

Rod O'Connor comments at the Saranac Lake public hearing, January 20, 1973

I am speaking as a resident of Star Lake, which is well within the Blue Line. I was born and grew up a few miles down the road from there in Wanakena, which as many of you know is about as far back in the woods as you can get. Wanakena is almost completely surrounded by Forest Preserve. There are advantages and disadvantages to growing up in a town like Wanakena. Forty below in the winter, no supermarkets or department stores, just one little grocery store and gas station. To do any real shopping, you had to make a day of it and travel seventy miles to Watertown. But there was a positive aspect to growing up in Wanakena, one which I always took for granted. There, I could step off my front porch with a pack on my back and fishpole in my hand, and within five minutes be out of sight of human habitation, on my way to Cowhorn Pond, perhaps, or High Falls, or wherever the word had it that they were biting. Often I have made the seven-mile hike to Five Ponds to pole a makeshift raft around Big or Little Shallow, trying for a mess of trout for supper (I've seldom been let down in that respect) or just plain exploring in this lovely, rugged country. Sometimes I'd sit back and watch a kingfisher hit the water from one of those tall dead spruce stubs overhanging the pond, those stubs that are so integral a part of wild country as compared to a manicured park. Sometimes on a warm summer afternoon a deer, unaware of being observed, would slip into the water up to its neck to rid itself of flies and to enjoy the cool water. More often than not, I'd be back in there three or four days without seeing another human. Believe it or not, I've even gone for hours at a time without seeing an empty beer can or candy wrapper. And I don't think there are too many places left east of the Mississippi where you can do this.

Things have changed quite a bit in the Adirondacks in the past 10 or 20 years, at least in my end of it. The woods are becoming more populated. There is an obvious back-to-the-woods movement. The old-timers will tell you that very seldom were campers seen on the Oswegatchie (that's the East Branch) before the 4th of July. Now they come as soon as the ice goes out, and keep coming until the hunters take over in the fall. One Saturday last summer, during a 2 ½ hour paddle, I met over 20 boats heading upriver toward High Falls, a very small stream in the wilderness area. Motorboats, canoes, and even a kayak.

These people are a new breed of camper. Husbands and wives, fathers and sons, and whole families with shiny new pack frames, nylon tents and Dacron sleeping bags. Some are old hands, some you can tell are green. But most of them have this in common: they respect the woods. Camping areas are left clean, woodpiles replenished. A lot of them come up just to get away and be outdoors, but those who fish are usually not game hogs, like the local "sportsman" who bragged when drunk about the 400 trout he and his friends brought out on one trip. He neglected to mention that they followed the hatchery truck in.

No, these new campers from all over the state and outside the state are for the most part people who well-deserve to use these great Adirondack Mountains for their recreation. I believe that this use is what those far-sighted persons had in mind nearly 90 years ago when the Forest Preserve was set up. The point is that we do have people in ever-increasing numbers

using the woods. As an example, over 28,000 used the public campsite at Cranberry Lake last year. About 8,000 signed in at the registration booths spotted on the trails just around Wanakena; 1,600 used the state boat launch site at Cranberry. Snowmobilers are clamoring for more trails, and even for uncontrolled access to state land. This is the type of pressure the woods are getting today.

Now we have huge out-of-state land developers and subdividers with bulldozers at the ready, talking of 6,000 to 10,000 units—20,000 to 35,000 people—inside the Blue Line. They do not come here with altruistic ideas about improving the environment, nor even of bettering our people's economy (which has been demonstrated to my satisfaction to be highly unlikely anyway). They come here to make profits. And when one gets in, they all get in. With 60% of the Park's lands in private hands, this is quite a potential bonanza for developers. I believe that a network of developments such as choked Long Island years ago, such as the people of Vermont and California, among other states, are having their problems with now, are totally unacceptable in the Adirondack Park, and totally inconsistent with the "forever wild" concept as outlined in the State Constitution. With the existing pressure on the woods that I have described, they would sound the death-knell for the Adirondacks as a wilderness. Wilderness is an irreplaceable commodity; I believe that as an entity it is as subject to extinction as the passenger pigeon or the whooping crane, and that we will suffer for its passing. I would hope that the people of this state are not sorry too late. We must decide now whether we will learn from others' mistakes. We must make up our minds now whether what we want here is another Long Island, or Disneyland, or whatever, or whether we want to keep something a little different from what most folks have—a wilderness we can point to with pride. My choice for the kind of environment I want my children and someday, hopefully, grandchildren to grow up in and enjoy, was not difficult to make. And if the Adirondack Private Land Use Plan, the result of many long and painstaking hours of work by these gentlemen, represents a deterrent to free-wheeling development in the Park, I say let's stand behind them.