

# The Adirondack Roots of America's Wilderness Preservation Movement

BY ED ZAHNISER

New York State's Forest Preserve lands of the Adirondacks and Catskills are living fossils of the broad 19th-century movement to protect wild forests of the federal public lands in the West as forest reserves and not as national forest sources of fiber, forage, and minerals. New York State's Forest Preserve lands therefore are living proof that the wilderness preservation movement is not an upstart 20th-century offshoot of the mainstream American conservation movement. The Adirondacks and Catskills preserve the historical fact that the wilderness preservation movement is a continuous, living stream of America's enduring determination to protect and preserve a significant remnant of its public wildlands to which, as cultural geographer Bret Wallach writes, progress otherwise would show no mercy.

The Adirondacks also are the locus of a significant legacy of wilderness preservation advocacy and served as the training ground for the national conservation coalition-building that would launch the mid-1950s campaign to achieve the federal Wilderness Act of 1964. The so-called Black River War begun in the 1940s to save the wilderness of the western Adirondacks from dam proposals provided the first, regional stage of a two-stage training ground for the national citizen campaign for the Wilderness Act.

This story comes into focus if Ver-

planck Colvin and his Adirondack state land surveys, begun in the 1870s, are placed in their proper national context. Most eyes had turned westward for broad horizons by the post-Civil War 1870s. The so-called 'Great Surveys' were then working the West as complex scientific expeditions, some with military escort and even military leadership. Standard histories of this great convergence of government, science, and the military have canonized four western expeditionary forces: the Wheeler, Hayden, King, and Powell surveys. But Michael Peter Cohen has pointed out that there was a fifth great western scientific survey: John Muir. Verplanck Colvin was a sixth—although not western—scientific survey. New York State was doing in its backyard what the nation was doing on the federal public lands of the West.

No matter that Muir conducted a one person survey. His research into the Sierra Nevada of California was not government-sponsored, military-escorted expeditioning but solo wandering. Nevertheless Muir, as a lone wilderness researcher, ended up assailing the official western science establishment—and winning on its own developing turf of sheer empiricism.

Muir won by looking at the evidence firsthand. At issue was: What had sculpted the land? Was it great floods or continental glaciation or what? The evidence lay high in Sierran mountain wilderness. Muir went and looked at the evidence. Muir even found active glaciers, perhaps alpine remnants of the very Earth carving culprits themselves. Muir's chief opponent was California State Geologist

Josiah Whitney. Whitney was reading a preconceived mental map. Muir was reading the terrain itself guided by the new glaciation ideas of Louis Agassiz. As John McPhee has written, in any conflict between a map and the terrain, the terrain is always right.

John Muir would soon be battling in the West to get certain public lands designated as forest reserves, just as Verplanck Colvin's Adirondack survey reports and speeches encouraged New York State to designate certain public lands as Forest Preserve. We owe today's "enduring resource of wilderness" in New York State—and arguably in the nation, too—to the fact that the people of the Empire State opted for the *preserve*, not the *reserve* and then stuck by their guns. In essence Colvin was conducting a sixth great survey but in the East where Massachusetts native Henry David Thoreau had remarked in 1848, perhaps with a mite of jealousy, that New York State "has its own wilderness within its borders."

From a semantic standpoint American wilderness preservation begins with that word, *preserve*. The formula might read  $p + reserve = wilderness in perpetuity$ .

In other words New Yorkers carried through on the preservationist impulse of American conservation that—as it applied to federal wild forest lands—was soon co-opted by Gifford Pinchot's utilitarian conservation philosophy under the Progressive politics of President Theodore Roosevelt. (It is ironic that Roosevelt had taken the oath of office in the Adirondacks.)

Failure to place Verplanck Colvin in this national tradition of 19th-century

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scientific surveys has helped mask these roots of America's wilderness preservation movement in the Adirondacks and Catskills. Failure to recognize these 19th-century New York State roots of the American wilderness preservation movement paints an inaccurate portrait of wilderness preservation advocacy as a kind of post-1930s fringe movement, a mere offshoot of mainstream American conservation.

New York State's national primacy in scientific and socio-economic and political life of the 1870s cannot be overestimated. We can argue that in truly *preserving* its public forest lands, New York State accomplished in its public back yard what the federal government lacked the foresight or political will to achieve on its national public lands in the West. New York State set in motion the preservation of wildlands in perpetuity. Forever. To preserve not just "forest" but "wild forest lands."

Consider the year 1872. In 1872 New York State's legislature appropriated "for Verplanck Colvin . . . Ten Hundred Dollars, to aid in completing a survey of the Adirondack wilderness of New York . . ." Also in 1872 the State legislature created a Commission of State Parks. Its purpose was to explore a radical new policy—the possibility of *hanging onto* its public forest lands in the Adirondacks, not routinely disposing of them, and perhaps of converting them into "a public park." Colvin served on this park commission. He probably wrote most of the commission's report, issued in 1873. The report concluded that it was indeed imperative to

protect the forest "from wanton destruction."

Lobbied heavily by the Northern Pacific Railroad, in 1872 the U.S. Congress also decides to remove certain federal public lands around the geothermal phenomena in the Yellowstone country from entry by homesteaders, miners, and loggers. Because that country is still territory and there is no state there, Congress dedicates those lands as a pleasuring ground, a *national park*. There are natural oddities out there that make European cultural antiquities look like second rate tourist attractions. As the United States approaches its Centennial Year of 1876, it is still searching for the national identity it will soon locate in its superlatives of nature with an aesthetic of giantism—the *Mammoth Cave*, the *Grand Canyon*, the *Giant Sequoia* trees—invoking the theories of the sublime developed by Edmund Burke.

But nobody was particularly worried about national parks in 1872. The next parks to be established were 18 years in the future. Congress didn't even fund the Yellowstone set-aside in 1872. It simply set it aside. When some years later poaching and other abuses grew too outrageous to ignore, the military was sent in to run the first national park.

Yet people (especially the people of New York State) *were* genuinely worried about their wild forests in 1872. When New York's forest statistics for 1871 were all compiled, they revealed that New York had become a net *importer* of wood fiber for the first time since European Ameri-

cans had begun chopping down trees on this side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Official worrying about forests began in 1864 with the publication of George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature*. A native Vermonter, linguist, polymath, and U.S. diplomat to Italy, Marsh noticed that the great civilizations of the Mediterranean Basin had disappeared shortly after their forests were all cut off. Marsh also had seen Vermont—whose name *means* Green Mountains—substantially denuded of forests in his lifetime.

Marsh connected forests to watershed preservation. His book has never been out of print! It was information to inspire Verplanck Colvin to climb the Adirondack High Peaks and revel in finding the headwaters of the Hudson River in a small tarn he named Lake Tear of the Clouds. What an apt headwaters metaphor Colvin chose for a state and a nation newly afraid that its forest were disappearing—at the hazard of dependable water supplies. Colvin's naming evokes meteorology, watersheds, landscapes, forests, and the ancient idea of the cosmic mountain as *umbilicus*, the mythic navel of the world.

Marsh's *Man and Nature* made it clear that humankind possessed a growing ability to modify the entire Earth and with mixed consequences. Marsh's word *modify* will carry forward 100 years into the statement of purpose in the 1964 Wilderness Act, whose full title is the "National Wilderness Preservation System Act."

Also in 1864: President Abraham Lincoln paused during the prosecution of the



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Civil War to sign the cession of certain federal public domain lands in Yosemite Valley to the State of California as public parkland *forever*. President Lincoln had appointed George Perkins Marsh to the diplomatic post in Italy where Marsh wrote *Man and Nature*. The 1864 Yosemite grant has been called an “act of national redemption”—for the horrors of the war and the gross commercialization of Niagara Falls. But California proved incapable of protecting Yosemite from commercialism, timber cutting, and livestock grazing. In 1892 Congress made Yosemite Valley a national park but left unprotected surrounding forests and high country since added to the park.

The operative word remained *preserve*. It was the word that would aim for perpetuity. And the federal government first acted to attach the word *reserve* to its great resource of forested public domain lands. The forest reserve movement John Muir fought so hard to enact for federal public lands of the West began as a movement to create just that, reserves. No mining, grazing, or logging was allowed. The lands were reserved in 1891 against such exploitation. As we have seen, ironically, under the Progressive politics of a native New Yorker, President Theodore Roosevelt, in 1897 the forest reserves were co-opted as national forests, to be sources of minerals, forage, and fiber. This was done under the rubric of utilitarian conservation, with its scientific forestry myth of sustainability.

That same co-option was attempted in the Adirondacks, too. Timber interests argued long and hard that New York State should allow sustainable harvest of the



timber on its Forest Preserve lands. But even the counties in which Forest Preserve lands lay voted *against* such a move. If you let the loggers in it would get out of hand, they said. Sustainable forestry was an unrealized optimism of the neo-Darwinian myth of Progress. The most recent scholarly history of the U.S. Forest Service is titled *A Conspiracy of Optimism*. The persistence of wildness on such a large scale in New York State hinged on how its people rejected any diluting redefinition of its Forest Preserve lands.

The people of the Empire State acted to preserve their wild forest lands by reserving the decision to themselves. They put the protection in statutory language in the state's constitution. They made any challenge to change how *preserve* should be defined a matter of constitutional amendment ultimately to be approved by popular referendum.

I belabor this history of the Great Surveys and the George Perkins Marsh-inspired forest reserve campaigns waged by John Muir to make this point: the 19th-century move to protect wild forest lands in perpetuity was promptly co-opted on the national scene, but this historical impetus persists today as New York State's Forest Preserve lands and their designated wilderness in its Adirondacks and Catskills. In part this preservation impetus persists as a legacy of surveyor Verplanck Colvin's poetic pleas to protect the great forests in order to protect the watershed.

That so few wilderness advocates today realize that New York-born Robert Marshall was a second generation champion of wilderness mirrors the wider misconception that America's national wilderness preservation movement is a relatively recent offshoot of so-called

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mainstream conservation. The wilderness preservation movement actually carries forward this impulse for wildlands preservation that New York State embedded in its state constitution in the 19th century as its 'forever wild' clause.

Bob Marshall's father Louis, the eminent lawyer and champion of civil liberties and minority rights, was an ardent advocate of the preservation of wildlands and particularly wild forest lands. Louis Marshall was a voting member of the 1894 New York State Constitutional Convention that enshrined the forever wild clause as protection for Adirondack and Catskill forest lands. It was Louis Marshall who led the floor fight to defend the 'forever wild' clause against a potentially crippling amendment at the 1915 Constitutional Convention.

It is in this historical context that the Adirondack and Catskills Forest Preserve lands are seen as living fossils of this 19th-century movement to protect New York State forests as Forest Preserve and federal forests as national *reserves*. That the Adirondacks and Catskills are where wilderness preservation began is revealed in the persistence in both name and fact of their designation as Forest Preserve lands. Today more than one million acres of New York State Forest Preserve lands are additionally designated as wilderness under the same language that defines the wilderness designated on federal public lands.

The connective tissue of this shared definition of wilderness is the legacy of Bob Marshall, son of Louis Marshall. And Bob Marshall's connective function is not just a matter of wilderness preservation philosophy. It forms a direct line of succession of practical advocacy and inspiration to advocacy that makes the Adirondacks the logistical locus of where wilderness preservation began.

In the summer of 1996, while vacationing in the Adirondacks, I reread James Glover's *A Wilderness Original: The Life of Bob Marshall*. In that rereading I was struck with the fact that the many family friends I grew up taking for granted as national conservation associates of

my father Howard Zahniser had been assembled by Bob Marshall in his travels to wilderness areas throughout the United States, including what is now the state of Alaska. It was around Bob Marshall that his co-founders of the Wilderness Society, including Benton MacKaye, Bernard Frank, Harvey Broome, Aldo Leopold, and Ernest Oberholzer, would coalesce. And they would carry on his wilderness work after his death at age 38 in 1939.

In terms of the tradition of George Perkins Marsh, MacKaye, Frank, and Leopold were trained foresters, as was Bob Marshall himself, who also held a doctorate in plant physiology. Broome was a lawyer for the Tennessee Valley Authority with which MacKaye and Frank were associated as foresters. Also heavily involved with Marshall's early Wilderness Society work were his personal recruits Sigurd Olson, who was an advocate with Oberholzer of what is now the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota and Canada, and Olaus and Margaret E. "Mardy" Murie, who would become prime movers in the establishment of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and wilderness protection for Alaska's great Brooks Range of mountains.

But Marshall not only inspired wilderness advocacy for federal public lands. He also inspired organized wilderness advocacy for the Adirondack wilderness he grew up experiencing in youthful summers at the Marshall family camp near Saranac Lake. Atop Mount Marcy in July 1932, three years before the Wilderness Society was organized, Bob Marshall ran into a young Paul Schaefer. Schaefer was on the summit of Mount Marcy photographing the ravages of forest fires caused by the careless logging of Adirondack High Peaks forests at elevations above which loggers had assured Marshall and other they would not cut. Schaefer was up there doing what his conservation mentor John S. Apperson said you must do. Stand on the land you want to save and take pictures so the public can see what's at stake. Apperson's rallying cry that Schaefer would carry forward for more than five decades of conservation

action was, "We Will Wake Them Up!" And on the summit of Mount Marcy, not so far above Colvin's Lake Tear of the Clouds, Bob Marshall captured Paul Schaefer's imagination with his call for the banding together of all wilderness advocates that would in fact happen three years later.

Fourteen years later, in 1946, it was Paul Schaefer who recruited my father to the practical defense of Adirondack Forest Preserve wilderness. Apperson and Schaefer had just showed their documentary film about the threats to western Adirondack Forest Preserve lands posed by dam-building schemes. Following their February screening at the North American Wildlife Conference in New York City, my father, who had begun work for the Wilderness Society the previous September, went up and told Schaefer that he and the Wilderness Society would like to help defend the wilderness in what became known as the Black River Wars.

Schaefer invited Zahniser, as he came to know my father, and our family, to experience the Adirondack wilderness firsthand in the summer of 1946. During a backpacking trip across the High Peaks wilderness that summer with Schaefer and fellow Adirondack conservationist Ed Richard, my father remarked that the forever wild clause of New York's state constitution might well model the type of protection needed for wilderness areas of the federal public lands. Earlier that summer the governing council of the Wilderness Society had voted to begin work toward achieving some sort of permanent protection for wilderness on federal public lands. The administrative classifications that Bob Marshall and Aldo Leopold had pursued to protect wilderness within the National Forest System were proving too ephemeral. Subsequent administrations were de-classifying them for road building and timber, mineral, and forage exploitation.

It was also on that High Peaks backpacking trip that my father remarked on the Adirondack wilderness: "So this was Bob Marshall's country. No wonder he loved it so."



With Schaefer's tutelage, Zahnie dived into the Black River Wars. My father's previous experience in federal government public relations work had taught him the machinations of multi-media publicity. But it was from and with Paul Schaefer in the Adirondacks that Zahnie learned firsthand the art of grass-roots organizing and stumping for wilderness. This is significant for understanding "where wilderness preservation began," because it was in the early 1950s battle against the Echo Park Dam proposed for the Green River in Dinosaur National Monument in Utah that the national conservation coalition was built that would later pursue national wilderness legislation in 1955.

The Echo Park Dam fight was led by Zahnie and Dave Brower, then heading the Sierra Club, whose previous professional background also was in print media and publicity, not in political organizing. Brower told me at the National Wilderness Conference in 1994 that Zahnie had been his mentor in the practical techniques of conservation advocacy. In that sense Brower was also in a direct line from Marshall and Apperson and Schaefer's Adirondack wilderness advocacy. It was also in the thick of the earlier dam fights in the Adirondacks with Paul Schaefer that my father met the philanthropist who helped bankroll the Echo Park fight, St. Louis chemical manufacturer Edward Mallinkrodt, Jr. The story of this first great national conservation controversy is told in environmental historian Mark W. H. Harvey's book *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (1994).

It is through the personal legacy of Bob Marshall that the stream of inspiration and practical organized advocacy for wilderness begins. And it begins in the Adirondacks, not just as an impulse and idea or philosophy, but as a practical laboratory of representative democracy. It begins on the Forest Preserve lands of New York State as a proving ground for the grass-roots organizing that would make subsequent wilderness advocacy on the national scene an important force for

wedging open the closed committee process of federal legislation in Congress. In the 'forever wild' tradition of the New York State Constitution, then, and in the Louis Marshall and Bob Marshall inspired grass-roots advocacy of sticking by that tradition in practical politics, the Adirondacks are indeed where wilderness preservation began.

In 1953 Zahnie delivered a speech in Albany, New York to a committee of the New York State legislature. This was his first major public formulation of the wilderness idea. His topic was the remarkable record of the people of the Empire State in preserving in perpetuity a great resource of wilderness on their public lands. My father titled the speech "New York's Forest Preserve and Our American Program for Wilderness."

In 1957 he addressed the New York State Conservation Council's convention in Albany. He titled the speech "Where Wilderness Preservation Began." When I collected my father's Adirondack journals and writings at the urging of Paul Schaefer in 1992, we chose that title for the book. In that speech Zahnie had said: "This recognition of the value of wilderness as wilderness is something with which you have long been familiar here in New York State. It was here that it first began to be applied to the preservation of areas as wilderness." Paul Schaefer had long envisioned using that speech title for a film project, but he generously agreed to its use for the book. My father had died in May 1964, four months before the Wilderness Act on which he worked for nine years was signed into law. And now Paul Schaefer is gone, too, having died in July 1996.

In August 1996 Dave Gibson and Ken Rimany of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks; Paul Schaefer's grandson David Greene; and my brother Matt Zahniser and I with our sons backpacked across the High Peaks to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1946 trip made by Schaefer, Ed Richard, and Zahnie. The wilderness beauties of that trip reinforced our collective appreciation for the fact that here is

"where wilderness preservation began." The trip also reinforced for all of us that the Adirondack High Peaks Wilderness Area is desperately in need of visionary wilderness use management as mandated under the Adirondack State Land Master Plan and provisions of state wilderness regulations.

Unfortunately this draft plan that should put New York State on the cutting edge of wilderness-use management—the real work of wilderness preservation for our time—is 20 years behind schedule. It is languishing in the very machinations of bureaucracy that the people of the Empire State have so often transcended in the past as they have acted to ensure that their landmark 'forever wild' should mean just that. Forever. Wilderness and wildlands preserved in perpetuity. It is time to speak clearly and strongly for this unparalleled legacy of wildness we have come to love and cherish. It is time to speak clearly and strongly for the astute and preservation-minded wilderness-use management of this place where wilderness preservation began.

In all the world, only the High Peaks Wilderness of the Adirondacks locates so much history of the wilderness preservation movement that the very wilderness itself constitutes a cultural resource of profound value. Its dual designation as wilderness on forever-wild Forest Preserve lands makes clear the people's intent that it be preserved in perpetuity. And yet this pioneering exemplar of the world-as-it-was is being loved to death because those charged with assuring its preservation in perpetuity as wilderness have failed to act. They have failed to act for more than 20 years. This breach of faith with the past threatens to deny to the future the benefits of this legacy of living wilderness that the whole people of New York State have vigilantly safeguarded for more than four generations. In the tradition of Louis Marshall, Verplanck Colvin, Robert Marshall, John Apperson, and Paul Schaefer, it is time now for all those who love the wilderness to band together again to demand that forward-thinking wilderness-use management be applied to the High Peaks Wilderness.