

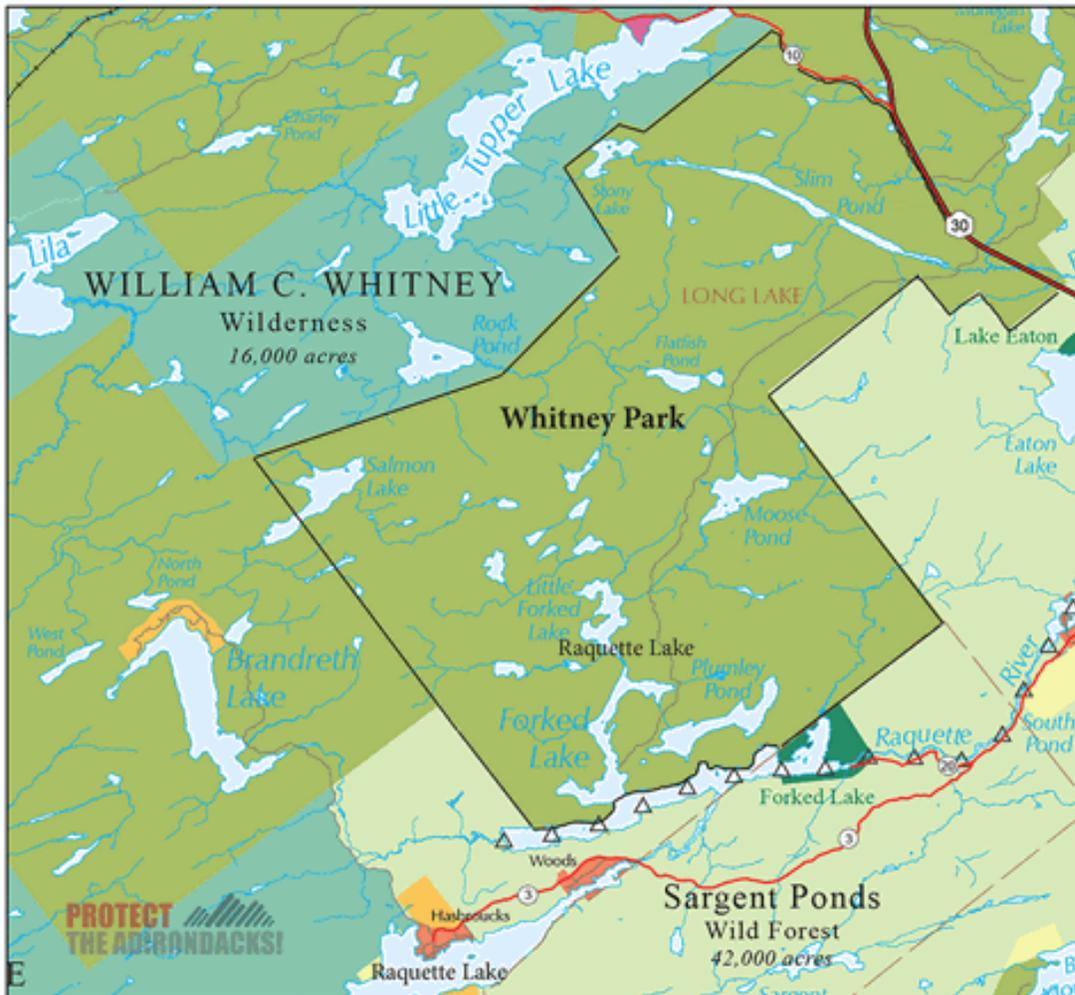
Conservationists call for state to buy Whitney Park

By Elizabeth Izzo

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36,000 Acre Whitney Park in Long Lake in the Central Adirondack Park



Whitney Park, 36,000 acre tract in the central Adirondack Park, has been the top land protection priority for New York State for 50 years. The tract contains 22 lakes and ponds, over 100 miles of undeveloped shoreline, and was a vital pathway for historic canoe routes through the Adirondacks in the 19th century.

Whitney Park, a historic 36,000-acre Long Lake estate, has been listed for sale for \$180 million. Conservationists want the state to step in and buy it.

Shortly after the owner of a historic 36,000-acre Long Lake estate announced this week he plans to sell for \$180 million, conservationists said they want the state to step in and buy the property.

Whitney Park was inherited last year by John Hendrickson, the widower of Saratoga philanthropist and socialite Marylou Whitney. The estate is

surrounded by vast swaths of state wild forest and wilderness, including 22 lakes, 80 miles of roads and 20 miles of trails. By Thursday morning, environmental groups were beginning to weigh in on the property's significance and beauty.

"The future of the Adirondack Park as a wild and protected landscape is on the line with whether or not Whitney Park is protected or it's changed in the future," said Peter Bauer, director of Protect the Adirondacks.

In the past, local elected officials have pushed back against state acquisition of the property. Long Lake Supervisor Clay Arsenault was not immediately available for comment Thursday, but Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages President Matthew Simpson said the association wants "to support Hamilton County and Long Lake on what their interest is in this property."

"We want to make sure all of our communities see a positive outcome with this property," Simpson said.

Whitney Park was established by William C. Whitney in 1897.

Marylou Whitney inherited the property after her previous husband, Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, died in 1992.

In 1997, under Gov. George Pataki, the state bought nearly 15,000 acres of wilderness from Whitney for \$17.1 million — with \$10 million from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund and help from the Nature Conservancy in negotiating the deal. The purchase was hailed by environmentalists, partly because the Whitneys had previously proposed developing the property with a hotel and other buildings.

That land is now part of the William C. Whitney Wilderness Area, which includes 20 miles of trails and several bodies of water, including Little Tupper Lake and Lake Lila, which the state bought in 1979.

The Nature Conservancy declined to comment on the announcement that the rest of Whitney Park would be put on the market.

The remaining 36,000 acres of Whitney Park has been "at the top of the land protection priority list in New York state for the last 50 years," Bauer said.

Adirondack Council Director of Communications John Sheehan noted it has been listed as a priority in the state Open Space Protection Plan — essentially a wish list of properties the state wants to buy — since 1993.

"We look forward to working with colleagues in the land trust community and state officials to find ways to secure the future protection of these lands," Sheehan said. "It will be a greater challenge without a new bond act to provide additional funding."

Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced on Thursday the state would postpone until next year a voter referendum on the \$3 billion Restore Mother Nature Bond Act because of financial challenges created by the coronavirus pandemic.

"The state has many capital funding sources and potential partners to work with," Sheehan said.

Sheehan noted the Whitney Park lands were listed in the council's 2020 Vision report that includes recommendations on how to fulfill "the dream of creating a true Adirondack Park" through land preservation.

The council has long promoted the creation of a 400,000-acre Bob Marshall Great Wilderness, which would consolidate three wilderness areas, six primitive areas, thousands of acres of state Forest Preserve and more than 170,000 acres of private land, including Whitney Park.

Adirondack Mountain Club Director Michael Barrett said the club wants the state to buy Whitney Park.

"Through state ownership, this land would be a significant addition to the Forest Preserve and a major victory for the Adirondack Park," he said.

"Whitney Park is not only important ecologically, but also in terms of recreational opportunities. If made accessible to the public, it would offer paddling routes rivaled only by the St. Regis Canoe Area and numerous destinations for remote wilderness hiking."

Adirondack Wild's leader, David Gibson, said "a great deal of work has already been done to prepare for this moment."

"The Whitney landscape lying at the very heart of the Adirondack Park has been well studied in the past by conservation scientists and planners at the Adirondack Nature Conservancy, the Adirondack Park Agency and by others," he said.

"At the invitation of the family, I was privileged to tour the property and can attest to the conservation importance of the entire tract, especially its interlacing network of lakes, wetlands and streams.

"Even during the pandemic, this project ought to rise in levels of priority and urgency."