

Editorial: Boreas Ponds is a jewel — let's keep it that way

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The Boreas Ponds tract in the Adirondacks.

Photographer: CARL HEILMAN II/THE ADIRONDACK COUNCIL

Rarely do we get a second chance to return something to the near-pristine state of its origin.

We should not let such rare opportunities pass us by.

In the Adirondack Mountains, there's such an opportunity, as the Adirondack Park Agency considers a land classification for the Boreas Ponds tract.

The 20,750-acre area offers spectacular views of the Adirondack High Peaks, access to amazing lakes, and other opportunities for visitors to experience the wilderness in its purest form.

Because this property is such an ecological jewel — and because it's so rare to have such a property made available to the public after so many years of industrial use — the Adirondack Park Agency should do as much as it can to limit the potential to spoil it.

And that means ensuring that access to cars, snowmobiles, ATVs and motorized boats be restricted so as to significantly limit their intrusion on the environment and the public's ability to experience it in its full glory. The ponds and surrounding wooded areas in the tract are teeming with wildlife, including native fish, birds and mammals, that need to be protected from invasive species like milfoil and zebra mussels that are carried in by boats and trailers.

Opponents of a Wilderness designation for the area argue that the property is not, in fact, pristine. For years, it was the site of heavy logging operations. The numerous hard-packed roads that vein the property, they say, are evidence that the environment has and can continue to sustain motor vehicle traffic. They also say that allowing snowmobilers and motorists to venture close to or right up to the waterways is necessary to help shore up the fragile Adirondack economy, as well as provide access for the disabled.

Any abuse by the motor vehicle access allowed under the Wild Forest designation, they say, could be mitigated by a unit management plan for the property administered by state environmental officials.

Such a plan, which would be worked out later, could place limits on the number of vehicles that could venture into the property; limit the number, size and location of parking areas; and define exactly where snowmobiles, ATVs and mountain bikes and boats could go within the parcel.

But once the Wild Forest designation is made, who's to say that any unit management plan under it couldn't be changed to expand access more than originally intended?

There are no guarantees, even with a plan in place, that people wouldn't eventually push for even greater access —withering the experiences of those who venture in to enjoy the property in its most natural form.

As we said at the outset, it's rare that one gets a second opportunity to return a property to a near-pristine state. How rare would it be for the Boreas Pond area to get a third chance?

Allowing vehicles to go right up to the ponds and for snowmobilers to rip around on the trails bordering the water is a slippery slope to even greater abuse of the land.

The potential to help the Adirondack economy is its own issue, as there are

other issues affecting it that go beyond the classification of this land.

It's true, snowmobilers are a big element of the Adirondack economy. But have the communities and regulators in the Adirondacks done enough to benefit from the miles of snowmobile trails that already exist within the park? And where are the hotels and restaurants and bars that would benefit from greater public access to the Boreas tract?

If expanding snowmobile access in that area is a priority for the local economy, why not cut a trail along the existing Blue Ridge Road that runs west from the Northway, rather than allow the machines to rumble on the old logging trails further north?

Would a new trail close to the main road have a significantly less economic impact to the region than allowing snowmobile use deeper inside the Boreas tract?

As for how close to allow vehicles to the Boreas Ponds, again the APA should err on the side of caution.

While supporters of greater access believe the area will not be overrun with vehicles if they're allowed within a mile or less, there's no guarantee it would pan out that way.

Setting the parking area back, perhaps two or three miles from the ponds, would limit the intrusion of vehicles and prevent large numbers of people from abusing it. Some accommodations could be made for disabled individuals who want to access the site. But even then, access should be limited and controlled with a strict permitting system.

That might mean that the APA will have to depart from the four options it's considering for the tract and develop a fifth option, not fully addressed under either designation, that addresses the concerns about disabled access.

While public hearings on the four options under consideration by the APA have ended, the public still has until the end of the month to offer written comments.

When you comment, think about what you want out of a nature experience and what you hope to see in the future.

Opportunities to preserve and protect areas like the Boreas Pond tract don't come along every day. We need to make the most of them while we can.