In 1885, a lobby of business owners created the New York State Forest Preserve in the interest of protecting the water supply of New York City. It became increasingly clear, however, that the lands would need a more permanent form of protection if they were to remain as wilderness. In 1892, the “Blue Line” was established designating the Adirondack Park boundary within which lay both public and private lands. Shortly thereafter, in 1894, the Adirondack Park became protected in the New York State constitution under the “Forever Wild” clause in Article XIV, Section 1: “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.”

As an introduction to the Adirondack State Park, a series of passages from Paul Schneider’s book, The Adirondacks, fits the bill extraordinarily well. If you are a longtime visitor “up north”, perhaps this will inspire you to explore more; if this is your first image of the Adirondacks, we hope that it aids you in forming a “sense of place”. In either case, get ready; the Adirondacks can be a magical, powerful, and compelling place.

“There are more than four thousand lakes, ponds, swamps, and bogs tucked away in the park. There are thirty thousand miles of rivers, streams, and brooks. The headwaters of the Hudson are within the park, as are major tributaries to the Mohawk and St. Lawrence Rivers, and Lake Champlain as well. Once a traveler is west of the High Peaks, which rise quite steeply from the eastern boundary of the park, the Adirondacks seem more a place of water than of mountains.

There are, however, plenty of peaks. Stretching from Lake Champlain in the east to Utica in the west, and from eleven miles south of the Canadian border in the north to just north of Schenectady in the south, the Adirondack Park is larger than Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, and Yosemite national parks combined. A fifth of New York State is inside the “Blue Line,” which makes the park larger than New Jersey or Massachusetts. At six million acres, it’s about the size of New Hampshire. There are within its borders roughly two thousand peaks that by regional standards qualify as mountains. Of these, more than a hundred rise above three thousand feet. Two in the northeast quarter of the park, Marcy and Algonquin, have summits greater than five thousand feet.

These are not towering giants by western standards, or even by comparison to the White Mountains of nearby New Hampshire. The five overlapping ranges of the Adirondacks are compressed and confused to a degree that can make for some fairly formidable hiking nonetheless. In thirteen and a half miles, the trail over the Great Range from the village of Keene Valley to the summit of Mount Marcy entails a vertical ascent of some nine thousand feet.

In addition to beaver and muskrat, there are black bear, white-tailed deer, red fox, gray fox, coyote, bobcat, otter, fisher, mink, raccoons, weasels, and some forty other species of mammals in the park. Three hundred different kinds of birds spend all or part of the year in the park. There are brook trout, lake trout, brown trout, rainbow trout, landlocked Atlantic salmon, and at least seventy other fishes. There are turtles, salamanders, snakes, frogs, toads, skinks, and newts. Ninety percent of the animal species that inhabit the eastern part of the United States can be found living somewhere, at some season, in the Adirondacks.
More than wildlife, and more even than mountains and water, this Adirondack wilderness is one of trees...The deciduous trees dominate, but there are also eastern hemlocks, Scotch pines, white pines, pitch pines, red pines, and jack pines in the park. There are red, black, white, and Norway spruces. There are tamaracks, the conifers that shed their needles every fall like leaves, and there are balsam firs.

In most places the forest is relatively young; second or third growth after successive waves of farmers, loggers, charcoal makers had taken what they wanted. But not everywhere. There are groves of hardwoods in the Pigeon Lake Wilderness Area, west of Raquette Lake, that were probably never cut. Some of the birches there belie the reputation of that family of trees for slender delicacy; mature yellow birches, for instance, with trunks that two adults standing with arms outstretched cannot reach around. Along Powley Road, south of Piseco Lake, there are spruces six feet around at the base that are probably close to three hundred years old.

And at a place called the Pine Orchard, a few miles east of the Sacandaga River in the section of the park called the Wilcox Lake Wild Forest, are three-hundred-year-old giants that centuries ago would have warranted protection by the English Crown for the sole use of the mast makers of the Royal Navy; straight-grained white

Geology
A southern extension of the Canadian shield, the Adirondacks are the only mountains in the East that are not part of the Appalachians. Formed over 1 billion years ago, they are among the oldest in the world. The Adirondack peaks, once Himalayan in size, were shaped by faulting, erosion and the recession of mile thick glaciers around 12 thousand years ago. What remains today of this last ice age – ancient islands in the sky – are 85 acres of fragile alpine zone on the summits of ten of the Adirondack peaks.

Mohawks, Trappers, & Loggers
For many centuries the Iroquois nation covered what is now upstate New York, with the Adirondacks falling in Mohawk territory. The Mohawks hunted regularly in the lower and more fertile areas of the park but did not live in the mountainous regions. When the first trappers arrived in the early 1600’s, the Mohawks were forced to defend their territory from their northern neighbors, the Algonquins, in order to keep their share of the fur trade. This provoked an age-old rivalry, a supposed outcome of which was the Mohawk's calling the Algonquins “Adirondacks” – a derogatory term meaning “bark eater” suggesting that they were not good hunters and had to eat trees or go hungry. The fur trade flourished through the mid 1800’s until the beavers were all but extinct for the sake of the felt hat industry in Europe.

The beaver gave way to the tree and by the 1840’s, New York state was one of the largest producers of timber with over 3,900 sawmills along the Hudson River. The Adirondack lumberjacks were the backbone of this industry, felling trees and driving the logs down the rivers in sub-zero temperatures during the winter months. Today logging on private lands is still a major industry, although on a reduced scale.

Era of the Adirondack Guide
After the great survey of 1836 by the Emmons party, people from the big cities read of the beauty and mystery to be found in the Adirondacks and began to flock there in search of adventure. They would hire an Adirondack guide to lead them into the vast wilderness where they would be rowed in a now famous guideboat to the best fishing and hunting spots. Many of the guides, such as Old Mountain Phelps, became legendary in Adirondack history and gained reputation based on their knowledge of the terrain, storytelling, cooking skills and woodcraft.
The mark of humanity past and present is by no means absent from the Adirondacks, however. One of the most unusual aspects of the Adirondack Park, as parks go, is that people can actually own property and live within its borders. In fact, the state of New York owns only 43 percent of the land inside the Blue Line. These 2.6 million acres, the Adirondack Forest Preserve, are probably the best-protected wild lands in the country. Any change in their “forever wild” status requires that an amendment to the Constitution of the State of New York be approved by two consecutive sessions of the Legislature and then ratified by a referendum of the voting public.

The rest of the park, 3.4 million acres of it, is private property of one sort or another. There are rules and regulations regarding its use, but it is all to some degree either developed or vulnerable to development. According to the most recent census, 130,000 people live on private land within the park year-round, mostly in the many villages and hamlets, but occasionally in remote roadless areas. Another hundred thousand or so move there seasonally from more crowded sections of the Northeast. In all, ten million people are thought to visit or at least make a scenic drive through the park each year.

More people arrive each year. According to the Adirondack Park Agency a thousand new houses are built inside the Blue Line every year; ten thousand every decade. Some who love wilderness say the implications for the future of the park are obvious and ominous. They agitate for stronger controls on development. The gloomiest among them moan that the place is already ruined, or fast getting there. But the visionaries see the Adirondack Park's mix of private and public lands as a model, however flawed, for other places where people and wilderness hope to coexist. To them the park could be a rough prototype for the sustainable development of the world.

On the other side are those who complain that all attempts to further limit the fragmentation of the park's open spaces are, at worst, the work of "ecofascists who want to take man out of the equation." They see a selfish greed of wealthy hikers, fisherman, rock climbers, and bird-watchers from downstate. The most bitter among them look at the preponderance of low-wage service jobs in the Adirondacks and blame the locked-up resources of the Forest Preserve, or the regulatory overburden of the state government. They look at the park and see not a model for anywhere else to emulate, but a magnification of everything that they feel is wrong with America.

This process of redefinition is nothing new. One of the few things that can be said with apolitical certainty about the lands of the Adirondack Park is that ever since the arrival of Europeans in the vicinity almost four hundred years ago, the meaning and value of "wilderness" has been in flux. Generations came to these hills and lakes to try out their ideas of material and spiritual progress. Occasionally these concepts grew out of an attempt to listen to the land. But most often, then as now, people arrived from elsewhere with their notions of what that wilderness should be, and what it meant, already in place.

In this respect, the history of the Adirondacks is not so different from that of the rest of the country. Somehow here, though, unlike so many other places in America, the wildness survived and even recovered lost ground. It persists.

This could be a result of the fact that it was in the Adirondacks, as much as anywhere, that Americans first learned to love wild places. Virtually every formulation of the wilderness idea in popular
American culture has produced its Adirondack variety. The tradition of ecotourism here goes back at least as far as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1858 camping trip to Follensby Pond – the famous “Philosopher’s Camp.” Adirondack history is the story of Americans out of doors.

Or it could be merely by historical accident that the Adirondacks largely escaped the filling-in that took place in the rest of the eastern United States; more fertile grounds for development lay elsewhere.

But whether by political design or economic serendipity, the essential truth remains that there is today in northern New York State a larger and healthier helping of wild open land than anywhere else east of the Mississippi River. "New York", as Thoreau observed in 1848, “has her wilderness within her own borders.”

"With a large majority of prospective tourists, 'camping out' is a leading factor in the summer vacation.

And during the long winter months they are prone to collect in little knots and talk much of camps, fishing, hunting and 'roughing it.'

The last phrase is very popular and always cropping out in the talks on matters pertaining to a vacation in the woods. I dislike the phrase.

We do not go into the green woods and crystal waters to rough it; we go to smooth it.

We get it rough enough at home; in towns and cities; in shops, offices, stores, banks -- with the necessity always present of being on time and up to our work; -- of keeping up, catching up or getting left.

Don't rough it; make it as smooth, as restful and pleasurable as you can.”

-Nessmuk (a.k.a. George Washington Sears Woodcraft and Camping, 1884