New York Groups Commemorate Anniversary Of Wilderness Act

By Pat Bradley
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The National Wilderness Preservation System Act was signed in 1964. The groundbreaking law to preserve lands across the country is based on New York State’s constitutional “Forever Wild” clause. Members of the NYS Wilderness 50th Steering Committee were in Plattsburgh recently for workshops with students on the Wilderness Act.

On September 3, 1964 President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law. It created a national method of designating wilderness areas, created a system to manage the preserved lands, and initially placed 9 million acres into wilderness. The wilderness lands now total 110 million acres in 44 states.

Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve partner David Gibson says the act has its roots in New York’s Forever Wild protection of the Adirondacks and Catskills. “The Adirondack Park and the Forest Preserve within the Adirondack Park inspired the author of the national Wilderness Act Howard Zahniser. When he read the words of Article 14 Section 1 of our state constitution and he got out with Paul Schaefer to experience the High
Peaks wilderness in 1946 he committed right then and there at the Flowed Lands lean-to, which is still there, to extend Article 14 on a national basis. The United States did not have a system of wilderness anywhere in the country. It had national parks, but not wilderness. So he committed to it right then and there in August of 1946. It took 18 years but the philosophy of Article 14 was then implemented nationwide.”

Adirondack Wild is working with the Rockefeller Institute of Government and colleges across the state to encourage young people to rediscover wild lands. Rockefeller Institute Deputy Director of Operations Bob Bullock says a wide range of people are participating. “We’ve had folks who are professors in theology, folks who are professors in English, folks who are professors in history, all coming together because a true understanding of the wilderness requires you to take a look at things in a very multi-disciplinary fashion. It’s gone far beyond what we every could have imagined for this commemoration.”

Bullock says as they travel to colleges across the state, they are finding a disconnect between the students and their environmental legacy. “Everybody knows that they are somehow touched when they get out into the woods and to the forests. What they don’t understand is the importance of the environmental legacy that was created back in the 1890's. So when they, all of a sudden, are given the opportunity to learn why these woods are so important to who they are as people and how it has been protected and what they can do to take part, If folks just look at it and think the work is done, the policy has been created and so I can kick back and enjoy, then they have lost the lesson here. The lesson that they have to take away from this is it has been protected up to this point, the rest is up to you.”

Gibson believes the NYS’s constitutional protections are stronger than the federal wilderness law. “The voters of NYS get a say on whether or not we change the 54 words of Article 14 in our constitution - the Forever Wild clause. Across the country, the Congress could change the Wilderness Act tomorrow. The voters of the country do not get a say in that. That’s the fundamental difference. Ours on a statewide basis I think we do have a much more secure wilderness here in New York State. That said, every Congress since 1964, with the exception of the latest Congress, has added to the wilderness system across the country. So the 1964 act that Howard Zahniser drafted has proven remarkably effective and resilient and popular across the country.”