

The group looking for help turned out to be the Adirondack Council. The Council was created with one overriding mission: “To ensure the ecological integrity and wild character of the Adirondack Park.”¹

The park, created by the Legislature in 1892 to protect timber and water resources, is the largest protected area in the lower forty-eight states. Bigger than Yellowstone, Everglades, Glacier and Grand Canyon National Parks combined, its six million acres covers almost 20 percent of New York state. Almost one-half of the land in the Park is publicly owned “forever wild” forest preserve.²

Almost an additional 775,000 acres of private land are subject to publicly held conservation easements.³ (See figure I.2.)

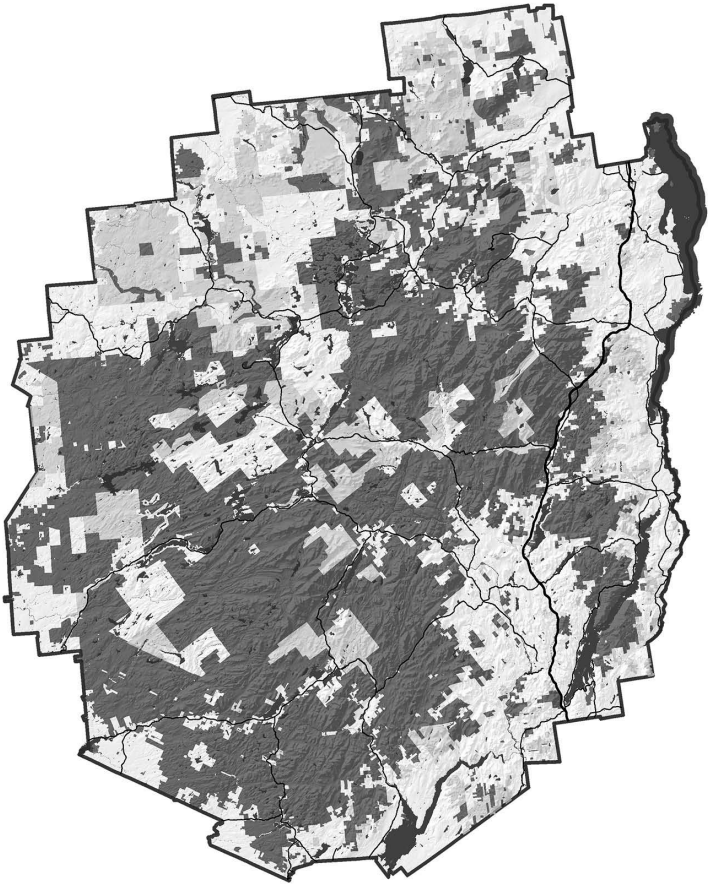


Figure I.2. Land ownership in the Park. State lands shaded dark, easements in gray, private lands in white. *Source:* Adirondack Council.

While the High Peaks region with forty-six tall peaks is most widely known, the Park includes the headwaters of five major drainage basins: Lake Champlain and the Hudson, Black, Saint Lawrence, and Mohawk Rivers. There are thousands of miles of rivers, brooks, and streams and approximately 2,800 lakes and ponds.⁴ Conservationists nationwide revere the park, one reason that the Council's members come from all fifty states.

For much of its history, one of the strongest environmental laws in the world, the “forever wild” clause of New York’s Constitution, adopted in 1894, has protected the public lands in the park. It reads: “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.”⁵

Over the decades, this ideal had come under pressure in the sprawling, complex Adirondack Park. Inside the Blue Line, as the park boundary is known, lies a six-million-acre patchwork of public and private land, in roughly equal parts. More than a hundred town or village boards control the private lands, and the public lands are managed by several state agencies.⁶

In 1970, an alarming report highlighted the dangers of this arrangement. Most private land in the park was not subject to land-use regulation, and a Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks, appointed by Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, warned that there was an imminent danger of large-scale, uncontrolled residential development. It found that most town and village governments lacked the land-use and zoning laws to control development within their borders, not to mention the resources to enforce such rules, even if they were in place.⁷ This situation would soon change, and change drastically. The very next year, the legislature approved Governor Rockefeller’s proposal to create an Adirondack Park Agency to oversee the planning and management of both state and private land in the Park. In effect, the state took the unprecedented step of establishing a parkwide planning and zoning board to regulate development in the towns inside the Blue Line.

The environmental community soon responded in kind. The Adirondack Council was created as a privately funded organization in 1975 to monitor the work of the Adirondack Park Agency (APA). The nonprofit, nonpartisan council would be a “green voice” as regulations for lands within the park were drawn up, adopted, and implemented. The Council was, at its inception, an organization of both individual and organizational members. Many of its board members represented national and regional environmental organizations with an interest in the future of the Adirondack Park. These predecessor organizations had already done outstanding work, especially the venerable Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks.

Over the following years, the Adirondack Council expanded its agenda beyond the APA to all matters involving the private and public lands in the park. By 1990, it had an annual budget of over a million dollars and staffers working not just at its Elizabethtown, New York, headquarters but also in the state and US capitals. It had become widely recognized as the “watchdog of the Adirondacks.”

It was at this point that I entered the scene as a job candidate.

I had met Gary Randorf, the council’s executive director, years before when we joined forces to lobby the legislature to expand the state’s Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers program. Gary was a short, nimble, and fit fellow with a huge beard, an easy laugh, and a twinkle in his eye. (Later he shaved the beard, saying that too many people told him it made him look like an elf.)

Gary’s accomplishments included paddling all waterways in the wild rivers program, along with the legendary woodsman Clarence Petty.

Gary led the fight to stop acid rain in the Adirondacks for years, and was successful in ending the aerial spraying of pesticides to kill black flies inside the Park. He was also a celebrated photographer of the natural beauty of the Adirondacks, whose prints were highly prized gifts to patrons of the Adirondack Council.

Gary explained that the council’s board of directors had recently decided it needed a full-time lobbyist. The impetus was an impending report like the one produced under Rockefeller in 1970. It was coming from a new panel, appointed by Governor Mario M. Cuomo, called the Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century.

The Adirondack Council thought that this report, like the original one, would set off a drive for new policies toward the park. He wanted his board of directors to be positioned to influence the results in the legislature.

Gary set up a meeting for me with the chairwoman, Barbara L. Glaser. Barbara was and remains a major force for conservation in the Adirondack Park, and in her hometown of Saratoga Springs. She would become a good friend.

I got the job. Having gone through the revolving door at the Capitol from not-for-profit lobbyist to legislative staffer, I now exited the way I came in. Back to the environmental community. I could not have been more thrilled at the prospect. Growing up only minutes south of the park boundary, I had spent many days hiking, paddling, fishing, camping, and hunting in the Park. Until now, most of my professional work on environmental issues had been focused elsewhere.

Just as I joined the Adirondack Council, the Park's natural resources were facing two great threats to their survival: environmental damage from acid rain and a potential sell-off of huge tracts of privately held timberlands.

Acid rain, laden with sulfur and nitrogen oxides, was killing trees in the Park; many lakes and streams had become acidic and could no longer support native fish, and the health of not just wildlife but also the Park's human residents was being endangered by mercury and lead. The main source of these pollutants was coal-fueled power plants and factories, most of which were located out-of-state, hundreds of miles away and out of the reach of New York's legal authority.

The push to obtain large tracts of private land for development inside the Park was a fairly new phenomenon. For more than 100 years, the owners of timber companies and large family estates took their responsibility to preserve and protect the hundreds of thousands of acres of forest, rivers, wetlands, and meadows they owned quite seriously. Few people realized that when they climbed to some high vista and looked across the vast forests and lakes below, they were likely looking at private land.

Now, market forces were rapidly changing the timber industry and the older generation of landowners was dying off. Large holdings were being sold off and subdivided at a rapidly increasing pace, with the development now focused on new vacation homes. The sheer scale of the turnover represented a potential catastrophe for the Adirondack Park. The legislative compromises that had been struck to create the Park Agency's regulatory authority, particularly the weak rules on waterfront development and protection of the backcountry, were now exposed. It was hoped that the new Governor's Commission would issue recommendations to address these new land use challenges in the Park.

The Adirondack Council and other environmental organizations would meet these two great threats to the future of the natural resources of the park by staging unprecedented lobbying campaigns at the state and federal level. In addition to this challenging work, the Council, in its self-declared role as the Park's "watchdog," faced other new issues large and small.

We would tackle them all: the reintroduction of moose; the construction of a prison in the park; a proposal to dump chemicals into the "Queen of American Lakes"; the fate of the Park's major river corridors; even the need to corral timber rustlers. All these events occurred in my tenure as legal counsel and legislative director of the Adirondack Council from the year 1990 to 2005.

I helped lead those campaigns. These are my stories.