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Editorial: Au naturel: Adirondack Council proposes to expand High Peaks Wilderness

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The Adirondack Council is leading an exciting movement to expand the High Peaks Wilderness, and state officials appear to be on board.

As part of a multi-year plan, the state is planning to purchase the 20,494-acre Boreas Ponds tract by March 31, the end of this fiscal year. The Adirondack Council joined seven other environmental organizations in proposing that Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo approve “a classification for these lands under the State Land Master Plan that will guide protection and use of the new Forest Preserve lands,” according to information from the council.

The Boreas Ponds area is located just south of the High Peaks Wilderness. By adding this property along with other land already owned by the state, the wilderness will increase in size from its 204,000 acres to 280,000 acres.

Since the summer of 2012, the state has been buying from the Nature Conservancy land that once belonged to the former Finch-Pruyn paper company: Essex Chain of Lakes/Hudson River, OK Slip Falls and Indian River tract; Thousand Acre Swamp, Benson Road and other noncontiguous tracts; and the MacIntyre East and West tracts. The state also has “traded parcels to acquire the 1,200-acre Casey Brook tract and purchased conservation easements on 92,000 acres of Finch lands that the conservancy sold to a private timber investor,” according to the council.

By adding some of these properties along with land from the Dix Mountain Wilderness, representatives of the Adirondack Council want to enlarge the High Peaks Wilderness by about one-third of its current size. The council jointly signed a letter with its partners to encourage Mr. Cuomo to carry out the state’s plan to buy the Boreas Ponds area, add it to the Forest Preserve and give it the proper classification to ensure it is protected. The other groups involved in this effort are the Adirondack Mountain Club, Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, Audubon New York, Citizens Campaign for the Environment, Natural Resources Defense Council and New York League of Conservation Voters.

Once the state acquires land and adds it to the Forest Preserve, the State Land Master Plan requires it be classified as one of seven categories: wilderness, primitive, canoe, wild forest, state administrative, historic or intensive use. According to the Adirondack Council, classifying land as wilderness will provide the highest protection possible.

Representatives of the council have been negotiating with officials in the towns of Newcomb and

North Hudson, both in Essex County, over the use of the Boreas Ponds area. The officials would like to see vehicle access all the way to the ponds, retention of the cabin on the shore of the main pond and bicycle access all the way around them — none of which is permitted in a designated wilderness area, said John Sheehan, director of communications for the council. Even though both towns provide ample areas where vehicles and bicycles can be used, their economies continue to struggle.

“We think a big wilderness at their doorsteps would change that and allow them to grow as Keene Valley has grown over the past 40 years,” Mr. Sheehan said. “Our plan would allow cars as far as a parking area where they could launch a canoe and gain access to the entire parcel but without bringing traffic, erosion, noise and invasive species into the interior of the tract or the expanded wilderness area.”

Preserving these areas in their natural state is crucial, and the council has worked tirelessly to develop a sensible plan. The state should proceed with buying the Boreas Ponds land, designate it as a wilderness area and expand the High Peaks Wilderness. Future generations will appreciate the forward thinking that has gone into this effort to enhance the Adirondack Park.