

# Editorial, Sunday Gazette

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## **Adirondacks need attention, not wolves and cougars**

The Adirondack Park needs a lot of work to survive another 125 years.

Jobs. Technology. Protection from acid rain and invasive species. More efficient and focused efforts to ensure balance between preservation of the forest lands and development.

What it doesn't need right now are wolves and cougars.

Every so often, some group comes up with a plan to restore some animal to the Adirondacks, harkening back to a century ago before man chased the animals out.

This year, it's wolves and cougars, two top-of-the-food-chain carnivores that backers claim would restore biological diversity to the park and help cull excessive populations of deer. A group called Protect the Adirondacks sent a letter to the state Department of Environmental Conservation last week calling for the agency to include restoration of wolves and cougars in its draft Wildlife Action Plan.

The DEC's draft proposal, released in the spring, neglected to include adding big cats and big canines. And there are good reasons why it shouldn't.

First off, supporters haven't demonstrated any compelling need for top-tier predators to return to the Adirondacks. Even though there's no clear consensus on the actual size of the park's deer population, the Adirondacks aren't overrun with deer, a primary meal for the cougars and wolves. Hunting, bad winters, old-growth forest and development seem to have kept populations in check. One existing Adirondack predator, coyotes, is said to help control the populations by preying on young and sickly deer. The state always can help control explosions of the deer population by extending hunting seasons and loosening limits on kills.

Then there's the question of whether the animals could even survive in the Adirondacks as their ancestors did. An independent study funded by the Defenders of Wildlife group in 1999 on the reintroduction of wolves reached the conclusion that although the park would support wolves, current development trends threatened the animals' long-term survival. Development in the park has only increased in the past 15 years. In other words, there might not be enough food to support a wolf population. The researchers at the time couldn't even agree on what types of wolves would best thrive in the Adirondacks. And now, on top of that, you want to add cougars?

The introduction of predators also raises a public safety question. While wolves and cougars are generally elusive creatures that avoid man, there are going to be interactions if their populations are artificially increased. Do we really want to introduce the prospect of cougar attacks at the same time state officials are trying to expand tourism opportunities in the Adirondacks for hikers, campers, sight-seers and bicyclists? As we go deeper into their habitats, and as the animals become familiar with people, encounters — however rare — will occur. Is even a small risk worth it when there's little ecological justification for bringing the predators back?

A better approach to improving the Adirondack environment comes from a report issued last week by Adirondack Wild, a group dedicated to protecting the forest preserve.

The group says in the first part of a planned two-part report that oversight and political will in the park have shown a "steady and significant" erosion over the last few years, resulting in a threat to the park's ecological balance.

The organization, which plans to issue the second part of its report later this year, makes several initial recommendations based on its observations. Among them are reforms in how subdivisions are designed and permitted by the state, reforming the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) Act to ensure closer compliance to the high standards of the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), providing more funding to better analyze trends and climate change in the park, putting more restrictions on public use of the Forest Preserve, creating more staff positions for wilderness management, and other recommendations. The report can be accessed at [www. adirondackwild.org](http://www.adirondackwild.org).

At the very least, the Adirondack Wild report provides a jumping-off point for further discussion on how to maintain the proper balance between the environmental and economic needs of the park.

And that — not dusting off old proposals to bring back predators into a region that no longer needs or can likely sustain them — is what will help ensure the Adirondack Park survives and thrives in the future.