On The Boreas Ponds Acquisition

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My first reaction to the announcement of the state’s acquisition of magnificent Boreas Ponds for the Forest Preserve is to celebrate, and to recall how long the Adirondack Nature Conservancy has owned this 21,000 acre tract – the last of the big Finch Pruyn tracts which the state committed to purchase. It was April 2007 when Finch Pruyn employees, then Governor Spitzer, and the rest of the world learned that Finch was selling everything – all 161,000 acres – to the Conservancy, with help from the Open Space Institute. And in the same announcement, that the mill in Glens Falls would continue operations and employment.

This news that April day nine years ago was breathtaking. Adirondack Wild’s mentor Paul Schaefer had dreamed and worked for such a result from the early 1960s until his death in 1996. That was the significance of the Finch forests even fifty years ago. George Davis of the Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks (1968-70) put Boreas Ponds on the cover of the
Commission’s final report.

Of the 161,000 acres Finch, Pruyn once owned, just over 90,000 acres were ultimately conserved by conservation easement during Governor Paterson’s term, and remains private land today. The state has acquired 69,000 acres for the public Forest Preserve since Governor Cuomo came into office in 2011.

Land ownership means assuming great responsibilities and costs. For the past nine years, the Adirondack Conservancy in Keene Valley, led by Mike Carr, initiated a comprehensive land planning effort for this and other Finch, Pruyn tracts around the Park; consulted closely with the remaining business, leaseholders and the affected towns; with NYS DEC, and with Governors Spitzer, Paterson and Cuomo; invited countless guests like me and Dan Plumley to see and experience Boreas Ponds and gain their first impression; and, perhaps most importantly, the Conservancy paid employees and taxes, maintained and managed forestry operations and leaseholds, and at Boreas Ponds paid for the upkeep of the road and buildings.

So, a very big thank you is owed the Adirondack Nature Conservancy for not simply holding Boreas Ponds and other large tracts for nine years, but assuming all of the complex responsibilities as land owner, taxpayer, employer and ecologist, forest economist, down to the very smallest detail; and raising the tens of millions of dollars to cover all of these costs.

One must also recognize and thank Finch, Pruyn for keeping the land intact and well-managed for so long; Governor Cuomo, DEC Commissioners Grannis, Martens and now Seggos, and DEC and APA staff for work to study the area behind the scenes; Senator Little for her efforts; and Essex County officials, including North Hudson Supervisor Ron Moore. While I may take a different position than Mr. Moore about the land’s ultimate classification, he never appears uncivil or mean-spirited in taking a determined position that the public be allowed access to this great tract of land and water. Reasonable access is very important. I just feel the bulk of the property should be classified Wilderness for it amply meets the Wilderness definition in the State Land Master Plan.

With the acquisition, Adirondack Park Agency will begin its classification deliberations later this year. According to the State Land Master Plan (pages 14-15, Classification System and Guidelines), APA must take into account the “fundamental determinant of the physical characteristics of the land or water” including the nature of the soils, slopes, microclimates, water chemistry, “all affecting the carrying capacity of the land and water both from the standpoint of the construction of facilities and the amount of human use the land or water itself can absorb. By and large, these factors highlight the essential fragility of significant portions of the state lands within the Park.”

Biological considerations also play an important role in the structuring of the
A Wilderness classification would give the Town of North Hudson a major share and stake in the High Peaks Wilderness. It would still allow ample public access via the Gulf Brook Road. We know that most visitors will remain at the perimeter but will still value and support this wilderness through their votes, taxes (all Forest Preserve is taxable for all purposes) and visitation to area businesses and information centers. Adirondack Wild supports the siting of an information/interpretive center devoted to the Boreas Ponds and High Peaks somewhere in the Town of North Hudson.

My first impression in visiting the Boreas Ponds was one of supreme mountain majesty. The High Peaks Wilderness looms just to the north. The declivity of Panther Gorge separating Mounts Marcy and Haystack appears so close it beckons you. As your kayak slips into these waters, a great solitude embraces the water on all sides among dense stands of spruce and fir. Loons ahead on the first Boreas pond call repeatedly – they are completely unused to human
contact. A red-tailed hawk soars over the second pond. In the fall, a migrating bald eagle passes high overhead. Paddling through the narrow entrance to the third pond, amidst spatter-dock waterlily, one sees a heron rookery. A belted kingfisher rattles at the shoreline, breaking the silence.

This landscape, once an industrial forest and company retreat, easily meets the State Land Master Plan Wilderness definition, having gained “primeval character,” “affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable, with outstanding opportunities for solitude and a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.”

Traveling around the ponds on the former logging roads one is impressed with its wilderness potential. In a year or two, these old roadbeds will be swallowed up, reverting to spruce and fir. Moose tracks and sign of bear add to this impression. So do the rare birds which specialize and rely on this boreal habitat for nesting and foraging. Near the High Peaks lie smaller ponds such as White Lily Pond where trout lie still in the shadows. Above that pond looms Allen Mountain – so close you feel its rugged outcrops.

A well has a “cone of influence” around it. The well’s water quality declines immediately when a significant portion of that cone’s circumference is damaged. So it is with a Wilderness. The High Peaks Wilderness, as large as it is today (nearly 200,000 acres), still lacks all its natural boundaries. The Ausable River and Raquette River drainages of this Wilderness, on the north and west, are largely intact. The big missing piece of this “cone of influence” is the Boreas River drainage to the south. At its heart lies the 21,000 acre Boreas Ponds tract. By acquiring this, and designating it part of the High Peaks, that Wilderness will finally gain its natural boundaries, and a sheer size, level of protection, ecological stability, enlightened management, and recreational potential unsurpassed in the eastern United States.

Few places in the northeast afford similar mountain and lake scenery and recreational potential in such close proximity. By classifying the area Wilderness, the quiet, remoteness and sense of solitude of the High Peaks during these recreational adventures are immeasurably enhanced. The major entrance, the five-mile Gulf Brook Road, should be an access corridor. Because Boreas Ponds inhabits a natural bowl, its soundscape is vulnerable to motorized traffic spidering off of the access road. A Wilderness classification would prevent this. Also, the Boreas Pond shorelines are sensitive to overuse by campers; additional primitive camping locations along the Gulf Brook Road south of the ponds would take camping pressure off the shorelines. Auto traffic on the road could be stopped at a control point short of LaBier Flow, a dammed section of the Boreas River, where trailhead registers could be placed, a Forest Ranger presence established, and boats wheeled or carried to the water. A day’s adventure would begin here. Perimeter parking would be matched to the land’s capacity to withstand use. The disassembly of the Boreas Lodge (built c. 1988) at the ponds is not only essential to achieve wilderness conditions, but it
removes motorized traffic to the sensitive shorelines, reduces the risk of introducing invasive aquatic species, and eliminates a costly white elephant five miles from the nearest highway. It must cost a lot just to heat, maintain and staff this structure each year.

One should not have to physically reach Boreas Ponds themselves to benefit. At several points along the Gulf Brook Road small pull-offs could be established and future visitors could enjoy new hiking opportunities on Ragged Mountain, or fishing on Gulf and Andrew Brook, or simply walking on sections of the road during fall or spring weather. Where the Gulf Brook Road meets the Blue Ridge Road, informative signage about the Boreas Ponds tract could be established, directing visitors and recreationists not only to the Road points of access, but also to a nearby interpretive center somewhere in the Town of North Hudson where the cultural history, majesty and opportunities of this rugged place could be told, and information about High Peaks weather, recreational conditions passed on to visitors. That’s my preference. Residents of North Hudson should ultimately select the themes.