



Commentary

State must continue to protect the Wilderness legacy

By Dan Plumley and Pete Nelson

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For most New Yorkers, the Adirondack Park is akin to Yellowstone or Yosemite National Parks in spirit, experience, and wilderness character. Places like this are refreshingly unique in this uber-busy, over-crowded, tumultuous world that always seems to be facing precipitous change.

It has also been a source of great pride for the last seven-plus generations of New Yorkers that the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves are the birthplace of the Wilderness movement, both nationally and globally. For nearly 125 years these lands have enjoyed “Forever Wild” constitutional protection, shielding them from abuses.

Unfortunately, a long-delayed decision to be made Friday by the Adirondack Park Agency and state Department of Environmental Conservation could severely diminish that proud history.

At stake is the crucial classification of the remote 21,000-acre Boreas Ponds Tract, purchased by the state two years ago. By virtue of its sensitive small ponds and connected habitats that range from lowland forests to boreal summits, this unique place holds tremendous Wilderness values. Lying at the foot of Mount Marcy, our state’s highest mountain, this is one of the most significant public land acquisitions we have seen. Magnificent in itself, it links other blocks of Forest Preserve into one of the largest contiguous protected areas east of the Mississippi.

But Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s administration is set to divide the tract in half between the Wilderness and Wild Forest classifications. Only half would remain truly wild, while the other half would be exposed to the likelihood of intensive motorized uses up to seven miles into the forest. This will bring the intrusion of modernity dangerously close (500 feet) to Boreas Ponds’ sensitive shoreline, and directly into the heart of what would otherwise be an unparalleled opportunity for solitude.

Under the state's proposed classification scheme, the Boreas Ponds themselves would fall within the new Wilderness — barely. DEC, under the direction of Commissioner Basil Seggos, is firm in its desire to keep open a road to the gravel dam on the ponds' outlet, should the need ever arise to rebuild it with heavy machinery. But with that road comes public recreational access not in keeping with the setting: motor vehicles, snowmobiles, the inevitable joyrider on an ATV thumbing his nose at all we have achieved as a state as he makes an end-run around an ineffective barrier.

What should be the quietude of nature will instead be a trail of exhaust fumes. The only way to ski into this new Wilderness, for instance, will be to dodge the snowmobiles for six miles. This is a false compromise, violating the very intent of the Adirondack Park.

The State Land Master Plan directs the APA to classify lands based on their resource sensitivity and wilderness potential. Indeed, over many months the APA's own staff has conducted ecological studies to that end. And statewide public hearings in 2016 revealed one essential truth: Wilderness is immensely popular. Of the more than 11,000 comments from state residents and visitors, 84 percent demanded stronger protections than what the state was considering. The people who wanted no motorized access at all — a full Wilderness classification — outnumbered proponents of mechanical recreation at a rate of three-to-one.

Cuomo can take much credit for ensuring the inclusion of these lands in the "Forever Wild" Forest Preserve. But now it's property's future that matters. Should the APA — a state agency under the governor's jurisdiction — make a decision this Friday to not only turn away from its own wilderness legacy, but disenfranchise the thousands of New Yorkers who participated in this process and expected a fair shake at affecting the outcome, his conservation legacy will be seen for the ironic and foolhardy "Groundhog Day" violation it truly will be.

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