Bringing the Internet to the Adirondacks: Communities losing touch with their greatest asset

Rural America has the benefit of being surrounded by nature, and as infrastructure continues to improve in these rural communities, and more and more households have access to cable and high-speed Internet, there remains a smoldering unease among some who believe this progression may damage residents’ quality of life. The Adirondacks should be front and center of this unease. While it is true that increased infrastructure will further economic development for local communities within the Adirondacks as well as increase quality of life as it is popularly measured, rural communities should not follow society’s trek into a media driven, hyper-individualistic world without first gaining a better understanding of the healing powers of nature. While it may seem obvious, often over looked is the fact that areas that rely more heavily on media, suffer an increased detachment from nature. The scattered communities of the Adirondacks must become better informed on the possible detrimental effects of human beings’ increasingly foreign relationship with nature.

There is plenty of information out there as eco-therapy (Clinebell, 1996) has increased in popularity and the birth of phrases such as Richard Louv’s (2005) “nature deficit disorder” have become more mainstream. Though people have travelled to the Adirondacks to experience the healing power of nature for several centuries, recent scientific studies are beginning to back these experiences up with concrete evidence. It has long been known that spending time in nature can improve mood and ease anxiety, stress, and depression (WebMD). A 2007 study at the University of Essex found that simply going for a walk in nature reduced depression in 71% of participants (WebMD). This study was succeeded by a second study that compared indoor walks with outdoor walks. Depression, anxiety, and other health conditions were reported much more greatly improved in those that walked outdoors as compared to those that walked indoors (Mind, 2007). In contrast, Internet use has been shown to increase depression and loneliness.
(Kraut, 1998). Additionally, spending time in nature helps promote physical activity. Physical activity has been shown to treat countless health conditions namely obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Therefore, even if studies had shown that nature played no role in these health benefits, which is not the case, the mere promotion of physical activity by time spent in nature as opposed to in front of the screen makes clear the health benefits of the outdoors.

While I’ve outlined the health benefits associated with time spent in nature, and through this bring awareness to the possible dangers of bringing Internet and cable to rural areas, the irony in this lies in the fact that the Internet is perhaps the most abundant source of information on these topics, and without it, the communities of the Adirondacks will have a more difficult time discovering why they shouldn’t have it to begin with. Though this may point to trial and error as the only solution, efforts should certainly be made to increase awareness on nature’s role in one’s health. Newspapers, magazines, and books are dying but not dead, and if a newspaper or magazine containing this article falls into the right hands within several small towns nestled between the beautiful mountains and lakes of the Adirondacks, it will have served its purpose.

In the end, given the more quantifiable benefits associated with increasing cable/Internet access within the Adirondacks, it is clear that the infrastructure necessary to achieve access to these mediums will be pushed forward, and in due time, the eclectic communities of the Adirondacks will have followed urban America into the media dominated world. Though this is inevitable, my arguments still ring true, because merely having access to cable and the Internet in no way forces the individual’s hand. Even after all the necessary infrastructure has been built, there will always remain a turning back point, as parents will always control their kids media intake and outdoor time, and all adults will be able to monitor their health. However, it will be far more difficult once the cookie jar has been opened. While this is a real and urgent issue in all of rural America, there are few expansive wilderness areas with the healing powers of the Adirondacks, and therefore Adirondack communities should accept the role of countrywide leaders, and play a prominent role in reducing the negative effects of “nature deficit disorder”.