

Is the Park still a model?

■ *Editors of Adirondack essays suggest that the era of "bold action" in the Adirondacks has passed.*

By Brian Mann

When Ross Whaley started work on a new anthology of writing about the Adirondacks (co-edited with William Porter and Jon Erickson), he was wrapping up a four-year stint as Adirondack Park Agency chairman. That meant wrestling with the meaning and value of the Adirondack experiment while still struggling to shape its future.

"When I went into this project, I talked about the Park as a model for sustainable development for rural wildlands here and elsewhere," Whaley said in an interview with the *Explorer*. "What I learned ... in the process of doing the book is that the package in total can not be replicated."

Whaley's assessment is startling and sobering. In addition to serving as APA chairman, he had been director of economic research for the U.S. Forest Service and president of the state College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF). With those credentials, he is one of the most influential thinkers on Adirondack conservation.

Yet he now questions the long-held belief that the Adirondack Park's carefully regulated balance of human settlements and wilderness can be imitated by governments and communities around the world.

Even more provocative are Whaley's reasons for this skepticism. He now believes that the great land-preservation victories that led to the Park's creation and protection were gained by wealthy and influential men of a bygone era that included Louis Marshall, Harold Hochschild, and former Governor Nelson Rockefeller—"visionaries with power," as he calls them.

"Would you get that alignment somewhere else?" Wha-

ley asked. "I don't know whether that exists. Maybe in monarchies, but I'm not sure where that exists in the democratic world today."

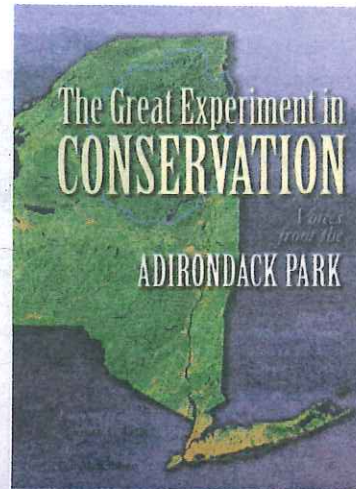
Not all of the thirty-nine essays in *The Great Experiment in Conservation: Voices from the Adirondack Park* cleave to this theme. The book's contributors (there are thirty-six in addition to the editors) present a thoughtful mix of ideas about the Park's natural, cultural, and political history.

Stuart Buchanan, the former regional director of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, contributes a fascinating article about the DEC's evolving relationship to the Park. James McClelland and Bruce Selleck give a concise overview of the Adirondacks' geology. Roger Dziengeleski, manager of woodlands for Finch Paper, sketches the state of the Park's timber industry.

But again and again, Whaley, Porter, and Erickson circle back to questions about the Adirondacks as a model. They also express doubts about whether the Park's modern leadership can overcome today's environmental challenges. "The current generation at times seems as if it would rather fight than win because the past forty years have been filled with acrimony," they write in the book's conclusion.

Whaley's co-editors are less well known but equally influential in ecology circles. William Porter is director of the ESF's Adirondack Ecological Center in Newcomb. Jon Erickson is associate professor of ecological economics at the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources in Vermont.

The three men co-authored the book's introduction as well as its conclusion. In addition, each contributed an introduction to one of the book's three parts, which are titled "Foundations of the Adirondack Ecosystem and Economy," "Institutions and Management of the Adiron-



**The Great Experiment
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dacks," and "Visions for the Adirondacks and Beyond." The editors make their most pointed arguments in these individual essays.

"Once we had started to see drafts of the individual chapters, we had the sense that they didn't tell a story," Whaley said in the interview. "That prompted us to spend more time on our own introductions to each of the sections, and a conclusion."

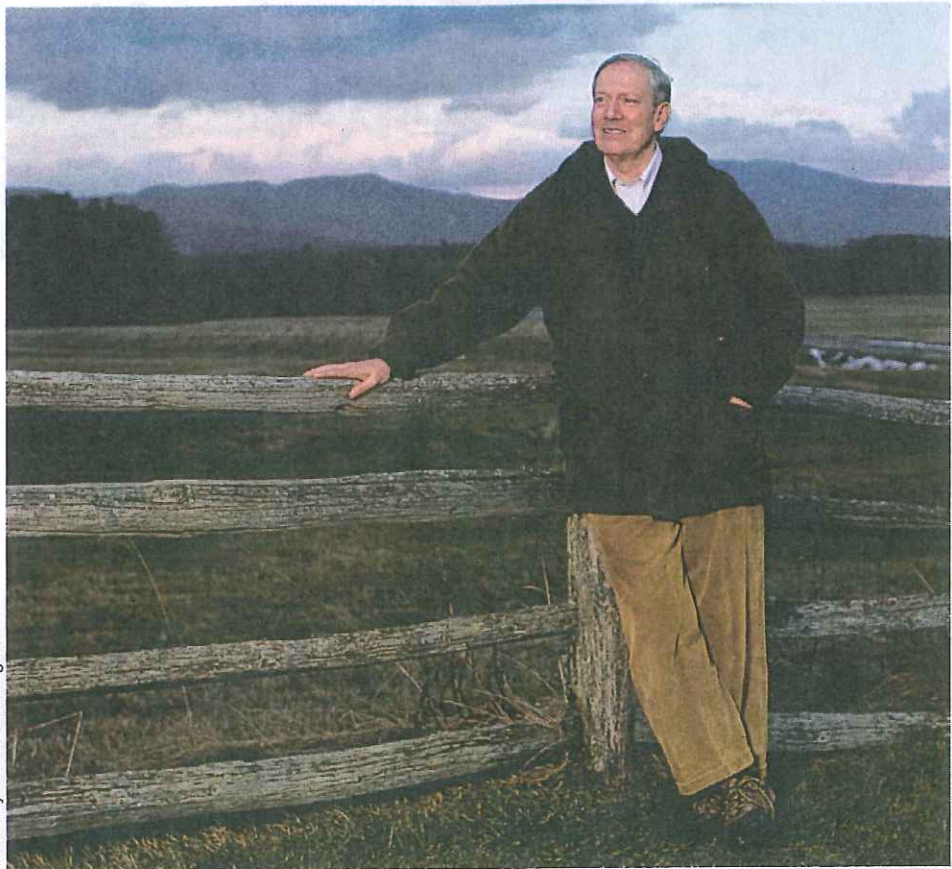
Taken together, their assessment of the Park is both courageous and contentious. It would have been easy to gather yet another collection of paeans to "the great experiment in conservation." And in fact, the editors remain convinced that the Park remains a vital laboratory for environmentalism. "Our sense was that there are lessons here," Whaley said. "If the [model] can't be adopted in totality, bits and pieces of it might be useful elsewhere."

In lionizing the great men of the past, though, Whaley and his colleagues appear somewhat dismissive of the accomplishments of recent years and of the potential for future gains. "What we have witnessed over the past 40 years, and the larger focus of this book," they

write in the conclusion, "is the playing out of the hand that was dealt by previous generations."

They go on to suggest that the era of "bold action" is over. In a typical passage, they assert that the "science available to date does not provide any clear answers" to the most pressing ecological questions facing the Adirondacks, including the cumulative development brought on by the vacation-home boom. They argue that Park advocates "will need to forge a new consensus for a shared vision" before making big changes.

This impression of a Park created by titans and left in the hands of tinkers and bureaucrats without a coherent agenda is problematic. The truth is that the Adiron- ▶▶



As governor, George Pataki preserved hundreds of thousands of acres of wild land in the Adirondack Park.

► Adirondack Park faces threats that those early visionaries couldn't have foreseen, ranging from the overdevelopment of shorelines to invasive species to climate change.

A growing number of critics believe that the laws and institutions that protect the Adirondacks need sweeping reforms, including more enforcement powers, more staff for stewardship, and stricter limits on development. "From the beginning," writes former APA Executive Director Bob Glennon, in one essay, "[the Park Agency] has tried to administer the unadministrable and enforce the unenforceable."

We have also witnessed the erosion of local communities and the quality of life for many year-round residents. Opponents of the APA go so far as to suggest that the overall design of the Park—with its layers of zoning rules and environmental regulations—has failed. "Based on what I have seen," former *Adirondack Daily Enterprise* Editor John Penney writes in his chapter, "I would question the basic fairness and wisdom" of APA oversight.

Several authors also point to the conundrum of solving Park problems that are shaped by powerful forces outside the Blue Line. The problems include acid rain, climate change, and invasive plants and insects. "More than at any time in the past," says historian Phil Terrie, "the fate of the Adirondacks lies not—or not solely—in the hands of New Yorkers or their legislature."

What's certain is that confronting today's challenges will indeed require bold action. Fortunately, there's every sign that

of thousands of acres to the Forest Preserve, and perhaps most important helped to legitimize the Park Agency itself.

Many local government leaders now see the APA as an important partner, especially in community planning. That would have been unheard of in the era when wealthy magnates pushed through environmental rules, as Whaley writes, "with little input from those towns and villages within the Blue Line."

The truth is that the Adirondacks has always been filled with acrimony and disagreement about its management. There never has been (and probably never will be) a shared vision of what the Park is or should be. But over the last four decades the Adirondack debate has been broadened and democratized. That's a good thing. There may be fewer visionaries with power, but the region's future is being shaped by everyday people living inside and outside the Blue Line. The process might seem noisier and more complicated than in the past, but it's also richer, fairer, and more nuanced.

Still, one of the most powerful impressions left by the authors of *The Great Experiment* is of just how fragile, complex, and improbable the Adirondack enterprise has been. After more than a century of bickering, tinkering, innovation, and compromise, the Park remains a "cauldron" bubbling with questions about stewardship and conservation.

"We don't in the book ever come to a conclusion about the greatness of the Park," Whaley said. "Optimists will see