Beyond the Blue Line: Navigating the Population Discourse in the Adirondack State Park

I marvel at the power of that thin (and audacious) blue line that slices thru Paul Schaefer’s 3-D, topographical map of the Adirondack State Park. The map, which spans an entire wall of the Kelly Adirondack Center at Union College, isolates the park from New York State at large. This embodies the problematic demographic demagoguery that dominates population discourse within the Blue Line. The Adirondack Park cannot support a traditionally defined, “sustainable”, isolated population. Instead of focusing on dwindling numbers of permanent residents, one should consider opportunities from nomadic population flows by seasonal immigration, tourism, commuters/telecommuters, and externally incentivized watershed protection.

The history of people in the Adirondacks reflects the inhospitable mountainous topography and infertile soils. Basic geography made yearlong settlement difficult: Mohawks used parklands seasonally for hunting grounds; colonization ushered in a series of failed entrepreneurs who dreamt of booming industry. Land prospectors tried, and failed, in encouraging land settlement of farming communities. Remaining homesteaders scraped by through resourceful multi-tasking, coping with the difficult terrain and weather patterns. Following this, a great line of wealthy merchants, like Charles Frederick Herreshoff, hoped to make millions by mining in the Adirondacks. Again, the inaccessibility of the terrain incurred untimely and inefficient business, generally leading to failure, and in the case of Herreshoff, suicide.¹

In stark relief to this frustrated entrepreneurial history, forestry in the Park circa mid-1800s illustrates a successful industry with yearlong employment. Some believe state ownership of land and environmental regulations restrict development and blame the failure of logging on these factors. This simplifies this issue and ignores global influences. First, increased mechanization and international competition limits logging jobs in the Adirondacks. Second, invaluable water resources for New York State from Adirondack watersheds rely on well-managed forests.² We have to look for ways that New York taxpayers can continue to incentivize protection of these crucial forests or even subsidize sustainably managed (and thus uncompetitive) forestry in the Park.³

Peter Bauer argues that larger population trends, and not poor economic development, explain declining population counts in the Adirondacks.⁴ Young people leave rural areas

⁴ Peter Bauer.
for higher education and specialized, diverse job offerings in urban areas. Philip Terrie similarly contextualizes the population and economic trends of the Adirondacks within the larger crisis of rural United States. The Adirondacks present a wilderness tautology: the Park remains wild because, throughout time, traditional economic development failed due to limited accessibility and difficult terrain. The rugged, wild terrain that outdoors enthusiasts romanticize exists only because established U.S. industry cannot efficiently function there.

What economic opportunities can we offer populations in this unique setting? Zoom out and ignore the blue line: hope lies in the nomadic flows of people via tourism, immigrant work forces in and out of the park, telecommuters and commuter-type workers, and externally subsidized watershed protection. From the Great Camps to the Romantics, the Adirondack Park has had a rich, successful history of tourism. The Wild Center of Tupper Lake offers a new model that sustains itself on seasonal tourism, but has yearlong staff employed by innovative off-season programming. This model contrasts the Adirondack Museum of Blue Mountain Lake, which remains open solely during the summer season and maintains yearlong activity by external visits to schools, etc. Both rely on seasonal tourism while simultaneously benefiting the local population, largely through school outreach programs. The regular migration of Mohawk Native Americans between Canada and New York City for work offers a different spin on nomadism. Their current migration imitates historic migrant fur trading in Adirondack Park. This exemplifies the type of fluid migration called for in the Park, instead of the established compartmentalized spatial politics of capitalism.

The Park’s famous nickname, “The Blue Line,” sticks because Adirondack Park represents a distinct socio-space within New York State. Regardless, the Park has integral connections to the State at large. The issue of water epitomizes this: Adirondack watersheds physically and symbolically connect New York residents outside the Blue Line to the status of the Park. Let’s re-envision sustainable economic development and go beyond the Blue Line!

---

5 Philip Terrie, Lecture, 27 June 2013.
Works Cited


