

# EDITORIAL.

## Lithgow Osborne and the Future of the Adirondacks

Three years after he became Commissioner of Conservation in 1932, Lithgow Osborne noted that “anything that was not wanted elsewhere was placed in the Conservation Department.” Even he, however, was surprised when Governor Franklin Roosevelt decided to create a bureau of state publicity and charge the Conservation Department with managing it. Soon enough, “the people of New York’s Western Frontier and the North Country” were among those banging upon his door in Albany, insisting that he give pride of place to their own unique “recreational delights.” Osborne had already complained publicly about the many interest groups who felt they had an exclusive claim upon the resources of his department. Foreshadowing the headaches of today’s Commissioners of Environmental Conservation, who must reconcile the conflicting demands of sportsmen and wilderness preservationists, legislators and advocacy groups, budget cutters and department heads, Osborne said, “They always want us to take their point of view. It is the same with forestry as with fish and game. These groups have extreme viewpoints.” Osborne, born into a prominent upstate family, was a Harvard graduate who had a distinguished career as a diplomat before returning to New York State. We can assume the diplomatic skills that he honed in Berlin after the first World War and at disarmament conferences in the early 1920s were used to negotiate the opposing views of fishermen and foresters. His goal at all times, he said, was “finding the middle ground.” No doubt, those diplomatic skills came in handy when negotiating the state’s purchase of George O. Knapp’s Lake George estate, since New York acquired those 7,000 acres and nine miles of shoreline for far less than their market value. Once the land was part of the Forest Preserve, Knapp negotiated another compromise: opening part of it to public recreation while leaving most of it as wilderness. Here, as elsewhere, he had found “the middle ground.” Osborne was still positing “a middle ground” twenty years later when commenting upon the Adirondack Forest Preserve’s 75th anniversary in the pages of the New York Times. “The more wild land we can acquire and preserve in its natural state, the better. The more accessible lake frontage that can be acquired for camping, picnicking and other simple forms of recreation, the better. We can have both ample recreation and ample wilderness in the Adirondacks, providing we move carefully, considering each step we take.” As the Adirondack Park Agency begins weighing the possible uses for the newly-acquired Boreas Ponds tract, it could do worse than deliberate in the spirit of Lithgow Osborne: proceeding slowly, and finding a middle ground between the pro-recreationist group calling itself “Access the Adirondacks” and the equally extreme “Adirondack Wilderness Advocates,” which wants to close the entire tract to all but the most intrepid hikers. A middle ground, allowing more access but placing most of the 20,578 acre tract in an enlarged High Peaks Wilderness Area, is being promoted by groups such as the Adirondack Council. If that compromise is successful, another goal of Lithgow Osborne’s will become possible, one that he adopted when he found himself New York State’s publicist-in-chief: “making New York, with its unsurpassed natural beauties, better known, to its own people and to others.” With a new wilderness area larger than Rocky Mountain National Park, that shouldn’t be difficult.