Perspectives on an Adirondack Landscape

BY CALI BROOKS

Introduction

The Adirondack Park has been, for more than a century, an important experiment in conservation that should serve as a model for managing environments where people and wilderness coexist. Unfortunately, many residents feel the preservation of Adirondack communities has not historically received the same attention as the preservation of forest and wild land. For years, money and energy within the Park have predominantly been directed to efforts at environmental preservation and wilderness protection, separate from rather than in concert with helping human communities thrive. This perception damages residents’ support for wilderness preservation, and threatens the future of the entire Adirondack Park.

Some residents of the Adirondack Park are beginning to recognize the importance of their own power to build strong local institutions. From the growth of village libraries and the commitment to building new schools to the creation of an Adirondack Community Trust, individuals and groups are beginning to work collectively to create sustainable communities in the Park. But isolation, a failure to communicate, and a lack of coordination still hamper many local efforts, making it difficult for a regional community preservation movement to gain momentum at the Park level.

The Adirondack Project (TAP), was launched in 1997 at the Blue Mountain Center, in Blue Mountain Lake, New York. The goal of The Adirondack Project is to help build a regional movement that will support both community and environmental preservation in the Adirondacks. Despite the extraordinary people and organizations working on local community or environmental issues in different parts of the Adirondacks, there has been limited conversation among them about broader issues. Few neutral forums exist where conflicting views on Adirondack conservation and development can be discussed, and opportunities for regional dialogue are rare. TAP intends to bring together individuals, issue-based groups and local organizations to talk, listen, and find common ground in the search for a sustainable future in the Adirondacks.

This is an excerpt from a full report completed in 1998. It is based largely on TAP's own interviews with Adirondack residents — year-round and seasonal, native-born and transplanted, employed and unemployed, hunters, trappers, guides, environmentalists, business owners, and local government officials — and draws on their cultural legacy as members of a human community that has lived in, used and preserved this land for more than a century. Other sources include researchers working in the region and information compiled from resource groups based in the Adirondacks. As a summary of the much longer report, available from TAP, POB 109 Blue Mt. Lake, NY 12812 cali@netheaven.com (518-352-7391), this article presents some of the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental challenges perceived by Adirondackers, followed by discussions of many of the strategies for change being pursued.

The Economy

“[W]e need to recognize that the Adirondack economy is in dire straits.”

—Ernest Hohmeyer, President, Adirondack Economic Development Corporation

“One of the Adirondack Region’s most valuable economic assets is its well-deserved reputation as a vast, pristine, rugged and uncluttered refuge from the hubbub and ills of modern society. This reputation markets the region, attracts and holds business and visitors, and provides the basis for the regional economy. If that reputation is carefully nurtured it will become more precious with time. But if the Adirondack Region loses its special qualities in pursuit of economic growth, it will also lose its economic niche and one of its most valuable economic assets.”

—Environmental Advocates, The Adirondack Condition: Economic, Environmental, and Social Well-Being
Observations

Historically, the economy of the sparsely-populated Adirondacks centered on farming, mining, trapping and forestry — an economy based on the extraction of natural resources — and during this time many communities prospered. The profitability of these activities then decreased rapidly over the last fifty years, and investment in alternative industries remained low, while seasonal population and tourism have increased. This shift happened most dramatically after 1967 when Interstate-87 was built, putting the Adirondack Park within a day’s drive of 55 million people. So it’s not surprising that many Adirondackers have very little sense of security about their current and future economic status.

This concern was heightened in October 1997, when Champion announced it was selling all its Adirondack Park land as well as its Deferiet paper mill, located outside the Park. The Adirondacks have a product that the world wants, but as competition from forests in the Southeastern U.S. and other countries rises, the future of the forest products industry in the Adirondacks is uncertain. The forest and paper-products industry, as an employer and a neighbor, is extremely important to Adirondack residents. However, changes in the global economy are affecting the local economy in the Adirondack Park.

By talking with residents about the wide range of economic issues affecting them, TAP has been able to look more closely at the challenges facing the region. A central fact for the Park’s new economy has to do with the seasonal and concentrated nature of many of its jobs. Many businesses, open from May to October, close down entirely in winter. Some parts of the Champlain Valley do not experience the dramatic seasonal swings in employment seen in the Central Adirondacks, but unemployment is still a major issue for them. As a result, important work related benefits and health insurance are almost non-existent in the Adirondacks.

Another hurdle on the way to economic vitality mentioned by respondents was the environmental regulations imposed on development. Some respondents mentioned the threat they perceived from the absolutism of the Blue Line, which has assumed metaphorical significance. These respondents feel that living within a Park results in a lack of control over one’s life and one’s community. A few highly publicized business developments that never came to fruition are mentioned: the five-star Gleneagles hotel for Lake Placid in 1989 and the $130 million state prison proposed for Tupper Lake in 1997.

A 1996 survey by the Lake Placid/Essex County Visitors Bureau estimates that 8.5 to 10 million overnight visits are made to the region each year, with each visit bringing in at least $100. Many communities in the Adirondacks are looking for ways to jump on the bandwagon: Indian Lake is promoting tourism based on snowmobiling; the Lake Champlain region is promoting historical and bicycle tourism; and Lake Placid is promoting sports tourism. The region as a whole is looking at eco-tourism.

In some cases, existing businesses are re-inventing themselves to respond to tourism more effectively. The Mountaineer in Keene Valley is an outdoor and sporting goods store specializing in clothing, gear and books. Opened in 1975 by George and Vinnie McClelland, it combines services to summer visitors with year-round sales to residents. Vinnie McClelland points to the changing nature of his business due to increases in tourism: “The Adirondacks have become a popular place. The traffic here has really grown — you can see it in our business and at the trailheads. These days people come to buy equipment for recreation here in the Adirondacks, as well as to purchase equipment and prepare for trips to places like Nepal. We have reinvented our original business ethic to include many more types of outdoor activities.”

Strategies for Change

I found residents eager to expand and diversify the options for local employment, and discovered many examples of new and alternative approaches to strengthening communities’ economies. Among the new businesses residents frequently mentioned as possible additions to the Park economy were adventure and ecotourism, light industry such as small-scale lumber mills, biotechnology, telecommunication, cottage or value added industries such as Adirondack chair manufacturing, cabinet making, sports and historical tourism, and education. Mary Hawthorne, Community Development specialist at the Adirondack Economic Development Corporation (AEDC) based in Saranac Lake, said to me, “I think the most important source of jobs here is going to be in telecommunications and the technology field, and updating and connecting our tourist facilities.”
of high-tech outdoor gear. When the Mountaineer first opened its doors, we catered to woodsmen of the Adirondacks, because that was who our clientele was. Now we cater to the global outdoors person, and this includes Adirondackers.”

In other towns, tourism has been the spur for new businesses and for collaboration among residents, small business, and local government to develop new projects. Marcy Neville, director of community economic development for the town of Moriah, is involved with the Champlain Valley Heritage Network, a citizen group working to establish a more focused identity that will attract tourists to the Champlain Valley. Neville believes that tourism adds to the base of the economy and that Lake Champlain has a huge potential as a tourist destination, but says that communities need to develop the infrastructure for tourism first: “We need more hotels, a good marina, and businesses that rent kayaks, bikes and boats. Neighboring towns need to sit down and link together interesting packages and promote the region as a whole, not on an individual basis.”

Neville adds that working with the Champlain Valley Heritage Network has helped her understand how different towns can collaborate on regional projects that benefit everyone, yet keep their own distinct identities. “We don’t have the High Peaks, or the Fulton Lake Chain, but we have Lake Champlain. All of us need to see that quality is maintained, not homogenized. Communities have to figure out who they are and what they want to be and then come together as a region. Planning is important; it’s not a dirty word. And, the economy will benefit from it.”

This collaborative approach to planning and economic development is not limited to tourism; I found examples of it in several other sectors of the economy. Instead of searching for a business that will move into the Park and then attempting to clear the development hurdles, some communities are promoting pre-approved sites and incubator buildings (they offer a large size, cheap power, and lower taxes) to attract business and industry. This new form of development depends upon bringing together residents, business, government and environmental leaders to identify sites and test them for resident and environmental approval early in the process. Once the sites are approved, developers will have a significantly greater chance of appealing to businesses looking to relocate or open a new facility in the Adirondack Park. Examples include the Adirondack Regional Airport Business Park in Lake Clear and a small manufacturing spec building in the town of Moriah.

Strategies involving regional cooperation include efforts by the AEDC, established in 1984 to promote small-business development through technical assistance, lending, and community economic planning. Ernest Hohmeyer, AEDC’s executive director, told TAP: “The best stewards of the land are those citizens living in a healthy economy.”

In January 1998, AEDC organized a panel discussion on the economic future of the Adirondack Park region, bringing together business leaders, local government officials, and environmental leaders. At the end of the meeting, Hohmeyer called for regional-wide support for an Adirondack Economic Initiative, and received $500,000 from New York State to support the project. The result has been an economic agenda that promotes preservation of the region’s unique quality of life and environmental integrity, while sustaining existing businesses, promoting opportunities and developing year-round employment. To assist in accomplishing this, AEDC created an “Adirondack Roundtable” comprised of various stakeholders within the regional economy to obtain consensus on an Adirondack economic agenda.

Finally, the most effective strategies TAP identified for changing the economy of the Park revolved around the linkage of environmental and community preservation. The conversation about economic well-being for Adirondack residents, it seems, has finally reached the level of importance that discussions of environmental preservation have long enjoyed. It is an opportune moment to integrate the two concerns, since the resource-based economic vitality of the Park is inextricably bound up with its environmental health. Forums such as the Adirondack Community Trust, the Adirondack Initiative, Adirondack Local Government Day, and the new Adirondack Information Resource Library at Paul Smith’s College (which will help residents and localities with the information they need for future development and planning), are examples of approaches that combine economic planning with environmental preservation, and involve the Adirondack community in the entire process.

Social and Cultural Conditions

“Who is the local Adirondacker? He or she is the person whose roots bore deep into the unyielding mountain soil; whose art is the pink and blue sky in the morn-
ing and the salmon-colored sunsets at night; who endures brutal winters just to witness another wondrous spring; who will help his neighbor if asked, but also respects his privacy. He or she is the person who will work a variety of jobs to exist in their mountains; who will forgo wealth in an urban area for the scent of balsam, and who will look with distrust on anyone who dictates what you can or cannot do with your own property.”
– Christine Snide, Supervisor of Long Lake

Observations

There is no single social reality in the Adirondack Park, but TAP’s interviews identify some shared values and principles that draw together the Park’s diverse people and create a sense of connectedness. There is a love for the Adirondacks that transcends ideology and class, and a rich legacy of stewardship of the Adirondack forests, wetlands, rivers, lakes, families, communities, wildlife and farmlands.

These values spring partly from the nature of life in most small Adirondack Park communities. People know each other well in the Park’s small towns and rural villages; extended families connect generations; and a network of relationships sustains neighbors and communities. Conflicts and controversies exist, but usually involve only a few players; most communities are sustained socially by the majority of residents’ resisting the impulse to “take sides.” The polarized debate between preservationists and property rights activists, for example, has dominated politics in the region for the past thirty years. But the social reality of political difference in the Adirondacks is more complex. There are hunters, for example, who are ardent Forever Wild advocates, and environmental activists who work for International Paper, the Park’s largest landowner. And, commerce conquers all. Those whose livelihoods depend on sales within the community are often cautious about alienating whole groups of people.

Regional preservation must be based on understanding the real social conditions that affect diverse communities in the Adirondack Park. TAP’s interviews about social conditions were wide-ranging: we asked residents to talk about everything from the nature of local identity, the social economy and politics to the impact of health care, education, and the media on their communities. I discovered widespread problems and challenging social conditions, but also found a complex social reality filled with existing and future opportunities.

One of the first questions I asked residents in interviews was how they would describe their sense of community within the Adirondacks. The most common words used in response were “disjointed” and “parochial.” Residents have a deep respect and passion for their own towns and hamlets but often neglect to look beyond those borders. There may be some who take pride in the broad identity of “Adirondacker,” especially those whose families have lived in the region for generations, but there are also rivalries among towns, and parochial loyalties that remain obstacles to regional identification and development. Dean Lefebvre, supervisor of the town of Altamont, says: “We’ve got serious difficulties with communication and regional cooperation. Many people and communities have similar ideas, but we waste time not working together.”

This tension is heightened by the broader problem of “outside” influence by state agencies on localities, which many people discussed in terms of the “crumbling foundations” of their communities. In most parts of the Adirondacks, residents do not feel in control when it comes to dealing with the state on economic, social and environmental issues.

Other issues, while seemingly local, have an impact on the development of a regional sense of community. The lack of media covering the entire Park was an example of this. Jim Frenette, a former county legislator from Franklin County, described how the narrow range of local media sources made his work more difficult: “The paper I read is the Adirondack
The conversation about economic well-being for Adirondack residents, it seems, has finally reached the level of importance that discussions of environmental preservation have long enjoyed.

Residents’ concerns about education are amplified by the continuing migration of young people out of the region. According to the New York State report titled, “Official Population Projections for New York State Counties,” the percentage of high school graduates leaving the Adirondack Park far surpassed the state average. The community college system is small and underfunded, and until 1997 there was no four-year college in the Park. In 1990, only 8.6 percent of Adirondack adults had B.A.s. Most of the Adirondack communities have very few jobs for high school or college graduates, and the unspoken rule is that locals are only successful if they leave; those that stay or return have failed.

TAP’s interviews about social conditions in the Park included questions about politics and the nature of political participation in the region, and respondents had varying views. Historically, the region is overwhelmingly Republican, and there is a strong allegiance to the party. However, some residents said they wished for more diversity in the political system. Traditional electoral politics are only a small part of the political landscape of the Adirondack Park. Many Adirondack residents, when moved, can be extremely motivated: they attend Adirondack Park Agency meetings; illegally drive their all-terrain vehicles onto state lands for a protest; show up at hearings about a proposed Wal-Mart, a hundred at a time for two weeks straight; and turn out by the thousands to support a new prison.

The political power of certain Adirondack businesses like Finch Pruyn, the Glens Falls-based paper company, was an inhibiting factor mentioned by some residents I interviewed, who believe local governments are unwilling to challenge such important pillars of the economy. Other residents expressed concern about the impact of large “outside” businesses on the local economy, and hailed the protests by Lake Placid citizens that stopped the giant retail chain Wal-Mart from building a new store there. There was an equally active group of supporters for the retail store.

A recurrent theme I found in many Adirondack communities was the absence of local planning and zoning and the need for “home rule.” Many communities have attempted to zone and plan their hamlets and towns, but efforts have either lacked resolution or become contentious. Indian Lake, Tupper Lake and the town of Saranac have tried and failed to organize community members to create a long-term vision for the future of their communities. Jim Frenette felt that public service agencies for the retail store.

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stake to change. The social conditions that affect the Adirondack Park are so many and so complex that efforts at change must necessarily seem partial and incomplete. In several communities, though, residents are attempting to address some of the immediate problems they face in health and social services, education, and political participation.

In the health sector, a multi-county rural community health needs assessment has begun for Clinton, Franklin, and Essex counties. Although only portions of the Adirondack Park are included, the project, which summarizes the priorities for health care and establishes regional partnerships, is a strong example of regional collaboration. In the meantime, some of the slack has been taken up by the health centers of the Hudson Headwaters Health Network, set up in 1974 when the southern part of the Adirondacks, designated as a “medically under-served region,” began receiving state and federal funds for primary care. HHHN doctors make numerous weekly visits to health centers where physicians assistants staff them full-time, many of these Centers are open over 45 hours per week.

At the college level, Paul Smith’s College has developed an Adirondack curriculum in conjunction with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. The Bachelor of Science Degree in Natural Resources has two concentrations, Environmental Science and Natural Resource Management and Policy. Students will design a Park-based capstone project, integrating their academic knowledge with a regional participatory experience.

Other aspects of Adirondack culture are the basis for new groups working on community preservation such as the Adirondack Architectural Heritage. Support and nurturing of the arts has long been important to Adirondack residents. Even though many people interviewed said they often left the Park for culture and social activities, organizations such as the Adirondack Lakes Center for the Arts in Blue Mountain Lake, the Old Forge Arts Center, Lake Placid Center for the Arts, Lake George Arts Project and the Pendragon Theater Company have gained a dedicated local following. In communities such as Saranac Lake, the arts are being used as a tool for economic development. Bob Pettee, the founder and managing director of Pendragon, highlighted the Festival of the Lakes, a three-day, multi-dimensional affair taking place in three different towns simultaneously. “It was important for us to attempt to break the often rigid lines that separate our neighboring towns. The Adirondacks has a rich history and natural resources to inspire art, writing, poetry, and theater, and all of it should be available to people in every community.”

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One little-noticed aspect of Adirondack culture that offers a strategy for organizing change is the way residents map their communities by the invisible boundaries of watersheds. Adirondackers follow their watersheds, and are thus more connected to their region and natural environment than many realize. The Adirondack Park can be divided along its five watersheds, and those people living in a particular drainage read the same papers, watch the same television stations, see the same doctors, drive the same roads to support the same stores, hike the same trails, go to the same schools, beaches, fishing holes, movie theaters and cultural events — while rarely crossing over into neighboring watersheds. It is very common to meet someone born and raised in one watershed who has never been to another. This cultural tradition is worth examining as different communities attempt to define their relationships with the land.

The Environment

“There is a camaraderie amongst Adirondackers, due to shared economic struggle, shared small town values, and a perception that the residents don’t care about the environment.”

—George Canon, Newcomb
Town Supervisor

“The Park’s environmental health is second to none. No other region of the state offers the outstanding array of attributes in the Adirondacks, from the cleanest air and water to the fewest hazardous-and toxic-waste sites and industrial landfills. The region has the greatest abundance and diversity of wildlife and the lowest levels of pollution from motor vehicles; the lowest percentage of power produced from fossil fuels and the widest assortment of recreational opportunities.”


Observations

It is difficult for some residents of the Adirondacks to hear that their region’s environmental health is “second to none” when their communities are visibly suffering from poverty, neglect, and isolation. If the region’s health is measured only by its environmental well-being and not by the well-being of its people, Adirondackers will feel as if they are invisible, and will believe that environmentalists have no interest
in helping humans and communities thrive.

For many years, environmental regulations have been blamed for the economic and social hard times affecting Adirondack communities. Numerous residents feel the Adirondack Park Agency is the barrier to attracting business into their towns, and they blame the regulatory agency for the lagging economy; others are truly glad the APA is here. Many others resent the idea of distant powers from Albany and downstate telling them how to live their lives, and feel environmentalists are aligned with those powers. Business and political leaders are angry at environmental groups who fail to come up with ideas for appropriate economic development.

In fact, a black-and-white distinction between “environmentalists” and “local residents” does not exist in the Adirondacks. In my interviews for TAP, I came to understand that there are as many different definitions for environmentalism as there are for wilderness. Membership in a conservation group is one kind of environmentalism; knowing where to find a prime fishing hole, foraging lands for deer or the best rock-climbing route is another. What is true, however, is that while the majority of Adirondackers support protection of the environment, they also want their towns and communities to thrive. However, the posturing of those labeled environmentalists and those labeled property rights activists, has caused a huge amount of conflict in the region. The extreme positions taken by some members of each group tend to dominate the discourse and make communication difficult.

**Strategies for Change**

Some small-scale projects illustrate ways for communities to connect through maintaining commonly-held environmental resources that are also important to their economies.

Throughout the Adirondacks, ancient pathways used by Native Americans and the first settlers, guides and trappers are still part of a trail system used today. Cross-country ski trails, snowmobile routes, canoe routes and mountain bike trails like the Jackrabbit Trail that connects Keene Valley, Keene, Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Paul Smiths are important to residents and attractive to visitors who ski and hunt. But the trails can also be a resource for developing regional consciousness. Residents of these towns regularly come together to look at issues of access, trail maintenance and usage, creating an opportunity for communities to collaborate on economically beneficial conservation.

A new development in the Park is revival and preservation of the Adirondack Railroad. Adirondack Railway Preservation Society (ARPS), a non-profit, volunteer based organization, was selected by the New York State Department of Transportation to develop the Adirondack Travel Corridor. ARPS has received tremendous support from a wide spectrum of volunteers and organizations. It has worked with recreational organizations, bus tours, international tours, environmental groups, economic development groups and local governments. They have set up mountain-bike and canoe programs with local sports shops. People can bike or canoe for half the day, and return home on the train. There are ample opportunities for communities to link together to use this resource, enhancing opportunities for community conservation. ARPS spokesman Randy Fisher said to me, “We will keep this as environmentally sensitive as possible because we can control the amount of visitors to certain areas to prevent possible environmental problems. It’s going to be a long voyage, but the possibilities are endless. The support from the many sectors in the Adirondacks has been key to our success.”

**Conclusion**

The Adirondack Project identified an array of problems facing the region. Year-round residents face formidable challenges to survive, much less to undertake projects that transcend individual needs and interests. But TAP has also found a tenacious and heartening quality evident among Adirondack residents. Most Adirondackers are committed to preserving the character of the natural environment that surrounds their communities. Through small-scale local projects, creative collaborations and regional linkages, residents of the Adirondack Park are beginning to wrestle with the challenge of strengthening their communities while preserving the Adirondack wilderness. As Chris Shaw, former editor of *Adirondack Life* said: “Adirondackers have a natural affinity for place. If you give people a stake in decision-making about the place they live, it will help to instill within them a natural conservation ethic.”