

Monday, March 15, 2010

**Phil Brown: Wilderness as a State of Mind**



The state Department of Environmental Conservation’s proposal to remove fire towers from St. Regis and Hurricane Mountains raises some difficult philosophical questions, starting with: what is wilderness?

In calling for the towers’ removal, DEC relies on the definition in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, which is taken from the federal Wilderness Act: “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man—where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

Fire towers are excluded from the State Land Master Plan’s list of acceptable structures in a Wilderness Area.

Actually, St. Regis and Hurricane Mountains are not in Wilderness Areas. The first lies in the St. Regis Canoe Area; the second, in the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area. Nevertheless, both tracts are managed essentially as Wilderness, so the same prohibition applies.

The towers' fans wonder why it's OK to have ranger cabins, lean-tos, signposts, wooden bridges, stone steps, and trails in the wilderness but not fire towers. They view the towers not as an affront to wilderness, but as a symbol of wilderness.

Obviously, wilderness is in the eye of the beholder. The debate over the towers is about aesthetics and human sensibilities. Surely, fire towers have little, if any, impact on the ecosystem.

Some people say it's impossible to find true wilderness in the Adirondacks. Wherever you go in this 5.8-million-acre Park, you're never far from roads and, all too often, the noise of traffic. This is another way of saying you're never that far from civilization.

But if distance from civilization is a hallmark of wilderness, then why not take this idea further and leave behind trails, lean-tos, signs, and the rest of our forest infrastructure?

Bushwhacking comes closer to wilderness as experienced by our forefathers, but in truth it's still far from the same. When our ancestors went into the woods, they didn't bring cell phones, GPS instruments, personal locator beacons, or even, in many cases, good maps and compasses. If they had an accident, chances are that no one would come to their rescue for days, if ever. Chances are no one else knew exactly where they were.

In short, they put themselves at far more risk than we do. I've often thought that to approximate the experience of yore, which is closer to true wilderness, you'd need to, at a minimum: (1) travel off trail, (2) leave behind the electronic devices that tether you to civilization, and (3) not tell anyone where you're going.

Of course, this goes against the advice you'll hear from forest rangers, wilderness professionals, and sane people generally, but I'm not saying you should do these things. My point is that wilderness is partly a state of mind. That's why it's so hard to define.

*Photo by Phil Brown: the Hurricane tower.*