

Snowmobile power struggle revs up

By Brandon Loomis, Editor
Adirondack Explorer

February 27, 2019



Snowmobilers ride on Long Lake in Hamilton County. Photo by Mike Lynch

John Miller buzzed his Ski-Doo across the Long Lake ice, ready for a lunch stop after riding lake-to-lake for 85 miles from snowy Tug Hill into the heart of the Adirondack Park.

The 58-year-old from Goshen, Conn., has toured the park by snowmobile since the 1970s, drawn to the North Country by snow and the hundreds of miles of forested trails—and by a camaraderie with other riders like the dozen or so who had parked their sleds beside the Adirondack Hotel before him to visit its café and taproom.

“You meet so many great people,” Miller said while packing away his helmet. “Nobody’s out here to trash the wilderness.”

They carry a bundle of dollars into otherwise snowbound and secluded crevices of the park. But they also trail noise and fumes that Adirondack wilderness seekers shun, and their efforts to push more trails into wild forests have landed New York State in court.

“We are in the midst of the greatest expansion of motor vehicles in the history of the park,” said Peter Bauer, whose Protect the Adirondacks has joined

Adirondack Wild is suing the Department of Environmental Conservation over two proposed trail segments passing state-designated wild-and-scenic stretches of the Cedar and Hudson rivers. Those segments would help create a new, shorter link between Indian Lake and Newcomb—small communities far off the well-traveled tourist highway to Lake Placid and the park’s famed High Peaks.

Adirondack Wild has also questioned the legality of a planned route farther west along an edge of the Blue Ridge Wilderness, where the state proposes to invoke a provision of the state lands plan allowing snowmobile trails “in limited instances” within 500 feet of a highway. The trail would parallel Route 28 through four miles of designated wilderness.

These challenges rest on the premise that both the state constitution’s promise of a “forever wild” forest preserve and legislative protections for wilderness and wild-and-scenic rivers should preclude motorized incursions. The groups also assert that if state officials want to permit something like a proposed trail bridge over a protected stretch of the Cedar River, they need legislative approval and not just a regulatory adjustment.

The environmentalists lost a split decision on the Hudson River case at the New York Supreme Court level, and are expecting to argue their appeal before the state’s highest court, the Court of Appeals, soon. The route intrudes on a wild river segment, which they argue is legally entitled to wilderness preservation, and goes near the Hudson Gorge Wilderness Area. Now they’re making a similar case for the Cedar.

DEC issued a permit for the bridge on the premise that it replaces one that existed when the land was privately owned, before the state bought it. But even in private hands the bridge was exclusively for the use of private leaseholders, and Adirondack Wild’s David Gibson said there’s no provision for ignoring the constitution based on previous ownership anyway.



Snowmobilers ride from Newcomb to Long Lake. Photo by Mike Lynch

"There are no pre-existing uses on the forest preserve—it's forever wild," Gibson said.

"The constitution says what it says."

Responding to a question about the Cedar River trail and bridge, DEC sent the *Explorer* a statement saying it "is confident that the proposal went through a thorough and public environmental review process."

The department did not respond to further requests for comment about the current extent of snowmobile trails in the park or Bauer's assertion that the state is seeking to increase motorized access, or for a map showing which trail segments have closed over time as others opened.

The state long ago placed a cap on snowmobile trails in the park's wild forest zones at 848 miles. Bauer asserts that the state has not held to it, and that Protect the Adirondacks conducted a review of the Moose River Plains and found that trails that were officially closed were still in use by some. Other trails that were claimed as closed hadn't actually been in use for decades.

"The closure issue becomes a real shell game," Bauer said.

The state's push for trails connecting communities addresses an overstated demand, he said. It's already possible to ride from Indian Lake to Newcomb with a detour toward Blue Mountain Lake, he noted. And on the park's east side, where the administration seeks a route from North Hudson and its Frontier Town tourism hub and Newcomb through the Boreas Ponds area, there's usually less snow and little clamor to reach those wildlands by motor. "Snowmobiling in the Adirondacks is largely a bar-to-bar experience."

Protect the Adirondacks accepted the governor's compromise placing a trail along the existing road there in hopes of preventing the state from cutting a new trail through the woods, Bauer said.

"We think it's going to be a flop," he said of the North Hudson-Newcomb route. "Eventually saner minds will occupy the governor's office, the (Adirondack Park Agency) and DEC," and it may be discontinued and the Boreas lands reclassified for more protection.

Snowmobile advocates say park trails provide an important and unique alternative for riders who prefer wild forests to wild times. New York State Snowmobile Association Executive Director Dominic Jacangelo is one of them. Community connectors like the one that would cross the Cedar River and traverse the Hudson offer new and scenic alternatives to disperse riders, he said, and they can increase safety if they keep riders from crossing lakes where ice thickness can vary by year.

He doesn't expect riders on the river route would disturb other recreationists. "I don't want to be facetious, but how many people are on the river while we're out snowmobiling?" Jacangelo said. "I doubt there would be one. That's not when the river is used."

The Albany-area resident said he usually avoids popular Tug Hill's "hot dog mentality" in favor of leisurely rides in the park. Others seem to agree, as more than a third of the state's rides occur in the Adirondacks, despite the fact that the park's public lands contain less than a tenth of the state's snowmobile trail miles.



Snowmobiles are lined up outside of the Adirondack Hotel in Long Lake. Photo by Mike Lynch

There are 111,000 snowmobile registrations in the state, and many of those riders spend good money on outings, Jacangelo said. The association's 2011 survey of New York riders found 40 percent of respondents took at least one overnight snowmobiling trip, and they spent on average more than \$100 a day.

Jacangelo's favorite rides are in the park "where there aren't a million people on the trail."

"The Adirondack Park is a very big place," he said. "It seems like there's room for all of us to have the experience we are looking for."

He said the state has closed trails as it adds new routes, and is well below the park's cap. His association this winter produced its own interactive map showing which routes are open.

Others agreed with Bauer that DEC has not provided clarity.

"They have refused to produce a map and a current GIS accounting of the system," Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan said. "We don't have a good sense of where all the trails are."

The Council is asking the court's permission to brief it in support of the environmentalists' appeal in the Hudson River case, in which the Council believes the initial ruling for the state misconstrued long-established protections for public wilderness areas. The groups filed the other case, to protect a nearby Hudson tributary, this winter.

Opening more snowmobile trails as the climate warms and the snows become less reliable increases the likelihood that the routes will eventually open to wheeled all-terrain vehicles, John Sheehan said.

"We don't believe that's an appropriate use of the forest preserve," Sheehan said. "That would increase the motorized impact in the park by three seasons." Pressures to widen and straighten trails further invite motorized degradation of wild country, he said.

To snowmobile riders like Miller, a fresh route to explore like the one proposed for Indian Lake-Newcomb seems a chance to spread out and enjoy the park without hurting anyone. He enjoys Old Forge, the village on the park's west side where officials have assembled a private trail system and welcomed riders to bring their sleds to dinner, the laundromat or wherever they need. But he also likes to escape on long tours where he can see deer and moose, which he believes benefit from a trail's packed snow.

"These tree huggers don't understand that we're not hurting the environment at all," he said.