

EDITORIALS

Save *all* fire towers in Adirondacks

When the state Department of Environmental Conservation recommended in February that 22 out of the remaining 24 fire towers in the Adirondacks not only be kept, but improved for public use, we were so relieved that we accepted its recommendation to remove the other two: on Hurricane Mountain near Elizabethtown, and on St. Regis Mountain in the northwestern part of the park. That was a mistake on our part, because there's really no compelling reason to take them down and good reasons to keep them. The Adirondack Park Agency deserves credit for holding hearings this week with the goal of finding a way to save the towers.

The towers are no longer used in the Adirondacks for their original purpose of spotting forest fires, having been replaced by satellite images and modern communications and airplanes. Their main value now is recreational. They are a popular destination for hikers, often families with children, for whom the climb up those long, narrow flights of stairs, wind whistling in their ears, is exciting, and the unrestricted views from the top rewarding.

The problem with the Hurricane and St. Regis towers, besides currently being closed and in bad repair, is that they are in "primitive" areas, basically the same as "wilderness," where heavy use is supposed

to be discouraged and man's hand is not supposed to be visible. But these are not some recent, unnatural intrusion on the forest; they are a rich, integral part of its history. Nobody's proposing building more towers as a theme-park gimmick to evoke an earlier time, just to keep what has been there for nearly 100 years.

Those who support removing the towers talk about the need to avoid exceptions, about "slippery slopes." But there are cases in which common sense should be applied. The mountains and towers can take the use, and they will introduce more people to the Adirondack Park and show them why it needs protecting.

This situation is not unlike the once neglected and abandoned Great Santanoni Camp, which was slated for demolition after the state took it over in 1972, but was ultimately preserved and restored.

The fact is, you cannot totally separate humans from nature, even in a wilderness; it's an artificial distinction. Culture and nature aren't mutually exclusive, and historic preservation and environmental conservation needn't be, either. The goal for the Adirondack Park should be to find the right balance, to show how humans can live in and interact with nature. Saving the remaining fire towers — *all* of them — is part of that equation.