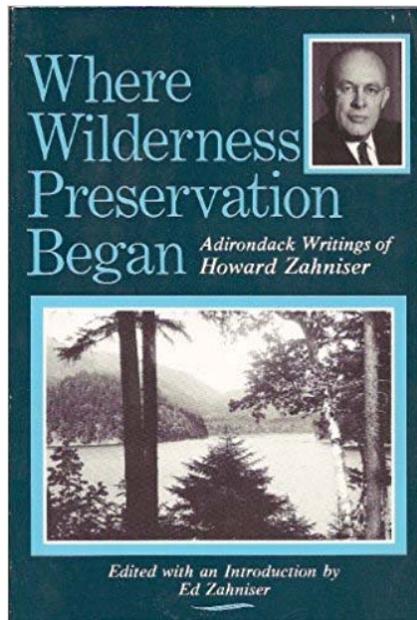


The importance of preserving the wilderness

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'Where Wilderness Preservation Began: Adirondack Writings Of Howard Zahniser'

I've again been stimulated to read up on an individual important in the environmental movement who was heavily influenced by time in the Adirondacks.

For my last review, I looked at a book of Bob Marshall's writings. This time I've turned my attention to Howard Zahniser.

A recent talk by David Gibson of the advocacy group Adirondack Wild got me started. His comments led me to look at a slim volume published in 1992 by North Country Books entitled "Where Wilderness Preservation Began: Adirondack Writings of Howard Zahniser."

Henry Thoreau once wrote, "In Wildness is the preservation of the World." Marshall founded the influential advocacy group The Wilderness Society to solidify that concept. Zahniser became that organization's executive secretary in 1945 and ended up doing much of the legwork necessary for the passage in 1964 of America's landmark Wilderness Act. This book includes writings by Zahniser, and also perspectives on him by other important preservationists.

Paul Schaefer, another key player spawned by the Adirondacks, calls Marshall and Zahniser "the two outstanding advocates of wilderness in this century." He recalls his first meeting with Zahniser, at which time the latter expressed interest in visiting the Adirondack region.

Zahniser's diary of that 1946 summer experience makes clear his joy in listening to the calls of hermit thrush, finding the surprise overlook or plunging for the quick swim. There's a tendency to describe each outing as the best he ever had. Still, running upon a patch of blueberries, frying up freshly caught rainbow trout or listening to locals tell their colorful stories does sound like fun.

And he's doing all this with Schaefer, who reminds us it's the journey and not the destination with observations like this one, en route to Hanging Spear Falls: "The falls were really not more of an objective than every foot we were traversing." It comes as no surprise that Zahniser ended up buying a cabin near Schaefer's in the Crane Mountain region; this became his respite place for the rest of his life.

Zahniser believed in the importance of land that remains unmodified despite man's current technological ability to modify anything. He argues such land keeps us from erosion of soul and spirit. Wilderness to him is a place without roads, buildings or any imprint of man's presence. "Untrammelled" was the word he carefully chose as a descriptor. Wilderness offers educational value. It offers recreational value. And it somehow offers still more, an opportunity for "personal renewal."

I enjoyed the mix of essays and talks written by Zahniser himself, complemented by commentary from other contributors. Sometime I will read something that covers his life in more detail. That way I'll gain a better sense of what stimulated his interest in wilderness preservation, and what helped sustain his efforts through what must often have been tedium in the advocacy process.

Zahniser was someone who seems to have kept the real endpoint in mind as he spent countless hours in his office, or doing research, or testifying before committee after committee. When we pitch a tent, or enjoy our own secret alcoves, we don't think about the dozens of drafts it takes to craft legislation granting us wonderful outdoor opportunities, or the patience required to answer every question posed by each individual with a varying point of view. Those of us valuing wilderness in any form owe people like him a debt of gratitude.

It's especially satisfying to know that time in our region served as a guidepost to his efforts. There's pride in knowing perhaps no place "got it" better than New York did with the Adirondacks. Environmental issues aren't always easy,

as we can see with current discussion about the Boreas Ponds. Still, the state has been a model, both nationally and around the world, with its constitutionally protected description of the Forest Preserve as "forever wild."

Zahniser died just before President Lyndon Johnson signed the National Wilderness Preservation Act into law in 1964. Fortunately, he left a legacy with potential to benefit us all.