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Preservationists Split On Adirondack Fire Towers

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KEENE, N.Y. (AP) — To some preservationists, the rusting skeleton of an abandoned fire tower atop Hurricane Mountain in the Adirondacks is a blight on the wilderness landscape, and the sound of wind moaning through its metal limbs disturbs the natural peace.

To others, the 35-foot fire tower is a beloved relic intimately connected with the history of the American wilderness. It's also a fun place to drop your rucksack and take in the view.

The Hurricane Mountain fire tower southeast of Lake Placid and a tower on St. Regis Mountain are the only two of the dozens that once dotted the six-million acre park that do not fit today's state land use plan.

The New York Department of Environmental Conservation recommended tearing the two towers down, labeling them a "non-conforming use." But the Adirondack Park Agency, which enforces land-use regulations in the region, voted in October to designate a half-acre under each of the towers as "historic"—an unusual move that would allow the structures to remain.

Adirondack Architectural Heritage and other groups that lobbied hard to keep the towers in place and eventually be restored applaud the decision. But wilderness preservation groups fear it signals a weakening of APA's commitment to uphold protective land-use rules.

"It's irresponsible for the APA to have made the decision they made," said Dan Plumley of Adirondack Wild. "This is postage-stamp zoning in the middle of wilderness to appease a minority viewpoint. It goes against the larger State Land Master Plan that the people of the state have supported time and time again."

Gov. David Paterson will have to sign off on the proposal, the department will have to develop a management plan, and the public be given a chance to comment before the APA can give final approval.

Fifty-seven fire towers were built in the park after a series of devastating fires in the early 1900s. The towers were slowly decommissioned between 1971 and 1990. Many were dismantled, but 20 remain on state-owned property.

Hurricane and St. Regis are the only non-conforming sites. The other 18 are in areas classified as less ecologically sensitive and remote.

“The towers and the people that staffed them had an important role in protecting the forests of the region,” said Steve Engelhardt, director of the heritage group. “Now, 80 years later, we still feel they serve a public educational purpose and a place in the forest preserve setting.”

Fire tower enthusiasts also see the structures as popular hiking destinations that afford breathtaking 360-degree views from their lookout cabins.

“The fire towers are an icon of outdoor history,” said Bill Starr, a one-time Adirondack fire observer and member of the national Forest Fire Lookout Association. “People have a deep love for the fire towers. They don’t want to see them go.” Starr fears the issue will drag on for years as opponents continue to press for removal of the towers.

The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, Adirondack Wild and the Adirondack Council all support removal of the St. Regis and Hurricane towers. So does the Adirondack Mountain Club, which has been a strong advocate for fire towers on other peaks where the land-use plan allows them.

Allison Beals of the Adirondack Mountain Club said the APA’s decision to establish historic areas inside wilderness sets a dangerous legal precedent that could lead to other amendments that chip away at wilderness preservation.

Plumley, of Adirondack Wild, prefers a proposal by environmental groups to move the two towers off the mountaintops to nearby communities where they could be set up as historic sites easily accessible to thousands of people.

But Engelhardt rejects that idea. “The context of the towers is very important,” he said. “They belong on the tops of mountains.”

Alta Jo Longware of Elizabethtown, co-organizer of Friends of Hurricane Mountain Tower, is delighted with the APA’s action. She said she’s hopeful it won’t be long before her group can begin repainting the tower, replacing missing stairs, and restoring it to a state where visitors can safely climb to the top.

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2 COMMENTS

Sandra Hildreth

The reason that the forested lands surrounding these 2 fire towers looks like wilderness is due to the fact that the towers were put up in the early part of the 20th century after there had been extensive fires and logging in the Adirondacks. Note I wrote “looks like wilderness” – much of the Adirondack Park does. But the history of the Park is much more a story of recovery and restoration than one of preservation. Look up old photos and see the barren hills and ravaged valleys. New York State has a world class Park – a very special region that deserves all the protection the state constitution can provide – but it exists because of the wisdom of those who created the Park and put up the fire towers. It seems very wild because man (and women)

intervened. I'm a member of the Adirondack Mountain Club and Protect the Adirondacks and I want these 2 fire towers to remain where they are so future generations will understand the story of how the Adirondack Park came to be.

November 22, 2010 at 10:08 am

Bill Starr

I believe that Mr. Plumley should take a second look at the number of people in favor of saving these two fire towers. He'll find that he represents the minority.