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Editorial: New York and "The Rooseveltian Spirit"

Here in the Adirondacks, a debate has surfaced about the future of a 20,500-acre parcel surrounding the Boreas Ponds. Bolstered by two recent studies of the tract's ecology, groups such as the Adirondack Council, Protect the Adirondacks and Friends of the Forest Preserve have urged New York State officials to classify the recently acquired lands as 'wilderness,' the highest level of protection imagined by the State legislature when it adopted a State Land Master Plan for the Adirondack Park in the early 1970s.

"This is a rare, fragile and globally unique treasure," says Adirondack Council Executive Director Willie Janeway. "Only if it is protected as wilderness can we ensure that future generations will inherit this magnificent landscape in a condition as good as it is today."

The Adirondack Council has also proposed that the tract be added to the High Peaks Wilderness Area to create the largest, intact wilderness system in the northeastern United States. The hurdles that must be overcome to fulfill this ambition are not only political, but, as we have been reminded by "The Poetic Species," a small book consisting of a conversation between the California poet Robert Haas and the Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson, philosophical, too.

The political obstacles are easy to describe. Local governments, the traditional opponents of state land acquisition, want the tract to be placed in a less restrictive category, one where a seven-mile-long road could be maintained and one that would allow the use of snowmobiles, cars, bicycles and motor boats.

Environmentalists worry that Governor Andrew Cuomo will attempt to dilute the restrictions attached to a wilderness classification in order to accommodate the opposing point of view, or to achieve "balance," much as the administration did when classifying the Essex Chain of Lakes tract. That compromise was ratified by the Adirondack Park Agency, which is supposed to maintain the integrity of the State and Private Land Master Plans, regardless of a governor's wishes.

If these are the political obstacles in the way of creating a new wilderness area, what are the philosophical ones? The objections raised by cultural and environmental historians to the very idea of wilderness.

According to Robert Haas, many scholars now question whether there ever was a nature independent of human beings or of the influence of other peripatetic, invasive organisms. If not, they ask, should we give up on the idea of wilderness preservation, because wilderness is nothing more than a cultural concept?

These are questions with practical implications, and they should be addressed, not in the realm of theory, but in the realm of practice.

As E.O Wilson says in "The Poetic Species," "I believe in wilderness. I've been there. I've studied thousands of species living there, in ecosystems much the same as they were millions of years ago."

To preserve those species and ecosystems, both Haas and Wilson argue in favor of parks, of wilderness preserves similar in kind to the proposed, expanded High Peaks Wilderness Area, an area that would be comparable in size to the Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado and twice the size of Zion National Park in Utah. This, they assert, is the only way to preserve biodiversity and the human habitat.

"We need a strong ethic and a renewal of the Rooseveltian spirit of creating and holding on to parks," argues Wilson. A decision by New York State to create a new High Peaks Wilderness Area, one that includes the Boreas Ponds, would reaffirm New York's commitment to that ethic and contribute in an important way, to "the renewal of the Rooseveltian spirit."