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THE ADIRONDACK MOUNTAINS: WILDERNESS P-  
RESERVATION OR BIOREGIONAL VISION?

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There has been, for many years, considerable debate over the efficacy of the different levels of government in the solution of environmental problems. On the one hand, it is believed that a strongly authoritarian government, or oligarchy, will be necessary if widespread disruptions to the environment are to be arrested.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is thought that meaningful and permanent solutions for environmental problems can only develop within political institutions permitting active involvement by people.<sup>2</sup>

This debate reflects a conflict along similar political lines in the Adirondack region of New York State. Since the establishment of the Adirondack Forest Preserve in the 1880s, there has been ongoing controversy. A fundamental issue is the balance of power between state and local governments; in the Adirondack mountains, local governments felt their powers usurped when the Adirondack Park was formed in 1892.

The park contains a mix of private and state-owned land. Approximately 60

While the concerns of local government are rooted fundamentally in issues of self-determination and autonomy, they are usually expressed in terms of land-use control and taxation.<sup>4</sup> A large amount of evidence supports the assertion that local governments desire more power to deal with land-use questions. There is also evidence that residents of the area are interested in measures to protect the environment.<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of deep ecology, local control is critical for personal empowerment; it is the appropriate level of political power in the bioregional vision.

The Ausable River passes through the northeast corner of the Adirondack Park. Originating in two branches, the East Branch drains Lower and Upper Ausable Lakes in an area known as the High Peaks, and the West Branch forms from tributaries that converge in South Meadow, also in the High Peaks region. The mountains are heavily forested in this area, and the flow of water is augmented by numerous brooks and springs. The Ausable is a swiftly flowing river containing many waterfalls, gorges, rifts, and sections of whitewater. The East Branch drops 1420 feet (430 meters) over the course of approximately 35 miles (56 kilometers), and the West Branch falls 1505 feet (457 meters) over the same distance. After the two branches join in the town of Ausable Forks, the river drops only 40 feet (12 meters) over the next 13 miles (21 kilometers), flowing through a broad valley bounded by mountains until it reaches the town of Keeseville. From here, it is seven more miles (eleven kilometers) to Lake Champlain, which the river enters through two swampy outlets of an approximate elevation of 100 feet (30 meters). In this last seven miles, the river flows over a series of

waterfalls through Ausable Chasm, a narrow gorge about 100 feet (30 meters) deep and ten to forty feet (three to twelve meters) wide. A hydroelectric facility is located at this point, and Ausable Chasm has been a regional tourist attraction for over a century.

Which type of political economy will best protect the environment of the Ausable River Valley, a strongly authoritarian government or small self-governing communities? The two approaches are embodied in concrete terms for the Ausable River Valley. The centralized view is reflected in various controls imposed by the State of New York. The decentralized view has been captured in a proposal for sustainable resettlement recently published by Nick Woodin.<sup>6</sup>

Almost all of the shoreline of the Ausable River is private land. Development in these lands is strictly regulated by the Adirondack Park Agency using state-level zoning articulated in the State of New York Adirondack Park Land Use and Development Plan. Most of the upper reaches of both East and West Branches are surrounded by land in "resource management," the most restrictive of the zoning categories, at 15 principal buildings per square mile (42.7 acres or 17.1 hectares per building). Starting at about eight miles (thirteen kilometers) above Ausable Forks, the shorelines of both branches are predominantly a mix of "rural use" (75 principal buildings per square mile or 8.5 acres/3.4 hectares per building) and "low intensity" (200 principal buildings per square mile or 3.2 acres/1.3 hectares per building). The land in the towns along the river is classified "moderate intensity" (500 principal buildings per square mile or 1.3 acres/0.5 hectares per building) and "hamlet" (no development limitations).<sup>7</sup>

Individuals wishing to build on private land must obtain a permit from the Adirondack Park Agency in addition to any permits required by the local government of the town in which their property is located. The permitting process allows the State of New York to exercise control over the use and development of private land. The state has abdicated its power in only a few instances where the town has prepared a local land-use plan meeting the approval of the Adirondack Park Agency. Even in these cases, the state relinquishes jurisdiction over smaller projects, while retaining powers to review projects of larger significance.<sup>8</sup> None of these towns are located along the Ausable River.

Under another set of resource classifications, the State of New York has implemented a second layer of regulations governing private land in the Ausable River Valley. Most of the Ausable River, including both East and West Branches before their convergence at Ausable Forks, has been designated "recreational" under the State of New York Wild Scenic and Recreational River System; the exception is the uppermost nine miles of the East Branch, which has been declared "scenic." Special restrictions govern development in Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers. These restrictions give the Adirondack Park Agency greater latitude in matters such as setback and removal of vegetation. Clearly, state government has centralized authority traditionally entrusted to local governments in order to protect the natural resources of the region.

Woodin's proposal for sustainable resettlement is based on an ecological history of the Ausable Valley with special attention to agricultural practices and architecture. Moving from the premise that concern for the future necessitates a fundamental realignment of human values and attitudes, Woodin offers specific advice for housing, farming, and forestry. His suggestions are rooted in practical concerns for energy consumption and economic cost. His ideas for housing come from homesteading manuals, such as *Your Engineered House* by Rex Roberts, and they emphasize the conservation of heat and solar designs. His propositions for farming recognize the limits of economic reality and the cold climate of the Adirondack region; nevertheless, he envisions small, diversified farms producing a variety of vegetables with the aid of solar greenhouses in the winter months. His analysis of forestry is aimed at providing a small woodlot owner with a modicum of cash income, sufficient to maintain a modest lifestyle, while removing only a few trees in a way that minimizes ecological disturbances. As well, a woodlot could yield other marketable products taken on a sustainable basis, such as maple syrup. In Woodin's words, "we are talking about a material life that is based on regionally appropriate agricultures (in the widest sense), and their harvests of renewable raw materials and energy, a life of limits, less consumption, more outdoor work."<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the reality of the Adirondack Park Agency, it could be argued that many of Woodin's ideas are unrealistic or impractical. Is there evidence that local economics can develop autonomously? Will the hidden hand of multinational corporations prove too disruptive working hand in glove with centralized governments exercising authoritarian powers? Will local governments be able to facilitate the process of community-building and a larger social movement emphasizing self-sufficiency? What about pollution that crosses jurisdictional lines? How will local governments deal with it in the bioregional vision? Will injured parties have difficulty obtaining timely remedies and adequate compensation? Will institutional arrangements promote alternatives easier and cheaper for those whose moral ineptitude leads them to pollute?

On the other hand, what are the problems with the centralized approach for managing the Ausable River Valley? What dangers lurk in the actions taken by the State of New York in establishing the Adirondack Park and the Wild Scenic and Recreational River System? What is the chance that the environment will be more harmed than helped by this approach in the long term? Will a centralized government agency ultimately prove more responsible to multinational corporations than the environment? Is there some way that the Adirondack Park Agency serves economic interests by making an Adirondack Park available for use by industry?

Consider the recent interest in tourism. It has been touted as a means to improve the local economy of the Adirondack region without deleterious impacts on the natural resources. A number of regional organizations have promoted tourism in the Adirondack region over the past decade. These organizations

include the Olympic Regional Development Authority, the Adirondack North Country Association, and the Adirondack Council, the staunchest advocate of environmental preservation in the Adirondack Park. The pervasiveness of support for tourism is reflected in the explicit endorsement by such a panoply of otherwise disparate interests. The Adirondack Council, for example, justifies its proposal for a scenic roadway system on the premise that "scenic vistas are the windows through which travelers see the Adirondack Park. As such, they are vital to the tourism-based economy and deserve special care and maintenance. Like the Wild, Scenic and Recreational River System set-up by New York State to protect and manage river corridors, the Adirondack Park needs a scenic roadway system. To achieve lasting protection for the wild and scenic qualities of the Park's travel corridors, certain sections should receive special designation as scenic highways." In a 1990 report of a special state commission to examine conditions of the Adirondack Park, a number of recommendations were offered to promote tourism.<sup>10</sup>

Yet isn't tourism a part of industrialism? Doesn't it fuel the economies of international oil and automotive industries, as well as their numerous subsidiaries? Isn't most equipment used by tourists manufactured elsewhere though it might be used in a scenic area? And isn't the global pollution resulting from the growth of these industries affecting the hydrology and biology of natural areas through ozone depletion, global warming, acid precipitation, and so on? As strict land controls in the Adirondack Park are increasingly justified on the basis of an economic rationale promoting tourism, then the centralized approach of the Adirondack Park Agency will become more and more like old-fashioned progressive conservation.

Under the vigorous leadership of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot at the turn of the century, progressive conservationists in the United States argued that the role of government was to manage the use of resources so that a supply would be available *ad infinitum*; in other words, governmental policies facilitate industrial progress by insuring a supply of resources on which industry was dependent.

The emphasis of progressive conservation was on centralized decision-making at the highest levels of government. According to historian Samuel P. Hays, "the crux of the gospel of efficiency lay in a rational and scientific method of making basic technological decisions through a single, central authority." This viewpoint provided little accommodation for citizen participation. Although the progressive conservationists enjoyed the support of many local organizations concerned about natural resources, they were not interested in having these groups make input on matters of actual policy. As Hays noted about conservation leaders, "their entire program emphasized a flow of authority from the top down and minimized the political importance of institutions which reflected the organized sentiment of local communities. Pinchot and Roosevelt did take into account grass-roots, but only to facilitate administration and to prevent their decisions

from arousing too much resentment.”

Another important part of progressive conservation was the role of professional societies. These societies legitimized the philosophy that resources should be conserved for utilization by industry on a sustainable basis. The Roosevelt Administration maintained close communications with such professional societies as the American Society of Civil Engineers, the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, and the American Institute of Mining Engineers. According to Hays, “Theodore Roosevelt had an almost unlimited faith in applied science. During his presidency, he repeatedly sought the advice of expert commissions, especially in the field of resource policy, and he looked upon the conservation movement as an attempt to apply this knowledge.”<sup>11</sup>

In much the fashion of progressive conservation years ago, conservation biologists at present attempt to influence governments throughout the world to prohibit development so natural areas can retain and enhance biodiversity. The difference between then and now is that applied scientists of today (conservation biologists) work primarily through nonprofit organizations, whereas applied scientists a century ago (engineers) worked through professional societies. Influential in such organizations as The Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society, Defenders of Wildlife and in the Adirondack region, The Adirondack Council, conservation biologists bend the ear of policy-makers. They play a strong role in the designation, acquisition, and management of wilderness areas by both the federal government of the United States and the state government of New York. They support and encourage ecotourism in developing nations under the ostensible belief that tourism might protect habitat, especially in the tropics.

A recent proposal for wilderness in the Adirondacks called for “the creation of a 4.5 million acre Wilderness reserve with land buffers and corridors leading to other wildland areas, such as will be restored in Vermont; and the eventual reduction of the permanent human presence in most of the Park.”<sup>12</sup> Based on principles formulated by conservation biologists Reed Noss and Larry Harris, the Adirondack wilderness would be a core preserve specifically for the protection of biodiversity. The proposal explicitly includes acquisition by the State of New York of about one million acres of land currently in private hands. In addition, state government would be empowered with the right of first refusal to buy all private land offered for sale. Finally, the state would be obligated to provide support for people to relocate outside the park.

While a strong state government appears necessary to implement this proposal for wilderness in the Adirondacks, there is the concomitant danger that this approach will also promote certain economic programs, like tourism, which may prove counterproductive in the long run. Moreover, a wilderness that excludes people may be an inappropriate strategy in any event. R. Edward Grumbine, in *Ghost Bears*, describes a program for protecting the biodiversity of the Cascade region based on principles of ecosystem management parallel to the above pro-

posal for the Adirondack region. In his conclusion, however, Grumbine writes that such an approach is not the best long term strategy from the perspective of deep ecology: "For, even though scientific ecosystem management may flourish in the coming years, biological diversity will not be sustained if new ways of managing nature do not also transform how we experience our place in nature, how we manage ourselves. The threat of scientific ecosystem management is that it will preempt the possibility of learning to live sustainably."<sup>13</sup> This prospect is exactly what appears to be the likely result of proposals for protecting the Adirondack wilderness using the authoritarian powers of state government. Despite its obvious risks, the decentralized approach of bioregionalism may be the best strategy for long term sustainability of both people and the natural world in the Ausable River Valley and elsewhere.

## NOTES

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2. A. Dobson, *Green Political Thought* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 117-129; W. Johnson, *Muddling Toward Frugality* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1978); K. Sale, *Dwellers in the Land* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985); E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973).
3. F. Graham Jr., *The Adirondack Park: A Political History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); J. E. Keller, *Adirondack Wilderness: A Story of Man and Nature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980); R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (3rd ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 116-121.
4. A. N. D'Elia, *The Adirondack Rebellion* (Onchionta, NY: Onchionta Books, 1979); F. J. Popper, "Rural Land Use Policies and Rural Poverty," *American Planning Association Journal*, 50 (Summer 1984), 330; C. Zinser, *The Economic Impact of the Adirondack Park Private Land Use and Development Plan* (Albany, N. Y., 1980). The viewpoint of local governments was best articulated for many years by the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, established by the New York State Legislature to advise and assist the Adirondack Park Agency; see its newsletter, *The Blue Line Review* (Onchionta, NY), especially volumes 1-6 (1983-1988).
5. P. Bobrow, et al., "Regional Planning Acceptance by Residents of Northern

New York," *Environmental Management*, 8 (1984), 45-54; C. C. Geisler, et al., *Social and Economic Research in the Adirondacks* (Ithaca, NY, 1983); T. P. Holmes, *The Future of the Adirondacks: A Survey of Attitudes*, prepared for the Adirondack Museum (Blue Mountain Lake, NY, 1990). Concern for both environmental protection and economic opportunity is expressed by a voluntary citizens group: "I still hope that we Adirondackers will find some way to obtain the help of the rest of the state in fostering economically viable communities here, while preserving their integrity in the face of development. I hope we can do this and preserve for our children the magnificent park that 100 years of thoughtful planning has given us," statement by J. Mahay, Chairman, Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, in M. Kurtz, "In Their Place: Portraits of Adirondack Activists," exhibit at Adirondack Park Visitors Center (Paul Smiths, NY, 1992).

6. N. Woodin, *The Ideal Working Landscape* (Ausable Forks, NY: Aquidanick Press, 1992). On how the Adirondack Park Agency attempted to achieve environmental protection through the implementation of restrictive zoning, see R. A. Liroff and G. G. Davis, *Protecting Open Space: Land Use Controls in the Adirondack Park* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1981); F. J. Popper, *The Politics of Land-Use Reform* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 81-83.

7. Adirondack Park Agency, "Adirondack Park Land Use and Development Plan Map, 1990" (revised, 17 May 1990). For a summary of regulations, restrictions, and the agency reviewing process, see . *Citizen's Guide to Adirondack Park Agency Land Use Regulations*, available from the Adirondack Park Agency, P.O. Box 99, Ray Brook, NY 12977. A copy of the entire law both establishing the Adirondack Park Agency and containing the Adirondack Park Private Land Use and Development Plan has been published under the title *Adirondack Park Agency Act*. Printed in March 1991 and including all amendments by the State of New York Legislature through that date, this document is also available from the Adirondack Park Agency.

8. Section 810 of Article 27 of the Executive Law of the State of New York (Adirondack Park Agency Act).

9. Woodin, *op cit*, 25-53.

10. Among the recommendations of the commission appointed by New York State Governor Mario Cuomo were the following: "In order to encourage tourism and promote consciousness of the Park environment, the Adirondack Park Administration, Adirondack Park Service and Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA) should cooperate to develop various outreach programs, such as short range radio frequencies for communicating information on interpretation, special programs, community events and weather; a toll free line (1-800-ADK-PARK) to offer information about where to go, where to stay, what to do in the Adirondack Park" See The Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-



First Century, *The Adirondack Park in the Twenty-First Century* (State of New York, 1990), 32.

11. S. M. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (reprint of 1959 edition; New York: Atheneum, 1980), 28, 271, 272, 267.

12. P. Medeiros, "A Proposal for an Adirondack Primeval," *Wild Earth*, special issue on the Wildlands Project, (1992), 37. For a description of how conservation biology is applied to the expansion and protection of wilderness through core preserves linked by biological corridors and surrounded by buffer zones of increasing human intensity, see R. Noss and L. Harris, "Nodes, Networks, and MUM's: Preserving Diversity at All Scales," *Environmental Management*, 13 (1986), 299-309; R. F. Noss, "The Wildlands Project: Land Conservation Strategy," *Wild Earth*, special issue on the Wildlands Project, (1992), 10-25.

13. R.E. Grumbine, *Ghost Bears: Exploring the Biodiversity Crisis* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1992), 238-242.

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