

THE APA AT 100

ELIZABETH THORNDIKE, FORMER APA COMMISSIONER

ewt@cornell.edu

Editor's note. This essay is adapted from a presentation at 50th anniversary of the Adirondack Park virtual symposium, sponsored by the Adirondack Museum/Experience in June 2021. The program for that event can be found at the Museum website: <https://www.theadkx.org/event/apa-at-50-symposium/>

Elizabeth Thorndike served nearly 16 years as a commissioner of the Adirondack Park Agency where she chaired the Agency's Park Policy and Planning committee from fall 1979 to summer of 1995. She is a past chair and current board member of the Adirondack Research Consortium.

Thank you for the opportunity to focus on the APA 50th anniversary. In 1971, the official birth year of the APA, I was based in Rochester and one of the founding members of the Rochester Regional Group of Sierra Club. We wanted to take an active stance in support of the recommendations of Governor Rockefeller's Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks, especially regarding creation of the Adirondack Park Agency. We were led by Bob Collin, then a professor at the University of Rochester, who had formed a study group to examine, comment on and submit responses to the recommendations of the Temporary Study Commission. Our bi-weekly meetings were informed by regular communications from the indomitable attorneys Robert Kafin and Ed Needleman who prepared regular newsletters about all aspects of the APA issue as it was being formulated and fought over, in the Park and in Albany.

I do not have anything to add to the fine presentations by Dick Booth, Bill Kissell and Marilyn DuBois who were centrally and directly involved in those earliest days of the Agency. Rather, while this program is a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the APA's creation, I would like us to imagine the Adirondack Park and the APA Act 50 years hence at its 100th anniversary. Many of us will not be here then, but let's place a marker on the landscape in 2071, as imagined from 2021. Let us focus on the ever important future, even as we honor the past.

First some general points, and then let us imagine how the Park and the APA could look in 2071.

1. The single greatest difference, very apparent today and totally distinguished from the leadup to 1971, will be the women in leadership posts throughout all aspects of the Park's governance, administration and stewardship. The most striking aspect, to this reader, of Brad Emondson's thorough account of the APA's founding, *A Wild Idea*, is that there was not a single woman involved in the creation of the APA through the Temporary Study Commission and its associates.
2. Balancing human aspirations with nature's constraints will remain the fundamental challenge of our times, the very essence of the climate change conundrum.
3. Shifting from a Consumer to a Conservator society will have become essential.
4. Planning will be based on foresight, not hindsight.
5. The environment will remain the economy of the Park. The economy of the Park will not be sustained if the environment is not thoroughly protected.
6. The New York State Forest Preserve will remain the core protected area of the Champlain- Adirondack Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO and National Park Service designation.
7. The future of the central pillar of the Park, its wilderness and wild forest nature, will lie in private hands. That includes the dozens of towns, villages and privately owned tracts that will constitute about 50% of the Park's lands and waters.
8. The APA was created as an independent agency in the executive branch of state government. But as former APA chair John Collins cogently observed, "You get the Park Agency that the Governor wants."

So what to envision in 2071?

1. A single resource management system for the Park and its immediate environs, made up of one DEC region, not two.
2. The overlapping, spaghetti style, administrative segments of 2021 will have been replaced. State agencies such as transportation, health, economic development will all have the same set of administrative boundaries to work in concert with the single DEC regional management of the Park.
3. State and local government and the private sector will work collaboratively to solve the inevitable issues that arise daily, weekly, monthly, forever.
4. Local governments will have sufficient funds to employ professional help to organize and oversee sustainable planning and zoning as needed.
5. The APA will have a 50% increase in funding so there are sufficient staff to accommodate the needed travel for a region the size of Vermont, travel that adds greatly to the covered time of staff engaged in planning, permit review, enforcement and legal affairs.
6. Research findings will be regularly incorporated into the decisions made by state and local agencies, so that actions are not based on seat of the pants opinion, or those pushed by special interests, whether environmental or any other source.

7. The APA Act of 2071 will have been updated to include the following terms and concepts, as well as others learned and developed since 2021: cosystems, whole watershed planning, biodiversity, cumulative environmental impact, carrying capacity of lakes, rivers, wetlands, forest tracts or watersheds. (None of these are included in the present Act promulgated in 1971.)

8. The double standard will be eliminated. Actions by state agencies, the largest developer in the Park, (other than in wetlands) are not currently subject to APA permitting requirements, unlike the private sector.

9. The term “undue adverse impact”, a critical regulatory criterion of the Act, will be clarified, explained and defined with examples.

10. A diverse cohort of citizens will be part of the Park, as residents, as visitors, as workers and as leaders.

11. The impacts of climate change will be fully apparent and require many yet- not- considered challenges for the Park, governments, the private sector and citizens.

12. Above all, the Park will be a unique planetary location.

What is it that has spawned protection under the New York State Constitution, a constituency of hundreds of thousands of individuals; dozens of associations and organization dedicated to protection, conservation, education, research, development, administration and management of the Park’s lands and waters; a parkwide zoning code and regulatory system; extensive library collections, volumes of books; museums; visitor centers; untold number of conferences and symposia; millions of annual visitors and over 250,000 year round and seasonal residents?

What is unique about the Park is *not* the vast open space, not the special natural areas, not the mountains, or lakes, or rivers and streams, not the wetlands, not the fields, nor the forest, not the vistas, not the harmony of small human settlements intermingled with the public and private lands.

What *is* unique is the combination of all these interlocking ecosystems. What is unique is a six-million-acre wilderness resource and rural wild forest atmosphere of such size and such diversity amid the largest concentration of people on the North American continent.