

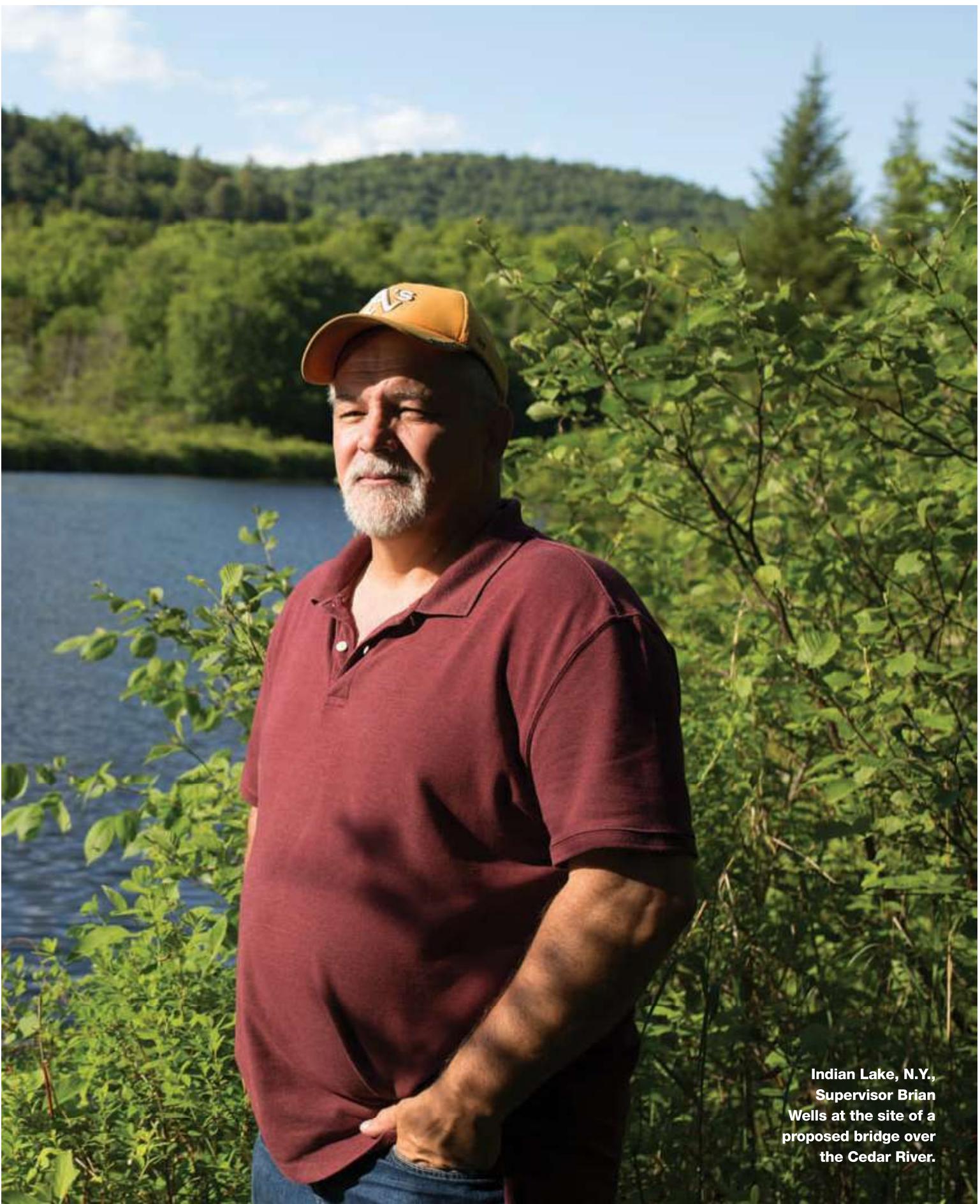
Whose Park Is It, Anyway?

A scenic view of a lake surrounded by dense green forests under a clear blue sky. The foreground shows some green foliage and bushes. The background features a calm lake with a forested shoreline.

America's largest state park is a battleground between conservation activists and small towns desperate for development.

By Mike Maciag

Photographs by David Kidd



**Indian Lake, N.Y.,
Supervisor Brian
Wells at the site of a
proposed bridge over
the Cedar River.**

Brian Wells looks out over the Cedar River at the end of an old dirt road deep within the Adirondack Park in upstate New York. The road is in the town of Indian Lake, and he is town supervisor. For years, Wells has fought to build a bridge over the river to a connecting trail on the other side as a way to attract snowmobilers, horseback riders and hikers.

Like many other rural municipalities within the park, Indian Lake has seen its economy suffer a slow and steady decline over the past several decades. A large furniture manufacturer left long ago, and few jobs in the logging industry remain. When Wells was growing up, there were many more diners and gas stations all along the main throughway. The mild winter this past year meant fewer skiers and snowmobilers, leading both a local motel and a diner to close their doors for good. Twice as many students were once enrolled at the local school as there are today.

What's left of the economy is largely tied to tourism, so Wells has worked with the state government and other nearby towns to try to lure more people to the region. The bridge and proposed trail system would give Indian Lake a direct link to other towns, and, it is hoped, prop up the area's businesses by attracting more tourists. "We have to have that connection," Wells says. "It's not

All across the Adirondacks, small towns and villages find themselves in a struggle for survival. With mining and logging jobs nearly gone, with businesses closing and with the population growing older, the towns are looking for any way they can find to halt the decline. Frequently, though, efforts to revive local economies come into conflict with concerns over preserving the park. The battle between conservation groups and pro-development town officials amounts to a dramatic test for a park long viewed as one of the country's grand experiments in conservation.

The Adirondack Park is, in many ways, unlike any other in the nation. Roughly the size of Vermont, it is the largest publicly protected area in the contiguous United States. It's a patchwork quilt of public and private property; the state of New York owns just under half the land. It is distinctive in another important way: There are 102 towns and villages within its boundaries, and it is home to more than 130,000 year-round residents.

The most contentious battle these days between conservation groups and town officials concerns the future of the large Boreas Ponds tract, the most scenic and highly coveted parcel in a recent land purchase. The tract borders a wilderness area and is flanked by several of the state's tallest mountains in the High Peaks region. When a paper manufacturer put the tract up for sale

in 2007, a nonprofit raised money for the purchase with the intention of protecting it from development until the state could work out its finances. In May of this year, the state formally announced acquisition of the nearly 21,000-acre parcel.

Knowing that the classification of the land would be hotly contested, the surrounding five towns formed a coalition about five years ago to bolster their interests. The supervisors of Indian Lake, Long Lake, Minerva, Newcomb and North Hudson have outlined a proposal that would classify half the land as wilderness, but would leave the area surrounding the ponds and much of the other territory open to various forms of recreation. Part of the proposed trail system through Wells' town of Indian Lake would connect with the Boreas Ponds land. "It's something unique in the region we can promote," Wells says.

Green groups, though, would like to see the state designate more of the Boreas land as wilderness, a classification with the strongest protections. In the past, they've been on the winning side in many fights over development. The groups often outnumber local officials 3-1 at public hearings, and they have more resources than the towns do to deploy lobbyists to the state Capitol.

But in the past few years, the five towns have enjoyed more success. "Economic development is not an afterthought like it had been," Wells says. State officials "realize you've got to do something to keep these towns alive or there won't be anyone here." They've secured a corridor to allow for snowmobiles in the Essex Chain Lakes area, and the state has approved funding for construction of the Cedar River bridge.

A big reason for the shift toward economic development has been Gov. Andrew Cuomo. The governor, who has vacationed in



Old Forge is one of the many small towns in the Adirondacks that depend on tourism to survive.

going to be the total answer for us, but it's going to be huge."

But construction of the bridge and trail are on hold for now. Environmental groups have filed a lawsuit to block the project, arguing it violates state law and is redundant given the existence of other trails in the area. It's just the latest in a long line of debates over development that have been playing out in the park for several years.



Since its inception, the park has withstood challenges from the lumber, mining and tourism industries.

the Adirondacks since he was a teenager, has taken an interest in park affairs that locals say exceeds that of any other recent governor. “He’s been instrumental in influencing policymakers to look at the park not just from the recreation and conservation standpoint, but also from an economic standpoint,” says Long Lake Supervisor Clark Seaman. The governor appoints and the state Senate approves eight out of the 11 members of the Adirondack Park Agency, which has ultimate responsibility for decisions like the Boreas Ponds land classification.

Cuomo’s efforts have at times provoked condemnation from environmental advocates who say he’s wrongly placed recreational access above wilderness protections. In March, park agency board member Richard Booth accused the Cuomo administration of “rigidly controlling” agency staff following a vote that amended the park’s State Land Master Plan to open some areas for bicycle use and maintenance vehicles. “For many months, the governor and the governor’s staff have forced the agency toward the result reached today,” Booth told the board.

The supervisors of the five small towns, most of whom represent fewer than 1,000 residents, have met with the governor multiple times. The mostly Republican supervisors representing one of the state’s most conservative regions see the Democratic governor’s time in office as a pivotal window of opportunity. “We have to strike while the iron is hot,” Wells says.

In arguing their point, the town supervisors say they try to seek a balance between preserving the park and making it more accessible. Environmental groups, they contend, are too one-sided. “We go in there with a nice balanced plan, then they go in with all these friggin’ extremist views all the time,” says Minerva Town Supervisor Stephen McNally. “After a while, they lose their credibility because they don’t search for balance.”

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, counters that the state should take advantage of a historic opportunity to create the second-largest block of wilderness lands east of the Mississippi River. Multiuse trails like the proposed network through the five towns, he says, won’t draw many new visitors. Snowmobilers, hikers and mountain bikers tend to prefer trails that are specifically designated for their use. “[The towns] need to be smarter in how they go about pursuing what real balance is,” says Bauer, whose group is one of the parties in the Indian Lake bridge lawsuit. “There are lots of opportunities in the Adirondacks for economic development in the developed areas and hamlets in the park.”

Cuomo’s background as an avid snowmobiler, Bauer says, shapes his vision for the park. “He is a real enthusiast for motorized recreation because he believes that motorized recreation somehow equals more economic development and more tourism.” As he walks down a newly constructed



Peter Bauer of Protect the Adirondacks surveys a snowmobile trail under construction.

snowmobile trail, Bauer points out the toll that cutting down trees takes on the forest. The number of trees cut and the width of the trails, he says, exceed what's permitted under historic case law.

In the dispute over classification of the Boreas Ponds tract, as in similar debates elsewhere, the main points of contention center around motorized access. The local governments want to allow visitors to drive up and park near the ponds. Conservation groups argue that there are already numerous large lakes throughout the park with direct access. They have offered various proposals requiring people to hike or carry their canoes about a mile from a parking area.

Much of the tug of war between conservationists and pro-development groups started with the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency in the early 1970s. It provoked deep resentment among park natives who didn't like the idea of being told what they could do with their property. Lani Ulrich, whose term as the agency's chairwoman ended in June, says she pushed to make it more approachable. But the agency still serves at times as a punching bag for interest groups and residents wanting to gripe about park policies. "I can tell when it's fundraising season for nonprofit groups and when it's election season for elected officials," Ulrich says. "Sometimes our agency gets caught in the middle of it."

Business owners such as Mike Lenhard, who runs the Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park Camp-Resort in North Hudson, are quick to express their disdain for park rules. Lenhard says he has fought for 25 years to have a sign for his campground along the nearby interstate. "I'm overregulated, overtaxed and I don't need the government to make decisions for me," he complains.

On private lands, designated commercial centers throughout the park known as hamlets have few development restrictions, while those in most other areas often require permits. Town officials express frustration with the attempt to concentrate development in hamlet areas, which make up only a tiny fraction of park land. They do say, however, that their working relationship with the agency has improved from decades ago when the two groups didn't want to be in the same room together.

None of the five towns has experienced a setback quite like North Hudson has. Tourists from around the country once visited Frontier Town, a Wild West theme park in the small community of about 240 residents. More than 3,000 cars lined the now vacant parking lot back in its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. Its closure in 1998 dealt a devastating blow, and all the local motels and diners eventually shut down as well.

The remains of Frontier Town have been neglected for years, but North Hudson Supervisor Ronald Moore thinks they may yet find use if the area can attract more tourists. "It will take an enormous amount of money to do anything with it, but the potential is there," he says. He believes the town's location could make it a gateway to the proposed trail system or a southern approach to the High Peaks region. As he drives through the town, Moore points out recently restored cabins and other businesses that could reopen. "We've got to prove that the people are going to come," he says.

The towns view four-season recreation as key to their survival, says Dan Kelleher, who works with the park agency's economic services unit. As it stands today, many businesses close during the winter months, and the unemployment rate doubles every winter in some parts of the park. One project the five towns are pitching envisions a hut-to-hut trail system utilizing new and existing accommodations. They're hoping cross-country skiers and snowshoers could traverse the network of trails and that this, along with the new snowmobile routes, would give businesses a much-needed boost over the winter.

New York state has made significant investments in tourism, including a \$50 million marketing campaign in the current budget. Many visitors make the drive down from Montreal to the top tourist draw, the High Peaks region—one can't hike very far without hearing French. On nice afternoons, a couple hundred hikers occupy the summit of Mt. Marcy, the state's tallest peak. Conservationists such as Neil Woodworth, who heads the Adirondack Mountain Club, say it's time for the state to rethink its spending on tourism. "We've got to begin to shut off the faucet because we're just going to overwhelm that resource," he says.

Environmental groups contend that opening more areas of the park to motorized recreation won't reverse the towns' economic woes. "The reality is that some communities in the Adirondacks will never regain their former size and population simply because the extractive industries they depend on no longer exist," says Woodworth. Green groups particularly worry about all-terrain vehicles that can tear up trails or forested areas if riders go off routes. While these vehicles are currently banned from public lands in the park, Woodworth worries that calls for opening trails to ATVs will continue.

Parts of the park are starting to look beyond tourism. A select few municipalities have seen growth in newer industries, such as Saranac Lake's emerging biotech sector. The primary challenge for a lot of communities, though, is that they simply don't have much of a workforce. "The youth of today are migrating to urban areas," says Seaman, the Long Lake supervisor. "But there have to be people out there who would like to live in an area like this if they could just make a living."

A study by the local governments projected the number of park residents under age 30 to drop an average of 14 percent between now and 2030. Rather than target large employers, the towns are looking to support new small businesses that might

hire five or 10 employees. The park agency has launched a Hamlet Economic Planning and Assistance Initiative to help the localities retool their economies.

Lake George, a tourist destination on the southern end of the park, has fared better than most other areas. Even there, however, town officials feel pressure to diversify the economy. "We've played out the resort industry in this town," says Councilwoman Marisa Muratori. "We still have the lake, but at the same time, it would be shortsighted to think we could bank on that year after year." But many residents don't want to see more development, such as a new six-story hotel under construction set to become one of the town's tallest buildings. "There are a lot of people saying we're a rural community, let's not try to reinvent ourselves," Muratori says.

Ulrich, the former park agency chair, has witnessed her share of painful disagreements. In 2006, tired of watching competing



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factions in the park fight year after year, Ulrich co-founded the Common Ground Alliance to help bridge the divide. The alliance brings together an informal group of local officials, environmentalists and citizens to seek solutions to the park's challenges. Last month, they held an annual forum to discuss the park's aging demographics, distributed power generation and park policy changes and other issues.

The greatest threats to the park, Ulrich says, are actually external: climate change, invasive species and acid rain. In her view, these are issues local governments and environmental groups all agree on, and in order to confront them, all the parties will need to work together. "The leadership of the park must continue to find ways to stay in dialogue," Ulrich says. "There are too few of us in this park to be cutting off communities." **G**

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