

Rutland Herald

Article published Apr 20, 2006

Wilderness: A vision for the future

A few weeks ago an ancient oak on the shore of Lake Champlain collapsed in a strong wind. Already a stately tree when the French explorer Samuel de Champlain came to the lake in 1609, it had a broad crown above a trunk nearly 20 feet around when it fell.

History passed by this venerable tree for centuries ... generations of Iroquois and Algonquin people, English and French armadas, American presidents, heroes and rogues; birch canoes, sailing ships and steamboats. No one saw it fall.

This tree, and a few others remaining nearby, are the last remnant of the magnificent landscape that enraptured Champlain — a land of "fine trees ... snow-capped mountains ... an abundance of fowl, stags, deer, bears, and beaver." Here was a forest beyond our imaginations — a wilderness which would fuel a vast new commercial empire.

By the mid-1800s most of the grand Vermont forest was gone, soil erosion clogged rivers, and most fish and wildlife were nearly extinct. The expansive wilderness which Champlain encountered had been replaced by cultivated landscapes.

Vermont and New York are planning a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Champlain's "discovery" of the lake he named for himself. On past anniversaries we built a memorial bridge and lighthouse, and held picnics where presidents spoke. Like many such celebrations, little of significance remained after the party. This time we are capable of creating a living memorial.

Within a few days of the fall of the ancient oak on Lake Champlain, Vermont's Congressional delegation introduced legislation to establish 48,000 acres of new wilderness areas in the Green Mountain National Forest, whose snow-capped mountain summits inspired Champlain centuries ago.

Sen. Leahy described the legislation as "a vision for the Green Mountain Forest for this and future generations." He echoed the words of President Reagan who signed the Vermont Wilderness Act of 1984: "No task facing us is more important than preserving the American

land Generations hence, parents will take their children to these woods to show them how the land must have looked to the first pilgrims and pioneers."

The new wilderness designations proposed by Sens. Jeffords and Leahy and Rep. Sanders are a fitting memorial for the 400th anniversary of Champlain's arrival, a permanent reminder that the American character is rooted in the wilderness experience.

This is not an easy undertaking. Some special interest groups object to new wilderness designations which will constrain their private use of these public lands. They claim that increased wilderness reserves will hurt we who hunt and fish, or earn our living in the woods.

That is simply untrue. After creation of the new areas, less than 2 percent of Vermont's land will be reserved, little capable of commercial wood production. Claims that wildlife will suffer are also untrue. Champlain reported "abundant" wildlife long before land clearing and commercial logging began.

The proposed wilderness designations, as Sen. Leahy stated, are about "a vision ... for this and future generations" — a vision worthy of our best efforts and American values. These new designations, however, fall a bit short of a truly grand vision. To accommodate some of the special interests, the legislation inappropriately leaves out key lands in Glastenbury, on Lye Brook and Lamb Brook, and elsewhere — omissions that need to be addressed in the final bill.

We must remember that this is not just a contest over private claims to public lands, be it for logging or ATVs or tree-huggers. Nor is it only about a short-term forest plan or designated wilderness reserves. This is about a matter of far greater significance. It is a vision of restoring and sustaining the American spirit; it is about our common heritage and a living legacy for those yet unborn.

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