

A grand vision comes to life



**Boreas Ponds should soon become part of the public Forest Preserve.
Photo by Nancie Battaglia**

If all goes as expected, sometime in the next three months New York State will complete a historic improvement to the Adirondack Park. With the anticipated purchase of Boreas Ponds and the surrounding area the state will complete a four-year process of acquiring sixtyfive thousand acres of priceless land from the Adirondack chapter of the Nature Conservancy.

This land, which goes into the forever-wild Forest Preserve, is part of a larger acquisition by the conservancy of timberland from the paper company Finch, Pruyn & Company. Most of that 161,000-acre Finch purchase remains as working forest in private hands but with conservation easements designed to ensure sustainable use and, in some areas, recreation opportunities for the public.

The state acquisitions constitute the largest addition to the Forest Preserve since 1895 and taken together with the easement lands are one of the most important developments for the Adirondacks since the creation of the Park. Those responsible, from Finch, Pruyn to the conservancy to Governor Andrew Cuomo, deserve the gratitude of all those who treasure the Park. The completion of the deal will be the fulfillment of a bold vision that will benefit generations to come.

With this sweeping change has come a series of crucial decisions about how the state will manage the new public lands and what kind of uses will be permitted in various areas. It doesn't

diminish the historic good that comes from these acquisitions to also note that in some cases the state has shown poor judgment in its management plans. Apparently intent on responding to pleas for motorized use, particularly by snowmobiles, the Department of Environmental Conservation and the Adirondack Park Agency played fast and loose with laws and regulations that are supposed to protect wild lands from inappropriate use.

The acquisition of the Boreas Ponds tract provides another opportunity to protect a lovely area of the Park and ensure wise use into the future. The 20,494-acre tract sits just south of the High Peaks, with the Great Range to the north and the Dix Range to the east. At its heart are the Boreas Ponds, surrounded by verdant forest and offering striking views of the mountains. The name is a little misleading since the “ponds” are three nodes of a single water whose level is maintained by a dam. To paddle these secluded ponds while soaking in the spectacular vista will be an inspirational experience.

This treasure deserves the greatest protection possible within the Adirondack Park: designation as Wilderness. A coalition of environmental groups has proposed adding most of the Boreas Ponds Tract to the High Peaks Wilderness along with some other newly acquired lands and some existing Wild Forest. In total, this would add thirty-five thousand acres to the High Peaks Wilderness. The result would be a single Wilderness Area of 284,000 acres, more than one-third larger than the current High Peaks Wilderness.

A bird’s-eye (or airplane passenger’s) view of the region shows that these lands naturally join together in an expanse of wild lands that climb the highest peaks in the state and reach down the mountainsides to extensive forests sheltering secluded waterways. A single Wilderness designation would shelter all this region under the most protective land classification, preserving it for all time as a place where nature reigns and people visit without the disturbance of motor vehicles and the more intensive use allowed in other classifications.

A management plan for this area will entail a number of detailed decisions (in our view, the Boreas Ponds Lodge should be removed; the existing dam that maintains the ponds’ water level can stay; a proposed snowmobile trail must be located in a way that minimizes its environmental and aesthetic impact.) As officials work through these questions their goal should be to create this expanded High Peaks Wilderness at the heart of an enhanced Adirondack Park.

Unfortunately, the state’s management plan for the Essex Chain Tract, a portion of the Finch, Pruyn lands acquired in 2012, has compromised important principles and fallen short of responsible management of that tract. Its actions, if repeated in future decisions, would be a shameful precedent of disregard for established protections.

In a generally good decision, the Adirondack Park Agency in 2013 classified most of the area around the Essex Chain Lakes as Primitive, a designation that means the lands should be managed to motor-free Wilderness standards, while giving hikers and paddlers reasonable access.

An unfortunate part of the compromise that led to the approval was agreement for a wide community-connector snowmobile trail. Using that opening, the APA went along with a DEC management plan that runs roughshod over important environmental protections.

The state Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers Act prohibits motorized traffic over Scenic Rivers. Yet, the DEC contrived what one APA commissioner called “a legal fiction” to circumvent the law and allow a snowmobile trail to cross the Hudson River on the so-called Polaris Bridge. The DEC argument that it was simply grandfathering in an existing motorized use is specious. The bridge, constructed and used for its own limited purposes by a private paper company, has no history of public use.

Similarly, the APA disregarded its own snowmobile guidance which says that the agency shouldn't approve new trails that are redundant with existing trails. Yet the agency approved a connector trail from Indian Lake to Newcomb through a trail-less section of the Vanderwhacker Wild Forest even though there is already a trail connecting the communities.

These missteps show that the Park remains vulnerable to misguided or unprincipled management. Those who care about the Park must insist that the state adhere to the highest standards of stewardship even as they celebrate the wonderful advances made possible by the Finch, Pruyn acquisitions.

(Thanks to the nonprofit organization LightHawk for providing a flight over the Boreas Ponds and surrounding area.)

Tom Woodman, Publisher