Where Wilderness Preservation Began: Albany Event Kicks Off the Wilderness Act’s 50th Anniversary

For Immediate Release, May 12, 2014
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Albany, NY – Three Wilderness Stewardship Awards were presented; a new video, Forever Wild, was shown; and the New York State Legislature released a joint resolution, all commemorating the 50th anniversary of the National Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964 and the 120th anniversary of New York’s “forever wild” constitutional protection for the Forest Preserve. It happened at an anniversary kick-off at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government on May 7. 85 people attended the event sponsored by the NYS Wilderness 50th Steering Committee comprised of the Rockefeller Institute, Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. New York’s celebration on this Wilderness anniversary is one of many across the nation.

The day’s keynote speaker was NYS DEC Executive Deputy Commissioner Marc Gerstman, who recounted the state’s rich conservation heritage that has resulted in over three million acres of Forest Preserve in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks and over 750,000 acres of private land under conservation easement. Gerstman celebrated the contributions to “forever wild” from New Yorkers like late 19th century Adirondack Surveyor Verplanck Colvin and 20th century wilderness advocates Bob Marshall, founder of The Wilderness Society, Howard Zahniser, author of the National Wilderness Act, and Paul Schaefer, founder of Friends of the Forest Preserve.

The Committee presented Wilderness Stewardship Awards to:

- **Evelyn Greene**, writer, photographer and citizen scientist whose strong advocacy and biological knowledge has strengthened her community, Park organizations and the Adirondack wilderness. Evelyn is the daughter of Carolyn Schaefer and leading 20th century Adirondack wilderness advocate Paul Schaefer. Evelyn and her husband Don Greene reside in North Creek;
• **Ed Zahniser**, historian and spokesman for the American wilderness, writer, editor, essayist and poet who has deepened Americans’ understanding of wilderness in their lives, and within the greater community of life. Ed is the son of Alice Zahniser and Howard Zahniser, author and chief lobbyist of the 1964 National Wilderness Preservation Act. He lives with his wife Christine in Sheperdstown, West Virginia;

• **Yusuf Burgess**, inspired outdoorsman, outdoor teacher and mentor to teenagers at risk from drugs and violence, whose sustained efforts have transformed the lives of many urban young people through exposure to nature and the wild Adirondacks. Yusuf lives in Albany with his wife Cherie and their family. His work is profiled in the acclaimed 2010 film *Mother Nature’s Child* and he was New York’s representative to the national *Children and Nature Network*.

The video, *Forever Wild*, was produced by award-winning outdoor photographer and author Carl Heilman (*Wild Visions, Inc*) and Adirondack singer-songwriter Dan Berggren (*Sleeping Giant Records*) on behalf of Adirondack Wild and other sponsors. It will become publicly available later this year.

The joint State Assembly-Senate resolution was sponsored by Environmental Conservation Committee Chairs, Assemblyman Robert Sweeney and Senator Mark Grisanti, with many co-sponsors. The Legislature recognizes that New York State has a special role to play in this year’s national recognition of the Wilderness Act. The state’s constitutional protection of the Forest Preserve in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks inspired the author and chief lobbyist of the National Wilderness Act, Howard Zahniser, during eighteen years of drafting federal Wilderness legislation. The resolution reads, in part:

**WHEREAS**, The act of designating a wilderness by law, where nature's reign is given full expression, forever free from mechanization and human domination, is one of the most important acts of American democracy and governance; and

**WHEREAS**, New Yorkers have been at the forefront of such actions since 1894, when Article XIV, Section 1 of the State Constitution, the "Forever Wild" clause, was approved by the people;

**RESOLVED**, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the National Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964, and the 120th Anniversary of New York State's Forever Wild constitutional protection.

The celebration concluded with a panel discussion on the challenges and opportunities of wilderness and wild land management and stewardship in the 21st Century. Panelists were: Kathy Regan of the NYS Adirondack Park Agency, Rob Davies of the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, Dan Plumley of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve and Chad Dawson, Professor Emeritus at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

The NYS Wilderness 50th committee is partnering with faculty and students in the State University system and at independent colleges to mark the anniversary through events and activities distinctive to each college. A schedule of these events, many of which will take place in the fall, will be posted at [www.adirondackwild.org/wilderness50](http://www.adirondackwild.org/wilderness50).