The fight to embrace wilderness and to keep designated wilderness areas free from mechanized uses is a national fight. APA weakened the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan this month by carving out two exceptions in its Primitive Area guidelines for bicycling and motorized maintenance in the Essex Chain and Pine Lake Primitive Areas.

This reflects a lack of appreciation of how sophisticated, gear-leveraged muscle-powered recreation impacts areas where the law states humans must not dominate the landscape (and where human uses are restrained to preserve, enhance and restore natural conditions).

The Primitive area classification in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan was created for areas that should eventually be reclassified Wilderness when the non-conforming uses end (such as closure of a road). That was, and still is, the goal under the Master Plan for a majority of Primitive areas.

A smaller number of Primitive areas fall into another type, those lacking wilderness scale or character and containing non-conforming uses unlikely to end in the foreseeable future, but requiring wilderness-type management.
because of highly sensitive natural resources.

Even if one accepts that the Essex Chain of Lakes and Pine Lake Primitive areas fall into the second general category – which is debatable – both should be managed as wilderness under the Master Plan. The Wilderness, Primitive and Canoe area definitions in the Master Plan are derived from the National Wilderness Preservation Act.

A lack of appreciation of how bicycling impacts wilderness combined with a sense of entitlement to one’s favorite recreational technology apparently motivates the latest effort to amend the National Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964 to authorize bicycling. Some mountain bikers (by no means a majority) and a mountain biking organization – the Sustainable Trails Coalition – have announced the intention to have legislation introduced in Congress to amend and weaken the Wilderness Act to allow mountain bikes in units of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Therefore, 116 organizations, including Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, have signed a letter to Congress. “For over a half century, the Wilderness Act has protected wilderness areas designated by Congress from mechanization and mechanical transport, even if no motors were involved with such activities. This has meant, as Congress intended, that Wildernesses have been kept free from bicycles and other types of mechanization and mechanical transport,” the letter reads.

“These mountain bikers erroneously claim that mountain bikes were allowed in Wilderness until 1984, but then banned administratively by the U.S. Forest Service. This claim is simply not true,” the letter said.

The press release announcing the letter includes several quotes from Wilderness Watch, who advocate for keeping the nation’s 110 million-acre National Wilderness Preservation System wild:

“At a time when wilderness and wildlife are under increasing pressures from increasing populations, growing mechanization, and a rapidly changing climate, the last thing Wilderness needs is to be invaded by mountain bikes and other machines,” said George Nickas, executive director of Wilderness Watch.

“Mountain bikes are exactly the kind of mechanical devices and mechanical transport that Congress intended to keep out of Wilderness in passing the Wilderness Act. Mountain bikes have their place, but that place is not inside Wilderness areas,” explained Kevin Proescholdt, Conservation Director of Wilderness Watch.

“We believe that this protection has served our nation well, and that the ‘benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness’ would be forever lost by allowing mechanized transport in these areas. Please oppose attempts to
weaken the Wilderness Act and wilderness protections by allowing bicycles in Wilderness,” the 116 organizations wrote Congress.

A copy of the letter to Congress signed by 116 conservation groups is here.