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Elk Lake preserve protected with easement deal

Nature Conservancy swaps land with tract's owners

By CHRIS KNIGHT - Senior Staff

A 12,000-acre privately owned preserve in the heart of the Adirondack High Peaks region is now permanently protected from development.

Elk Lake Land LLC, owned by the Ernst family, has donated a conservation easement to the state that protects the lake and surrounding forests, wetlands, rivers and mountain summits located in the Essex County town of North Hudson.

It's part of a larger agreement, recorded in deeds filed late last month in the Essex County clerk's office in Elizabethtown, that also gives The Nature Conservancy title to the 1,400-acre Casey Brook tract located west of Elk Lake and north and east of Boreas Ponds.

Article Photos



A conservation easement agreement between the state and the owners of the Elk Lake-Clear Pond preserve in the town of North Hudson will include construction of a trail to the summit of Boreas Mountain, where this picture was taken from. The view includes Elka Lake and three

Adirondack High Peaks: from left, Nippletop, Giant and Dix mountains.
(Photo — Jeffrey Corser, New York Natural Heritage Program)

Mike Carr, executive director of the Conservancy's Adirondack Chapter, said the Casey Brook property will be sold to the state as part of its acquisition of the Boreas Ponds tract. Boreas Ponds is one of several former Finch, Pruyn and Co. timberlands the state is purchasing from the Conservancy over five years for \$48 million.

In return for giving up the Casey Brook tract, the Ernst family will get a 1,600-acre parcel known as the Three Brothers tract located south of Clear Pond, along Elk Lake Road. The Three Brothers tract will continue to be leased by a hunting club, and forestry operations on the parcel will also continue, Carr said.

Carr said it's a straight land swap; no money is changing hands as part of the deal.

The Ernst family's donation of the conservation easement on the 12,000-acre Elk Lake-Clear Pond preserve expands on an easement the family negotiated with the state in 1963. That deal, which Carr said was the first-ever conservation easement in the state at the time, protected a band of the property extending 1,000 feet around the shore of Elk Lake and included its islands.

"The rest of the lands were not in easement, but in this transaction, the Ernsts donated a conservation easement over the remainder of the property," Carr said.

The easement prohibits future development but allows for the continued operation of the Elk Lake Lodge and continued forestry on the property. It also makes permanent public trail access through the preserve to the High Peaks and Dix Mountain wilderness areas. A new trail is also planned to the summit of Boreas Mountain from Elk Lake Road.

"It's very exciting and a tremendously generous gift by John and Margot Ernst," Carr said. "It's a gift to the people of the state of New York. When you look at it on a map and you see the context and the continuity across Elk Lake, Boreas Ponds, the High Peaks Wilderness and the AuSable Club to the north, which is under state conservation easement, it's astonishing what this assembles in terms of conserved acreage."

The Ernst family purchased the lands and waters that now make up the Elk Lake-Clear Pond preserve from Finch paper in the 1950s and '60s.

John Ernst told the Enterprise he pursued the land swap with The Nature Conservancy because it gives him control of a tract of land along the Elk Lake Road that he'd like to keep pristine and undeveloped.

Overall, he said the land swap and the donation of the conservation easement for the entire 12,000 acres is a "win-win for everybody.

"There is increased public access to the Elk Lake property," said Ernst, who lives in New York City. "There is the ability to continue to run the Elk Lake Lodge, which is one of the biggest

operating businesses in the town of North Hudson. Plus the easement requires timbering, which is being done under the management of Finch. Any taxes paid by the state through the easement are paid to the town, so the town loses nothing.

"It's hoped that the protection of this property and the Finch property around it, which means that the High Peaks are preserved forever, has got to be a huge draw for businesses and for tourists in the future."

Ernst noted the easement agreement doesn't allow public access to Elk Lake itself, which will continue to only be open to guests of Elk Lake Lodge.

"To run the business, we have to keep that private," he said.

Elk Lake Lodge has been in operation since at least 1873. In 2010, Outside Magazine ranked it as one of the 10 best wilderness lodges in North America.

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