This is your Forest Preserve.

“Forever Wild”

–Article XIV–

New York State Constitution
ADIRONDACK PARK

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Mount Marcy, Whiteface, Lake George, Hunter Mountain, the Esopus Creek, Neversink, Raquette River, Boreas Mountain, Ha-De-Ron-Dah Wilderness—these evocative names connote the essence of wild, rugged beauty and wilderness habitats. New York State is the only state, and the only government, which has a forest preservation mandate in its State Constitution. New York’s three-million-acre publicly owned Forest Preserve in sixteen Adirondack and Catskill counties is protected by an ironclad, far-reaching covenant between a government and its people. We have an enduring wilderness for people and wild nature, a haven for the ultimate expression of our human partnership with nature.

1894

And that has been the case since 1894 when a constitutional convention in Albany and the voters approved the following article, two sentences and 54 words long, known today as—

“Forever Wild”

—Article XIV—

“The lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the forest preserve as now fixed by law, shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed.”
Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve considers this late 19th century covenant a living and breathing document. We are determined to not only safeguard its integrity, but to extend its principles and its implicit land ethic in the 21st century.

The framers of Article XIV lived at a time of intense industrialization. The cutting and removal of trees on higher elevations with thin soils resulted in erosion, flooding, loss of soil moisture, and forest fires. Many European nations, as well as New England states, had already experienced severe loss of natural resources from exploiting their forests.

New York’s lawmakers were concerned with conserving watersheds, and assuring that rivers and streams which came from these mountains would continue to flow year-round to supply New York’s canals, the highways of their day. Others knew that a constitutionally protected forest would serve as a refuge for wildlife and for the spirit of people seeking peace, respite, and recreation. Citizens were resolved that New York’s “Forever Wild” clause would stand as a bulwark against unrestrained commercialism.

Where Wilderness Began

The protection of Adirondack and Catskill Preserves inspired wilderness preservation in 20th century America. In the early 1960s, Howard Zahniser, Executive Secretary of The Wilderness Society, completed his final draft of the National Wilderness Preservation Act. He devoted 18 years to moving this bill towards passage which was achieved after his death in 1964. The nation finally had a national system of wilderness lands. Howard Zahniser gained the inspiration to undertake this monumental accomplishment in 1946. Zahniser hiked through the Adirondack High Peaks with Paul Schaefer, founder of Friends of the Forest Preserve. At a lean-to at night, above the Flowed Lands, Howard and Paul discussed the national implications of New York’s “Forever Wild” law.
Opportunities and Benefits

Today, the Forest Preserve encompasses three-million-acres in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks. Article XIV acts not just as a restriction but as an opportunity for all that wild lands provide us at such little cost, and as an obligation for government to act comprehensively in ways that respect the health of our lands, our air, our atmosphere, and our watersheds.

Rivers like the Upper Hudson, Raquette, St. Lawrence, Black, Mohawk, and the Delaware all originate in these protected mountains. These great watersheds efficiently filter billions of gallons of water each day, and prevent flooding. The New York City metropolitan area is spared billions in water treatment costs by the Catskill “Forever Wild” watersheds. The smallest Adirondack stream flows year-round because of the stable base flow guaranteed by “Forever Wild” policies. The recreational, wildlife, and spiritual benefits of our wilderness are incalculable. The Forest Preserve acts as a buffer against a changing climate. The economic benefits are in the tens of billions of dollars annually and growing every year.

Judicial Decisions and Amendments

The most significant judicial interpretation of Article XIV came in 1930, after The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks sued to block the construction of an Olympic bobsled run on the Forest Preserve. In ruling for The Association, Justice Harold Hinman wrote:

“Giving to the phrase ‘forever kept as wild forest lands’ the significance which the term ‘wild forest’ bears, we must conclude that the idea intended was a health resort and playground with the attributes of a wild forest park as distinguished from other parks so common in our civilization. We must preserve it in its wild state, its trees, its rocks, its streams. It was to be a great resort for the free use for the people in which nature is given free reign. Its uses for health and pleasure must not be inconsistent with its preservation as forest lands in a wild state. It must always retain the character of a wilderness.”
It is purposefully difficult to change our Constitution. “Forever Wild” amendments have to pass in two separately-elected legislatures. Ultimately, New York citizens decide whether an amendment constitutes a significant shift away from “Forever Wild.” Voters have ratified defined amendments of limited geographic scope. The Northway (I-87), Whiteface and Gore Mountain Ski Centers, the small airport at Piseco, an expanded cemetery in Keene, a new groundwater supply for Raquette Lake, and about 25 other amendments since 1895 have met with voter approval. However, voters have rejected a dozen other proposals for massive dam projects, commercial cabins, roads, spreading ski resorts, and other development which would eviscerate the very wilderness which draws so many to these mountains. Paul Schaefer, founder of Friends of the Forest Preserve, personally led coalitions which defeated many of these proposals.

The Forest Preserve in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks is taxable. Taxes are paid by all New York residents to hundreds of affected towns, villages, and school districts, amounting to more than $80 million annually. Adirondack Wild helps lawmakers to recognize that the downstream benefits of protecting upstate watersheds in the Adirondacks and Catskills more than justify these costs spread among all taxpayers.

Challenges

There is a natural temptation by elected officials and state administrators to compromise and dilute “Forever Wild” for perceived short-term gain. There can be no Forest Preserve without a vigilant public that will not compromise on the long-term principles which undergird this law.

Strengthening Forever Wild

Adirondack Wild tells the story of how much wild nature benefits our society. We train students in wilderness stewardship, providing the background and tools they need. Young people know that the “Forever Wild” law should be strengthened, not compromised. With our help, students are showing how this can be done. Young people of all backgrounds, once introduced to the wilderness, learn teamwork, discipline, and may become influential leaders.
Lessons Learned

Our founder Paul Schaefer set the context for our work:

“For here is a universe older than history, over which nature has full reign and man is of little more consequence than the deer, which come to these pure waters from surrounding wooded ridges. We all own an undivided deed to this Adirondack land of solitude, peace and tranquility.”

Today, we seize an opportunity to affect the minds and hearts of future generations or, in Schaefer’s words, to assure that the priceless legacy of “Forever Wild” will be passed on “to the youth of distant tomorrows.”

Wild Legacy

Friends of the Forest Preserve was founded in 1945 by Paul Schaefer, that champion of Adirondack wilderness, recognized by Audubon in 1998 as one of the most effective conservationists of the 20th century. Adirondack Wild’s partners were mentored by him, and employ many of Schaefer’s methods.

We build upon the work of hundreds of spirited men and women who have stood up for wilderness and the Forest Preserve—against tremendous odds—since 1885.

For 125 years, New Yorkers have been guided by these conservationists. As citizens, we are links in an important and historic chain that must not be broken.

Our sole focus is on wild landscapes.

Advocacy and training efforts to sustain and secure the wilderness require funding. Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve’s programs will flourish with your moral and financial support. Donations in any amount will be well spent and greatly appreciated.

This Article XIV booklet is made possible through the generosity of Wells Fargo Advisors.
We all own an undivided deed to this Adirondack land of solitude, and peace and tranquility.

—Paul Schaefer

Safeguarding the Wild
by protecting the wild legacy, transcendent values, and benefits of the NYS Constitution’s “Forever Wild” provision for the three-million-acre Forest Preserve in the Adirondacks and Catskills.

Extending the Wild
by advocating for the addition of particularly valuable wild lands to the Forest Preserve, and for conservation easements which further ecologically-beneficial stewardship of private lands.

Educating for the Wild
through training, photography, cultural arts, literature, conferences, and partnerships with those who help recruit aware, active wilderness stewards.

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Founded 1945
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