

# The Adirondack Park: The Next Twenty-Five Years<sup>1</sup>

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## **Summary: Healthy communities and ecosystems thriving in a protected and unique landscape**

Over the next 25 years, an understanding of the interdependence of our environment and our economy spreads through our communities. Our mixture of public and private lands is the defining feature of the Park; it drives our diverse sustainable economy and increases our self-reliance. We use balanced, slightly more flexible, regulation to preserve our unique landscape while enhancing the health of our communities.

The local parts of the strategy increase spending within the Park on local food, energy, forest products and other regionally produced goods, so we send less of our wealth outside the Park. By increasing the use of biomass from private forests, we reinforce the self-reliance that has traditionally been part of this region's character, lowering our use of fossil fuels. The global parts of the strategy include (1) nearly ubiquitous broadband Internet to enable residents to participate in the global knowledge economy and attract new families here, working remotely, (2) attracting globally diverse visitors to enjoy and learn from our Park.

We strengthen our communities, centered in hamlets and villages, but working collaboratively across the Park. They are more dynamic and welcoming of new comers. Part-time and full-time residents work together to enrich hamlet life. Our small, networked, high quality schools give students a strong understanding of this unique place where they are growing up. A vibrant visual and performing arts scene further enriches the quality of life here for visitors and residents. We attract young families and active retirees to settle here and further diversify our population. Living in the hamlets and being part of an active community is cool again.

We maintain strong protections for the Forest Preserve and complementary private land regulation. The State and environmental NGOs purchase additional forest and farm easements and use transferable development rights to keep our land productive and preserve open space and intact forests. Community groups, land and lake-owner associations, NGOs and the State collaborate to protect our water quality. We manage the forest using science-based stewardship that helps to protect it against threats of climate change and invasive species. We protect our large wilderness areas and natural corridors across the landscape. We overcome the stalemate that has prevented significant change to Forest Preserve policies and address some of the unintended constitutional limitations we face in helping our communities prosper.

We upgrade and expand our visitor amenities in a sustainable manner that does not degrade the Forest Preserve and strengthens the regional economy. We are leaders in New York State's switch to renewable energy sources. We focus on attracting visitors that are interested in our protected environment and cultural heritage. By introducing the Park through our promotions to new and more diverse types of visitors, we continue to maintain a base of support among the next generation of voters of New York State.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not an "official" report. This vision is based on a year-long *pro bono* series of 120 interviews and 14 workshops that involved over 500 people conducted under the auspices of the Adirondack Common Ground Alliance. The detailed data and workshop reports can be found at the website [www.ADKfutures.org](http://www.ADKfutures.org). We wish to thank all the people who have contributed so generously in time and ideas to this effort.

## **More Efficient, Rational Government**

We move in small but steady steps toward more efficient government that strikes the right balance between centralization for efficiency and local responsiveness; government that works together across levels and functions and that partners well with community groups and NGOs; and government that uses modern technology well to overcome the large distances in the Park and be more data-centric. Integrated GIS and other databases are critical to make government work more productively and give citizens better understanding of Park conditions. This will be a period of gradual consolidation and downsizing for all levels of government as hard choices have to be made about where to put public dollars. Smart downsizing through increased collaboration, sharing of functions and elimination of overlap will proceed at all levels, forced by limits on tax revenues. State regional agency structures are rationalized to reduce coordination costs.

## **A Time for Strategic Regulatory Change**

The intermixing of private lands with highly protected, but in many places fragmented Forest Preserve is a unique challenge that we meet with innovative and updated regulation. The Forest Preserve can end up isolating the hamlets that it surrounds from modern services – a classic example of unintended consequences. If the Adirondacks were a remote Alaskan, or Canadian wilderness, managed by the forces of nature only, wild would be the default option. But in the Adirondacks, a ‘recovered’ wilderness, located within hours of 120 million people, downwind from Midwest pollution, with communities mixed into it, wilderness is a uniquely difficult feat.

The Park has gone through many periods of change, expansion and new governance. Today, the Park is entering a new period of change, economic revival and, perhaps, a few improvements in regulation and administration. After 40 years, most now acknowledge that APA regulations succeeded in maintaining the unique character of the Park. As further trust and good communication is developed among the key constituencies, more strategic actions are possible, including:

- A major updating of the State Master Land Plan that considers front country/back country concepts and shifts from numerous UMPs to five large regional wildlands complexes with watershed level plans and recreation plans that take into account easements, private land and communities.
- An amendment process that is significant, e.g.:
  - A Utility Land Bank that will allow for needed infrastructure development (e.g., broadband, sewer, water, etc.) in hamlets
  - Allow land swaps to consolidate the currently fragmented Forest Preserve which does not ideally serve the needs of our communities, visitors or ecosystems.
- Further modifications to private land regulation to encourage clustering in and around hamlets
- Use easements and/or smart growth principles to facilitate protection of private land parcels with important natural resources in order to ensure ecological diversity across the park.

The next twenty five years will be a period of painful change in global and American society. An aging population, accelerating climate change, regular environmental disasters, the list goes on. Our response is to protect our Adirondack resources; the value of the Park’s ecosystem services (clean air, clean water, and open space) inexorably rises for both humans and the environment. Our forest’s high biodiversity does a better job at keeping out invasive species and disease carrying pests. We do more to protect our Adirondack waters by

investing in waste water treatment and tightening regulations on, and inspections of, private septic systems. Our air is vulnerable to pollution and warming outside of our control. But the quality of our water is largely in our hands, and we protect it.

### **Community is the Core of the Vision**

Over the next 25 years, we adapt our lifestyles and our hamlet and village architectures to these new realities. We focus settlement in the core of hamlets, not on spread out, isolated lots. Many new residents start off as visitors. Whenever we promote the Park, we include promoting it as a place to live, start a business or go to college. We attract new families to come live here and add more age and racial diversity to our communities. Our core vision is of interdependent yet self-reliant communities that:

- Significantly reduce fossil fuel use through:
  - Greater attention to energy efficiency and
  - Conversion to diverse distributed renewable energy sources and a smart grid:
    - Biomass for heating, sourced from private forest in sustainable volumes
    - Solar, wind and geothermal in community and individual settings
    - Synfuels created from woody biomass and agricultural waste
    - More use of electric vehicles charged with “green” power
    - Hydro from refurbished dams throughout the Park
  - Human muscle power in the form of biking and walking on improved and safer inter-hamlet bikeways and trails
  - More use of shared transportation systems (Regional busses, local delivery services, rail)
- Grow a portion of our food, integrating farming and animal husbandry into the community through budget friendly CSA(Community Supported Agriculture) arrangements and greatly expanded local processing and distribution that connects farming areas to communities throughout the Park
- Leverage unique historical, cultural and natural features to maintain their own unique character and appeal, while increasing identification with the broader Adirondack Park brand
- Protect waters and forests from degradation and overuse by working cooperatively with DEC and APA, engaging in the development of local land use plans that are consistent with the community’s recreation and economic strategies and that cluster development in and around hamlets
- Strongly support their fine local schools that are networked using broadband services to maintain high academic standards while finding ways to lower costs
- Support a variety of visual, performance and other arts in networked collaborations across the Park that enrich our cultural and mental lives and stimulate the local economies
- Welcome diverse people of all ages, levels of education and skills. Attract people to live and start businesses in the community. Attract active retirees who love living in these communities. Build the infrastructure to attract visitors and give them a world class vacation experience.
- Possess an engaged citizenry that contributes ideas, money and time to community development and local sustainability and that is well educated in the cultural and environmental history of the Park and proud to live here.
- Are less dependent on Government employment, and enjoy a more diverse economy.
- Pay attention to poverty, supporting lower income families through community services such as food-pantries, public transportation, easy access to recreation, and community activities.

## **Grow the Local Economy in Traditional and Modern Ways**

A better economy with more opportunity is the only way to address the twin threats of growing poverty and depopulation. Our goal is to cultivate a large number of small businesses rather than a few big employers, who can leave suddenly and devastate a community, as has happened repeatedly here in the last 50 years. We can do this without compromising our environmental protection. The strategy both keeps more spending within the Park by buying locally and draws more income into the Park through more visitors and more teleworkers.

The source of our strength is a diverse economy based on these pillars:

- Near-universal broadband Internet services that enable individuals to work from home and entrepreneurs to start new virtual businesses
- A diversified agricultural sector that processes and distributes more of its production locally
- A revived forest products industry that supplies feedstock to a growing biomass heating market in the Park and neighboring areas and supplies the needs of emerging wood products markets
- Recreational tourism targeting a broader set of domestic and international visitors and offering greatly expanded services and goods for visitors to spend money on
- A financially strong modern rural healthcare system that provides new services for our aging population and allows retirees to spend more time here, often in their existing vacation homes
- Attracting private investment for start-ups, tourism infrastructure and renewable energy
- Strong, growing educational institutions that are the nexus of entrepreneurial business development in the region. More effective small business assistance in the form of venture and other funding including loan guarantees are part of the revival.
- Higher education and other public and private research institutions that make the Park a research project, and draw scientists and researchers from around the world to study this unique place and live here, enriching our communities and our knowledge
- State and Federal policies that support small-scale business and agriculture on par with industrial efforts

## **Eco-Friendly, Sustainable Recreational Tourism for More Diverse Visitors**

We brand the Adirondack wild experience as eco-tourism. The updates to our amenities are as green as possible. Already we see the beginnings of a blending of tourism and agriculture in the Champlain Valley and green architecture is seen throughout the Park from Old Forge's View to the Lake Placid Conference Center. We want to attract those visitors that care about this superb landscape and who will take care of it. That segment can support a range of accommodations from backpacking to very high end resort. We expand activities for a broader range of visitor groups, including families with small children, the physically challenged, senior citizens, multi-ethnic and international (non-English speaking) visitors. We target different visitor groups with a wide range of outdoor and indoor activities that fit the character and geography of our region. The size of our wild lands allows us to create new, longer, multi-use trails as well as more inclusive recreational opportunities that provide more authentically wild experiences for visitors while also offering modern community amenities.

Diverse programs help us adapt to changing interests of the public and give our economy resilience in the face of no snow winters or extended droughts. Sustainable means the recreational uses of the Park should not degrade it for the next user or the next generation. DEC uses simple, user friendly, reservation systems to manage overuse when necessary; in the age of GPS smart phones and smart cars, this will become easy and necessary.

This strategy updates our approach to tourism across the region, modernizing and supplementing visitor amenities like places to eat, sleep, shop in order to attract more visitors and have them spend more while here. Achieving an expansion in visitor numbers and diversity requires much better branding and marketing. We've been a pretty well-kept secret. A unified brand experience makes it clear to visitors that they are in a special place. Hamlet trail heads take people into adjacent Forest Preserve lands and we promote hamlet-hopping trips, encouraging each community to 'sell' the next hamlet along the trail.

### **Handing This Special Place Off to the Next Generation**

Our vision is not just for aging boomers. It's also aimed at the next generation that will inherit this special place. A strong commitment to education is part of our plan going forward, education in the unique attributes of this place; education and outreach that extends to students throughout New York State, ensuring that children growing up today hold the values of environmental stewardship and protection of the wild. An expanded and updated eco-tourism program also builds support for the Park and its principles in the next generation. In our vision, residents take action to change how we live and use the earth's resources. In this very special place, we demonstrate how to live close to the earth, respectfully, lightly.

Over more than 125 years, the Adirondack Park has become the largest and most important of the US Northern Forests. Its ecological diversity and large forested areas play a major role in the tracking and scientific understanding of the effects of climate change. Our strong research community gives us new information to protect the forest and inform policy. Adapting to climate change brings hard choices with regard to the Forest Preserve, including ways to expeditiously control damaging invasive species. As the effects of climate change start to substantially alter the forest, we apply new science-based strategies to protect the Forest Preserve, and the whole Park, not past policies devised without the benefits of current conservation biology and best management practices. We have better science and more options now to keep the Park's forest lands and waters more resilient and resistant to nuisance species, while also providing welcoming habitat for desirable southern species moving northward. We know what is coming, what to guard against and what to welcome.

### **Moving Ahead**

There is a lot of progress in aligning regional, Park-wide strategies. The North Country Regional Economic Development Council (NCREDC) has been a big leap forward; before that, the Common Ground Alliance and now the Adirondack Partnership. Local government, the State, the NGOs, lake-owner and land-owner associations, and community groups talking, listening, moving forward and cooperating are the path forward, not law suits. In the end it requires community leaders and engaged citizens to come together, assess their community's assets and opportunities, participate in wider regional efforts to bring cohesion and then go back home and start the work that leverages, protects and enhances their assets and keeps their community vibrant.

We are not asking for this strategy to be blessed or enshrined because it isn't news. It is, in fact, what we are already doing. It is widely viewed as desirable and well-balanced. We know how to do it. The news is the broad alignment and considerable forward momentum toward achieving it. Don't let up now. Roll up your sleeves. Figure out what you do that no one else can. It is not likely to happen without you.

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