

Forests for the PEOPLE



By Josh Clague

Photos courtesy of author

One late-March morning several years ago, my wife and I decided to go hiking in the woods with some friends. Suffering from cabin fever, both families anticipated getting out of the house with our one-year-old boys, Ewan (ours) and Ethan (theirs), and sharing with them an activity we adults had enjoyed for as long as we could remember.

At the time, we all lived in Kingston, a small city situated at the foot of the Catskill Mountains in Ulster County. For a community its size, Kingston has a lot to offer, but it's just too small to provide the large expanse of public open space suitable for the experience we sought.

So we headed out of town. As we passed the city limits, a sign informed us we were entering the Catskill Park. A sharp contrast to Kingston's dense network of bustling streets and residential neighborhoods, the Catskill Park is a 1,000 square-mile area of rolling mountains, rural settlements, and large tracts of unbroken forest.

Like its larger cousin to the north, the Adirondack Park, Catskill Park is unique in that it contains a mix of public and private land. Designated near the turn of the twentieth century as a way to guide land purchases by the state, today nearly half of the land

within the boundary of each park is publicly owned and contributes significantly to the park-like character of the two regions.

As we drove deeper into the Catskills, I could imagine New York as it must have looked when Europeans first settled the region centuries ago. In fact, it was difficult to envision this mountainous landscape as anything other than the vast sea of trees that

extended in every direction. But only several generations ago, these forests had been all but cleared from the land.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, less than 25 percent of New York State remained forested. Cleared for agriculture and logged for various industries including timber, paper, charcoal and tanning, this deforestation was typical of what was happening throughout the northeast. By the turn



With 1,000 square miles of forest, rural settlements, and mountains, the Catskill Park is a good location for a hike to escape daily life, or a winter of "cabin fever."

of the twentieth century, state officials worried that if the rate of clearing persisted, New York's forests would soon disappear, and their benefits would be lost to future generations.

Thanks in large part to a growing awareness of the consequences of deforestation, New York was the first state to reverse this downward trend. Many of the remaining forested areas were acquired by the state and placed under some level of protection, and healthy forests were re-established in areas that had once been cleared. More than 100 years later, it's obvious these efforts have paid off. Today, nearly 19 million acres—or 63 percent of our state—is forested.

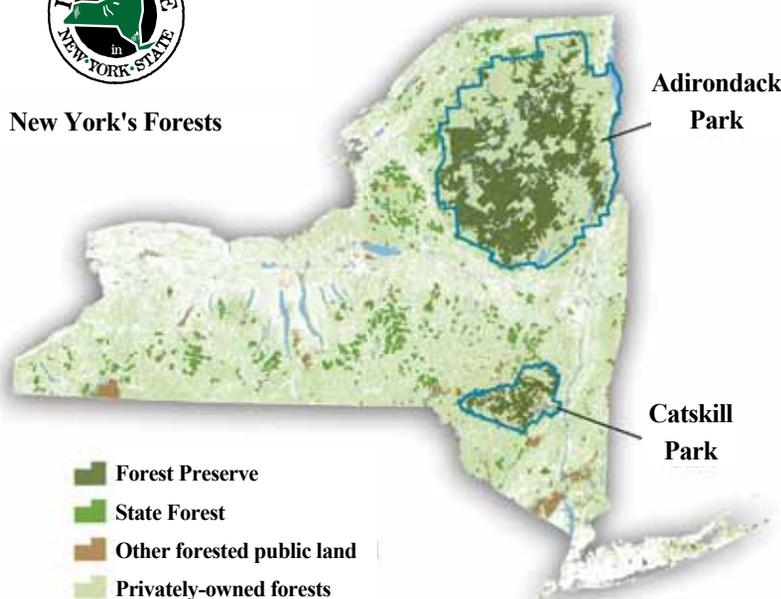
In re-establishing forests to much of our state, New York has built an impressive legacy of forest conservation, and the cornerstone of that legacy is our public forestland. Over the last 150 years, the state has acquired more than 3.5 million acres of forests—that's 12 percent of the state's land area—which today are managed by the Department of Environmental Conservation for a variety of forest-related purposes, from timber production to watershed protection.

These lands also provide an abundance of public use and access opportunities, including 52 campgrounds and nearly 5,000 miles of trails and roads open for activities ranging from hiking and mountain biking to skiing and snowmobiling. For those willing to venture off the beaten track, back country camping, bushwhacking, hunting, fishing, and trapping opportunities abound. These forests are also home to a multitude of fish and wildlife.

Together with New York's extensive system of state parks, which are managed separately by the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, New York's public forests



New York's Forests



provide world-class recreational opportunities on a scale seldom found in the northeast. With 12 times the amount of land as our state parks, however, our public forests provide ample opportunity for a more primitive and unconfined recreational experience, and free of charge, which is exactly what our two families sought that beautiful March day.

By late morning, we arrived at our destination: the Mink Hollow trailhead. Only 30 minutes from Kingston, the tranquil, wild setting surrounding us seemed worlds apart from the hustle and bustle we had left behind. While still too young to walk, Ewan and Ethan were nevertheless as thrilled as their parents to be out of the city for a few hours, and seemed quite content to watch the scenery while strapped to their fathers' backs.

Following an old road through the heart of Mink Hollow, this hike was like many others found on state-owned forestland throughout the Catskills. The clean air and wilderness setting alone were enough to make this an enjoyable outing, but it was the centerpiece of this hike, the Mink Hollow stream, that ultimately drew us to this particular place.

Earlier in the spring I learned that Mink Hollow stream was the principal source of drinking water for the City of Kingston. I had always been amazed at the high quality and good taste of our municipal water, and my curiosity led me to investigate how such pure results could be achieved. As it turns out, about 50 percent of the Mink Hollow stream's watershed is made up of state-owned forestland. In other words, of all the rainwater and snowmelt that drains into the stream, half of it flows through a public forest first.

The effects of a healthy forest on water quality are profound. The mere presence of vegetation—and lack of bare soil—significantly reduces erosion and sedimentation, a damaging process in which soil particles accumulate in rainwater as it flows across the ground and into streams and rivers. An abundance of vegetation, as found in healthy forests, does more than keep the water clear; it effectively regulates the flow of water across the land, simultaneously reducing the likelihood of flooding while ensuring a more steady flow of water over time.

The crystal clear water flowing just feet from our trail was evidence

of a healthy forest doing its job. As I overheard my wife and Ethan's mom sharing the joys and challenges of raising children, I felt a greater appreciation for this unassuming stream as I realized it would be providing consistently safe drinking water to our households—as well as those of nearly 20,000 other Kingston residents—for years to come.

If the Mink Hollow stream's modest contribution to Kingston's quality of life seems impressive, then the role of public forests in bettering New York City's drinking water is nothing short of remarkable. As the population of our country's largest metropolitan area grew during the twentieth century, officials turned to the Catskill region to relieve the city's insufficient water supply.

To reduce the need for an expensive filtration system, the city has put considerable resources into ensuring the forests that naturally filter their water remain healthy forever. Through the purchase of land and development rights, NYC has preserved 170,000 acres of land in the Catskills. Today, nearly 200,000 acres of state-owned forests fall within the same watershed, exceeding the city's own efforts in protecting its water supply. Together, city- and state-owned forests have played a significant role in establishing one of the highest quality municipal drinking water systems in the world.

It's easy to take today's seemingly endless supply of clean, affordable drinking water for granted. But the journey to our current state of abundant water can be traced back to an era when excessive deforestation was brought to a halt and trees began to dominate our state's landscape once again.

As early as the 1850s, forests were gaining recognition for their importance to water quality and quantity. Interestingly, it was those

with business interests, worried how unchecked logging was causing sedimentation and disruptions in water flow which threatened the Erie Canal, who voiced the most concern over the fate of remaining forests. At the same time, conservationists were rallying support for protection of the region. In response, the New York legislature passed the Forest Preserve Act in 1885, setting the stage for a series of laws that permitted the state to purchase forests—including those that had already been logged—and prevent further logging. Unfortunately, timber harvesting continued on these state lands until 1894, when Article XIV of the State Constitution was passed, making all lands in the Forest Preserve—including state-owned forests in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks—protected as “wild forest lands,” and prohibiting the timber from being “sold, removed, or destroyed.” For more than 100 years, Article XIV's original language has remained intact, making New York's Forest Preserve the only constitutionally protected wild forest lands in the country.

Three years after our trek into Mink Hollow, our two families reunited for another hike, this time at a state-owned parcel along the Hudson River called Turkey Point State Forest. Now four years old, Ewan and Ethan anticipated these forest hikes with great excitement, and within seconds of our arrival they were off searching for the perfect hiking sticks. The boys then led the way down to the river, stopping occasionally to observe a frog jumping into a nearby woodland pool.

In many ways, the character of this forest reminded us of our previous experience in the Catskills. Unlike the Forest Preserve, however, the purposes of Turkey Point and all state





forests are more diverse, requiring a more holistic management approach. Specifically, in addition to recreation and watershed protection, a primary management objective of state forests is the production of timber and other forest products.

Many of today's state forest lands are the result of reforestation efforts—such as the work done by the federal Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression—to reclaim abandoned farmland. With the passage of the State Reforestation Act of 1929, much of the abandoned land outside the Adirondack and Catskill Parks was acquired as “State Reforestation Areas.” This marked the beginning of New York's state forest system.

As these original stands of re-growth reached maturity, the state's careful management enabled a variety of native tree species to naturally regenerate these forests. Today, New York's State Forests are Green Certified, a highly coveted international designation and the latest step in assuring that these lands are managed to the highest standards of sustainability.

There's a certain timeless quality about New York's public forests—not just in their wild character, but in their ability to endure. Through hard economic times and dramatic changes to our country's social fabric, these lands are as relevant today as ever, providing benefits that were unforeseen when they were first set aside for the public. As our predominantly rural way of life has given way to increased urbanization and suburban sprawl, our need for the recreational opportunities and clean water provided by these forests has increased. And by sequestering carbon and providing potential habitat for species displaced by warming temperatures, these forests play a critical role in combating



climate change. New York's public forests provide the continued certainty of sustainable management that guarantee they will always be there for this purpose, a benefit not only to New Yorkers, but to the entire global community.

After stopping to admire the view of the Hudson River and letting the boys try their hand at skipping stones, our two families made our way back into the woods. The surrounding forest once again provided the perfect backdrop to our temporary reprieve from urban life, and we arrived at the parking area feeling rejuvenated.

Heading home, I felt a deep satisfaction in knowing that as New Yorkers, these forests are our birthright, handed down through the generations to help us address the environmental and social challenges of the time. And when Ewan and Ethan take that first spring hike with their children, we can be certain our public forests will be there too, ready to meet their generation's challenges in ways we may never predict.

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