles from the nearest road is the bad idea my wife warned me about.

Whether at the rock-rimmed tops of the West or just a few miles from our backyards, wildernesses are places to realize our insignificance in the cosmic scheme and make peace with our temporary presence here.

The spiritual need for occasional access to wild places runs so deep that laws were written to preserve them back when people were less cynical about the legislative process, or more considerate of future generations. Two of the primary wilderness protection measures have big anniversaries this year, and both have Adirondack roots.

The National Wilderness Preservation Act turns 50 this September. Its chief author and advocate, Howard Zahniser, visited and drew inspiration from the Adirondacks.

Since then, the federal law has been used to preserve from mankind's unwise instincts more than 109 million acres of federal land, mostly in the West, in an arc stretching from the blistering depths of California's Death Valley to the chilling heights of Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness. (Marshall, a co-founder of The Wilderness Society, was profoundly influenced by adolescent summers his family spent on Lower Saranac Lake.)

New York, however, has its own robust system for keeping publicly owned wild lands from all becoming welcoming and people-friendly, with visitors centers, parking lots and roads that take you to the waterfalls and wildlife. Those have their place, but it isn't everywhere.

There are more than a dozen designated wilderness areas in the Adirondacks and Catskills within two hours' drive of the Capital Region. They're guaranteed to remain that way under New York's Article XIV of the state Constitution, which has its 120th anniversary this year.

Zahniser was inspired by New York's "forever wild" clause, written in 1894 to protect the Adirondack and Catskill forest preserves. As an adult, he became a frequent visitor to the Adirondacks, and owned a seasonal camp in Warren County near that of his friend Paul Schaefer, the Adirondack conservationist.

The "forever wild" clause was then and remains today the only permanent protection written into a constitution, said David Gibson, a partner of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve.

As executive secretary of The Wilderness Society, Zahniser drafted the language of the federal act and lobbied Washington legislators for eight years, only to die of heart failure at age 58 — which counts as young to me — a few months before President Johnson signed the bill into law in September 1964. That's another point in favor of Lyndon Johnson, whose reputation is ticking upward with the passage of time.

Adirondack Wild is looking to make a five- or 10-minute video to celebrate both anniversaries. It has a fundraising campaign under way on Adirondack Gives, a crowd-funding site for nonprofits. The goal is to raise \$1,000 out of a total estimated production cost of \$5,000.

Adirondack Wild's planned video would use Adirondack imagery, voices and music, and be shown at various anniversary events to promote the continued preservation of wilderness.

"Wilderness remains a rare and threatened resource around the world and in our world, the Adirondacks, the Catskills and beyond," said Dan Plumley, another Adirondack Wild partner.

The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany will hold an event May 7 to mark both anniversaries, with Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joe Martens among scheduled speakers.