

Essex Chain of Lakes and the State Land Master Plan

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Third Lake, Essex Chain. Courtesy of The Adirondack Almanack

The Department of Environmental Conservation has recommended that the new Forest Preserve acquisition at the Essex Chain of Lakes be classified Wild Forest, while the Upper Hudson River just to the east become part of a river corridor Wilderness. Several organizations previously submitted ideas for how these landscapes should be classified.

The APA is now charged with preparing classification documents for 18,000-acres comprising the Essex Chain of Lakes, and Upper Hudson tracts. Those classification documents will be subject to the State Environmental Quality Review Act and must involve public hearings and a public comment period. It will prove most interesting to see if APA acts with the independence it has in law, respects the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, and acts contrary to DEC recommendations on the Essex Chain of Lakes.

Fortunately, all the ideas and recommendations thus far have benefited from four years of intense field research and documentation

by the Adirondack Nature Conservancy, by DEC staff and by efforts within the DEC to solicit ideas and advice last summer and fall.

Now, all recommendations need to be tested against the guidelines in the State Land Master Plan, which guide APA's classification. Since few have commented yet on this testing, I will attempt it for the Essex Chain of Lakes.

As far as the lakes are concerned, the problem with the DEC's Wild Forest recommendation is that it appears to be a bad fit with the Master Plan's unifying theme, classification system and management guidelines, all of which have the force and effect of law (derived from the APA Act). If the Adirondack Park Agency has the will to abide by its Master Plan, it should reach a different conclusion than the DEC on how to classify the chain of ten lakes lying south of Goodnow Flow and north of the Cedar River. Fortunately, alternative classifications, or a diversity of classifications when combined over the 13,000-acres permit a substantial amount of public recreational uses.

In its Introduction, the Master Plan states "if there is a unifying theme to the master plan, it is that the protection and preservation of the natural resources of the state lands within the Park must be paramount. Human use and enjoyment of those lands should be permitted and encouraged, so long as the resources in their physical and biological context as well as their social or psychological aspects are not degraded. This theme is drawn not only from the Adirondack Park Agency Act and its legislative history, but also from a century of the public's demonstrated attitude toward the forest preserve and the Adirondack Park."

"Fortunately," the Intro continues, "the amount and variety of land and water within the Adirondack Park provide today and will provide in the future, with careful planning and management, a wide spectrum of outdoor recreational and educational pursuits in a wild forest setting unparalleled in the eastern half of this country."

In Chapter II, the Classification System and Guidelines, the Master Plan requires the APA to classify the state lands "according to their characteristics and capacity to withstand use." A "fundamental determinant of land classification is the physical characteristics of the land or water which have a direct bearing upon the capacity of the land to accept human use." It goes on to emphasize how fragile many of these landscapes are. "These fragile areas include most lands above 2500 feet in altitude, particularly the boreal, sub-alpine and alpine zones as well as low lying areas such as swamps, marshes and other wetlands. In addition, rivers, streams, lakes and ponds and their

environs often present special physical problems." Biological considerations, social and psychological factors, sense of remoteness and degree of wildness, and established facilities on the land, as well as uses now being made by the public are all factors to be taken into account in classification.

So what are the natural resource factors to be observed and protected in the Essex Chain of Lakes, and what classification makes the most sense given the APA's and DEC's "paramount responsibility" ?

I hasten to say that my knowledge and familiarity with the Essex Chain is limited. Few members of the public have been allowed to see the area, so I appreciate efforts by the Conservancy and NYS DEC to sponsor several field trips there. I've been most impressed by the lakes themselves which appear completely undeveloped, save for the leasehold structure on Third Lake which must be moved in 2018.

As we paddled them, all the lakeshores appeared thickly vegetated with spruce-fir swamp, lake margin bogs, and tamarack bogs. Loons were fishing on the chain of lakes, along with a member of the lease club (who caught a big fish as we paddled by). An osprey nest was visible on Third Lake. Despite knowing of the road system around its edges, I experienced a feeling of remoteness paddling in the chain of lakes, which are only about 7-8 miles in length, and took us only part of a day to travel back and forth.

According to Conservancy ecological maps of the area, calcareous bedrock underlies the entire chain of lakes, and there are several rare plants known to grow here. Places of good, deep mineral soil for locating primitive tent sites on the chain's shorelines appeared few and far between. The fishery includes stocked Rainbow Trout, Lake Trout and Landlocked Salmon. The Conservancy, the leaseholders and the DEC apparently feel the fishery is very vulnerable and that significant damage from overfishing or the use of bait fish could occur in the first year of public use.

Carrying capacity of the fishery, the boggy riparian areas, and the remote, unconfined nature of the lakes are all highly sensitive to disturbance and overuse, and require a form of wilderness management – while a different classification may be justified along the roads and access points to the north. Managing perimeter access and parking to match the interior capacity of the lake region to withstand public use appears to be critical.

DEC proposes a Wild Forest classification for the entire area. The Master Plan defines Wild Forest "where the resources permit a

somewhat higher degree of human use than in wilderness, primitive or canoe, while retaining an essentially wild character. A wild forest is further defined as an area that frequently lacks the sense of remoteness of wilderness, primitive or canoe and that permits a wide variety of public recreation." I've experienced plenty of Wild Forest that is remote and magnificently wild, thankfully, but APA must classify Essex Chain according to the Master Plan.

Do boggy, undeveloped lakeshores which should not be degraded lend themselves "to a somewhat higher degree of human use?" How about a highly vulnerable fishery for which special management regulations must be considered? What about calcareous bedrock under the lakes which sustains rare plants? Then, there is that clear sense of remoteness I and others have experienced along these water bodies.

I suspect that one of the reasons DEC has proposed Wild Forest has less to do with natural resource considerations, and more to do with its recommendation for seasonal-only float plane use of Third Lake at the center of the chain, a use disallowed under a Wilderness, Canoe or Primitive classification. Pilots could bring in fishers and hunters for multiple day and overnight use during the spring and fall. Yet, floatplane access in and out of Third Lake would come at the expense of the sensitive natural shorelines where shoreline camping may not be appropriate at all, and also harm the sense of remoteness at the very center of this lake chain. Unless the planes were thoroughly inspected and washed before each visit, float planes might also introduce aquatic invasive plants into this lake system.

The Adirondack Nature Conservancy has already worked out an agreement to permit ongoing float plane use near the perimeter of the Essex Chain at First Lake and Pine Lake. Such uses could continue indefinitely if both of these perimeter lakes were added to the immediately adjoining Blue Mountain Wild Forest. Additional float plane use at the very heart of a sensitive Essex Chain makes little management sense.

DEC may also be recommending Wild Forest because that classification allows for all-terrain bicycles, and motor vehicle use on roads open for such use. Yet, a split classification, one for the lakes, another for the area between them and Goodnow Flow, would accommodate all users while giving the APA the chance to classify the lakes as they should – according to Master Plan requirements.

For instance, a Canoe classification for the Essex Chain and immediate shorelines may be the one that most closely meets SLMP classification definitions and guidelines. A Canoe area is one where "watercourses or

number and proximity of lakes and ponds make possible a remote and unconfined type of water-oriented recreation in an essentially wilderness setting." That definition appears to be a dead-ringer for the Essex Chain. In addition, Canoe basic guideline 1 is all about protecting "the quality of the water and fishery resources while preserving a wilderness character on the adjacent lands." If this important fishery is to be safeguarded through education and regulation, a Canoe classification appears to make sense. A Canoe classification also makes the most sense if, as I suspect, lake monitors will be asked to inspect canoes and kayaks and educate paddlers to avoid introduction of aquatic invasives.

With all the waterways acquired over the past fifteen years for public use, one would think the Adirondack Forest Preserve and the public would be ready for a second Canoe area – but one that has to be carefully managed.

Given the small, intimate nature of the lakes, and natural resource constraints on overnight camping on their shores, there will be a premium on controlling public use to achieve primitive camping guidelines and to stay within lake carrying capacity limits. A Day Use only, or an overnight camping reservation system may be vital at the outset of DEC's management later this year, and a Canoe classification makes successful implementation of these user management tools more likely than Wild Forest.

Canoe areas guidelines would allow mountain bikes to be used on existing roads designated for such use. The Wild Forest classification might be best suited for the northerly part of this unit south of Goodnow Flow, affording miles of mountain bike use on good gradients, as well as snowmobiling opportunities on the road system leading to Deer Pond on the west, and Fifth Lake on the east. Primitive corridors could be extended for several miles beyond the gates here to afford better hunting access along the roads during big game season.

One of the DEC's best recommendations is a partnership with the State University's College of Environmental Science and Forestry and the Town of Newcomb to both welcome and manage the variety of visitors who will be attracted to the Essex Chain and the Upper Hudson River, partners who will help to boost the "wild economy" of the central Adirondacks.

These and other Master Plan "paramount" considerations need to be on the minds of APA staff and commissioners in the months ahead. The Master Plan is one of the APA's most critical responsibilities. The Adirondack Park Agency Act, from which the Master Plan is derived,

requires APA to classify the state lands in the Park according to “their characteristics and capacity to withstand use.” Come spring, I trust commissioners will paddle out on the chain of lakes, and drive the dirt road system to see and experience all those characteristics personally.