



# ADIRONDACK LANDOWNERS

## —the Public’s Silent Partner

By Dr. Ross S. Whaley

Photos provided by author, unless otherwise noted

Known for its stunning vistas and vast wilderness, the Adirondack Park is a unique blend of public and private land. Nowhere else in the nation is there such a mix of communities, “forever wild” forests, private estates, research facilities and public campgrounds in one park. It is a rare blend of public recreation, ecosystem protection, commercial forestry, and private getaways that range from modest family cabins to vast sporting clubs. In addition, the park contains 100+ towns and villages and more than 100,000 year-round residents.

While the Adirondack Park and its amenities are familiar to many, few know about the important role it plays in research. The park’s public and private lands, its size, ecosystems, remote location and proximity to outstanding academics combine to make it a unique natural laboratory for ecological research. Here are just a few examples of partnerships between the State of New York, the research community, and private landowners.



Researchers studying fish populations

## Fisheries Research at the Adirondack League Club

The Adirondack League Club (ALC) is one of the oldest and largest private preserves in the eastern United States. It covers over 50,000 acres and includes 30 lakes and ponds, 12 miles of the South Branch of the Moose River, and 3 miles of West Canada Creek. Since 1950, the Club has had an agreement with Cornell University to allow them to conduct fisheries research on the property. What began as a part-time consultancy with one faculty member has evolved into having full-time research personnel stationed at the ALC.

Over the years, the research conducted here has led to a number of important fisheries practices, including: protocols to control species that compete or prey on brook trout, lake trout and other native fish species; the prohibition of the use of live bait for fishing, to reduce unintentional introductions of invasive species; and development of a hybrid strain of brook trout that has become the stocking favorite for public waters throughout the Adirondack Park. In addition, research also resulted in recommendations on logging practices to protect coldwater tributaries from warming and siltation.

Between the 1960s and 80s, acid rain became recognized as the cause of fish population declines throughout the southwestern Adirondacks. Prior to federal legislation aimed at improving air quality, Cornell researchers explored and refined techniques for using lime to neutralize the acidity of lakes, and this became the treatment of choice throughout the north country.

## Studying the Elusive American Marten

Dr. Paul Jensen, a senior wildlife biologist at DEC's Warrensburg Office, is New York State's expert on the American marten, a member of the weasel family. During the 1800s, the marten declined due to trapping and loss of habitat, particularly loss of mature conifer forests. However, Dr. Jensen's research has shown that the marten inhabits a range of forest types found



in the Adirondack Park. An article about Dr. Jensen's work ran in the December 2007 issue of *Conservationist* and outlines insight into marten populations, habitat, range and food preferences. DEC refers to his research when determining areas for habitat protection and defining trapping regulations.

Much of Dr. Jensen's work has been conducted on private lands, including those of the Adirondack Ecological Center, Adirondack League Club, Ausable Club, Domtar Inc., Elk Lake Preserve, Finch Pruyn & Co., Inc., Follensby Pond, International Paper, Jerseyfield Preserve, Miller Park Association, The Nature Conservancy, and Wilmurt Club. Dr. Jensen stresses the importance of having received permission from these private landowners to conduct research on their lands, and notes that accessing private land can be easier than navigating remote portions of the Forest Preserve. In addition, because many private landowners do not allow trapping, there's a greater probability of finding populations of American marten for study and radio tracking.

## Private Place with a Public Purpose

Established in 2008 by private individuals, the Shingle Shanty Preserve and Research Station (SSPRS) property was acquired for the sole purpose of building a research station devoted to long-term monitoring and study of Adirondack ecosystems. Comprised of 23 square miles of various forest types and a rich array of wetlands, this unique property has attracted researchers from Cornell University, The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, The New York State Museum, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and Paul Smiths College, among others.

Research at SSPRS has focused primarily on the site's rare animals, birds and plants. The ecosystems here respond rapidly to climate change and atmospheric deposition, potentially threatening the existing biodiversity. SSPRS and its collaborators have worked to document the resident species by studying the distribution and genetics of boreal birds and mammals and describing the vege-



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tation structure of the wetland complex. Bird species such as rusty blackbird, spruce grouse, and olive-sided flycatchers have declined greatly over the last decades in N.Y., and their success is highly dependent on the great extents of lowland boreal wetland habitat like that at SSPRS.

SSPRS has also offered short courses in field botany, bryology (moss biology) and mycology (fungus biology) of the Adirondacks to students and professionals alike. Natural history tours of SSPRS for the general public have been sponsored by the Wild Center and the Adirondack Council as well. The research combined with education programs at Shingle Shanty have broadened the scientific knowledge and public awareness of these important, remote ecosystems.

## The Adirondack Ecological Center

In 1932, Archer and Anna Huntington donated their 15,000-acre Adirondack estate to Syracuse University (in trust for the now College of Environmental Science and Forestry) to be used “for investigation, experiment and research in relation to the habits, life histories, methods of propagation and management of fish, birds, game, food and fur-bearing animals and as a forest of wildlife.” Forty years later, this land on the Huntington Wildlife Forest gave birth to the Adirondack Ecological Center, a facility that attracts researchers from around the world who facilitate and conduct the science that underpins management of the Adirondack Park.

One on-going program—the Adirondack Long-term Ecological Monitoring Program—monitors over 100 physical, chemical, and biological attributes to provide the perspective necessary to detect changes and identify trends in Adirondack ecosystems. More than 70 ongoing research programs investigate the restoration of wildlife, development of new forestry practices, impact of acidic deposition on soils and lakes, social organization of deer, movement of soil ions, silvicultural regimes, Adirondack Park biodiversity, and much more. The Huntington Wildlife Forest is also home to the Adirondack Interpretive Center, a public education facility, and

the Northern Forest Institute for Conservation Education and Leadership Training, which focuses on education, leadership and stewardship of both natural and designed environments.

## Private Lands in a Public Park

Since the Adirondack Park’s creation in 1892, questions remain as to whether it was intended to be a mixture of public and private land, or whether it was assumed the state would eventually acquire all the land within the “blue line.” Many claim there is too much public land, while others encourage further additions to it. Regardless of conflicting opinions, this combination of public and private land has resulted in economic growth and other benefits, including protection of rare and endangered ecosystems, carbon sequestration and watershed protection.

Much of the research in the park occurs on property owned by members of the Adirondack Landowners Association (ALA), which celebrated its 25th anniversary early in 2015. The ALA was founded to encourage continued stewardship and sound management of the land; to promote public awareness of the valuable role played by private landowners in the park; to advocate laws, regulations and governmental policies that promote and facilitate good stewardship by private landowners; and to recognize and preserve their rights in the land.

**Dr. Ross S. Whaley** is currently the Senior Advisor to the Adirondack Landowners Association. He has served as Chairman of the Adirondack Park Agency, President of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and co-edited *The Great Experiment in Conservation: Voices from the Adirondack Park*.

*Author’s note: Information on practices resulting from Cornell research at the Adirondack League Club came from A Tradition of Excellence: The Adirondack Fishery Research Partnership of the Adirondack League Club and Cornell University, published by the Adirondack League Club commemorating the 50th anniversary of collaboration with Cornell.*