

Pushing for a larger wilderness in Adirondacks

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By Rick Karlin

A leading conservation group has launched a campaign to get some 35,000 acres of newly purchased or about-to-be-purchased Adirondack forest land added to the existing High Peaks Wilderness area.

The result would be an expanded wilderness region that would be larger than Zion National Park in Utah and rival Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park in size, said William Janeway, executive director of the Adirondack Council.

"Gov. Andrew Cuomo has been a champion for the Adirondack Park's pure waters, wilderness and communities, so we expect him to support and embrace wilderness," Janeway said in a prepared statement announcing the group's BeWildNY campaign supporting the wilderness designation.

The tracts would expand the wilderness-designated land from the High Peaks to the south, toward the communities of Newcomb and North Hudson. The area, which is being purchased by the state, is uninhabited forest and former logging territory, with bodies of water such as the Boreas Ponds.

The main tracts in question are MacIntyre East and West as well as Boreas Ponds, Casey Brook and the so-called Open Space Institute lands. If all are deemed wilderness, the High Peaks Wilderness would grow to encompass 437 square miles.

The plan would also link the High Peaks with the Dix Mountain Wilderness to the east, which supporters say would make it easier to manage as one unit.

The Council is launching an ad campaign as well as a website, BeWildNY.org, to publicize the initiative.

Designating the tracts as wilderness might not create an immediately noticeable change, since they're located in a remote section of the existing Forest Preserve.

But a wilderness designation would lead to the closure of former logging roads to motor vehicles, and it would ensure that motorized boats aren't used in the Boreas Ponds.

The designation would also create a protected wilderness area where someone could conceivably park a car near Exit 29 of the Northway and go about 33 miles to Follensby Pond near Tupper Lake without seeing a highway, said Council spokesman John Sheehan.

"It's the greatest opportunity for wilderness expansion east of the Rockies right now," he said.

The move also could help tourism in the Newcomb and North Hudson communities by drawing more hikers or backpackers heading into the High Peaks area from the south, he said.

Currently, most people entering that popular mountains come through the Keene or Lake Placid areas along Route 73, which runs to the north.

Other groups including Audubon New York, the Adirondack Mountain Club, Adirondack Wild, the Citizens Campaign for the Environment, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the state League of Conservation Voters also support the designation. A letter of support for the plan was sent to Cuomo earlier this week.

The bulk of the land has been purchased by the Nature Conservancy, with plans and agreements for the state to purchase it.

The area is near the Essex Chain lands, which the state has also purchased. State officials, though, are considering keeping some minor roadways open in that area for better access to the water. They are looking at maintaining a snowmobile trail, as well.