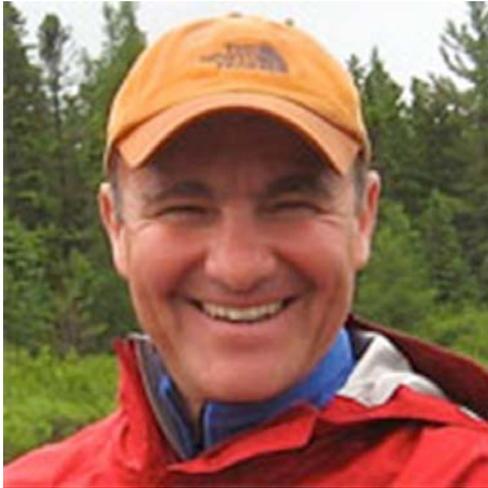


Green group blasts Cuomo administration for Adirondack Park decisions

by [Brian Mann](#), in Saranac Lake, NY
Northeast Public Radio



Chris Amato, a former assistant commissioner at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, is now acting chair of Adirondack Wild. Photo source: Adirondack Wild

Jul 15, 2015 — The last five years have seen surprising new partnerships in New York's Adirondack Park between local government leaders, state agencies, and environmental groups.

The bickering and feuding that marked the early decades of the Park's history have eased dramatically. The Common Ground Alliance, a group that has worked to foster that new, less confrontational tone, meets today in Long Lake.

Not everyone thinks this approach is working. This week, a green group called Adirondack Wild released a report that argues the Adirondack Park Agency and the Department of Environmental Conservation are compromising too often, going too far to promote economic development and tourism inside the blue line.

Brian Mann spoke with Chris Amato, a former assistant commissioner with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and now Adirondack Wild's acting chairman.

"The DEC and the APA seem to have strayed pretty far from their statutory missions, which for both agencies is really to place protection of the Park's

natural resources above every other consideration," Amato argued.

Brian Mann: This report lays out a pretty strong indictment of these two state agencies. It talks about them straying from their path. Describe that. What do you see—your organization—what do you see as the big concerns right now in the Adirondacks?

Chris Amato: The DEC and the APA seem to have strayed pretty far from their statutory missions, which for both agencies is really to place protection of the park's natural resources in front of every other consideration.

BM: Give us one or two of those examples, of things that really raise a red flag in your mind.

CA: With regard to the park agency, they have unfortunately been reviewing and approving projects without a really comprehensive environmental review. I think the ACR case is the poster child for how the APA is not requiring the type of review that this type of project would be required to have if it was in any other park in the state. For example, there was no comprehensive wildlife survey for ACR.

BM: There was litigation, and the park agency prevailed and won that challenge, and there was a very interesting moment when Terry Martino, the executive director of the park agency, suggested that this court decision was a validation.

Terry Martino: "The courts have continued to recognize the thorough work this agency and its staff does in project review and state planning."

BM: What do you think about that?

CA: When a state agency is sued, the courts normally defer to the agency's decision-making process, and the plaintiffs in a case like that face a real uphill battle in attempting to convince the court to overturn a decision by a state agency. So I do think she was really overstating that the courts have validated what the APA is doing.

BM: So that's the Park Agency, but in this report you also single out the Conservation Department, what are your concerns there?

CA: As you know, I worked for DEC for four years as Assistant Commissioner for Natural Resources, and I know from experience that the department has a very challenging job. It's a very difficult job, attempting to balance the competing interests and how to manage the forest preserve. That being said, though, I think it is a disturbing trend, the department actually promoting the constitutional amendment that led to the [NYCO mining exploration on the J Mountain Wilderness Area]. And the amendment itself, I think anyone who

cares about the forest preserve and wilderness areas in particular, has got to be troubled by the idea of exploratory drilling with the idea that eventually there would be an open-pit mine in place of a wilderness area.

BM: So what's the answer? How would you steer the Park Agency and the DEC back onto the path, as you see it?

CA: For the APA, one of the things that's clearly missing is an analysis of the trends within the park. I don't think the agency has a very good handle on the development trends within the park, the resource trends within the park, and in particular, what is happening in terms of fragmentation of the landscape. For DEC, unfortunately what we've seen is even though DEC does have some pretty good information about what's happening on public lands in the park, they've unfortunately been failing to act on it. And we cite to a specific example in the report of the St. Regis canoe area, a heavily overused area, that the resources of the canoe area are being seriously compromised and degraded, and that the wilderness experience of the people in the canoe area is being compromised because of overcrowding. The department really has not done what needs to be done in that area to preserve its unique qualities.

BM: I've been speaking to Chris Amato, who's acting chair of Adirondack Wild. Fascinating, and I'm grateful to you for taking the time.

CA: Thank you, Brian.