

# Alternative Plan Needed To Save Gooley Club



by Bill Connors

Photo: AP Photo: Mary Esch

Courtesy The Poughkeepsie Journal, Adirondacks AP

It has probably been 20 years or more since I fished the waters of the Gooley Club on the Essex Chain Lakes in the interior of the Adirondack Mountains.

I had the pleasure of fishing the club waters several times with an old friend of mine. We would usually arrive at the club late in the day, unload our gear and then spend some time visiting with other members of the club who happened to be in camp. After a leisurely dinner, followed by a good night's rest, the next morning we would step out of our small cabin into the morning sun and the crisp mountain air and head off to the club's dining hall for a hot breakfast. The rest of our day would be spent trying to get the lakes to give up a trout, or three.

The Gooley Club lies in the extreme southwest corner of Essex County. After leaving the last paved road near Newcomb, the last leg of the trip was over a gravel road, the condition of which depended on the time of year, the beating it took all winter, followed by the damage inflicted on it during the "mud season." Sometimes, the trip took half an hour, sometimes much longer.

The camp buildings sit on the edge of a bay on Third Lake, one of at least eight lakes in the chain. The club started life as a logging camp and it predates the state's Forest Preserve Law by several decades. Approved as Article VII of the State Constitution at the 1894 Constitutional Convention, the new law was approved by the people of New York in the 1894 General Election and became effective on January 1, 1895. It was later amended to Article XIV of the State Constitution.

There is a tremendous history to be told about the old logging camp and clubs that have occupied the land from the mid-1800s until 2012 when New York took possession of the land. It was by a route as circuitous as the old logging roads that still crisscross the property.

Sadly, in spite of the fact that the camp is now registered as a State and Federal Historic Site, numerous environmental groups have called for the demolition of the club buildings. Should they have their way, the buildings will become a pile of rubble not long after the club is forced to vacate the premises on Sept. 30 of this year.

Those advocating for the removal cite Article 14 of the Forest Preserve Law which reads, "the lands of the state shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed." This refers to the lands within the Blue Line of the Forest Preserve.

Because the logging camp existed before the Forest Preserve, as far as I'm concerned it should be protected as a part of the preserve. It represents not one, but two cultures (logging and sporting) of historic importance in the region. Actually, to the Forest Preserve itself.

A last-minute reprieve is being sought to keep the buildings intact. The New York State Conservation Council, the state's Conservation Fund Advisory Board as well as the Fish and Wildlife Management Board, are all considering an appeal to the Governor, asking that he put the demolition plan on hold.

They would like him to pull together a committee of stakeholders that would include representatives of local governments, preservation and environmental organizations, business and educational interests and state sporting groups to review possible alternative uses for the historic camp that could serve as an attraction intended to bring tourists to the Essex Chain complex. They would like the committee to explore uses such as a ranger substation, an interpretive or educational center, as well as other possible uses of the club buildings.

The 161,000 acres of land purchased from the Finch Pruyn Paper Company, either by fee acquisition or as conservation easements, has not resulted in any measurable economic benefit for the surrounding communities as was promised by the Governor when he built his case to assume ownership of the lands. Visitation to the Essex Chain has dropped dramatically over the past three years and state designated campsites are getting nearly the use predicted.

It is time for an alternative plan to be devised to help make up for the loss of local jobs and economic activity resulting from the exit of the forest products industry and the imminent end of 20 sporting clubs scattered across the Finch Lands — including the Gooley Club on Third Lake — whose patronage and expenditures helped support local businesses.

The Governor professes that he sees the economic value of our sporting traditions here in New York. He should; it is estimated to be \$8 or \$9 billion a year.

Back in February 2013, when he kicked off his "NY Open for Fishing and Hunting" campaign, he said he knew the recreational and economic value that hunting and fishing bring to New York. Unfortunately, many of the decisions since then have discouraged the sporting community.

It is very puzzling. Tens of thousands of acres of new lands have been purchased, but unit and recreation management plans have all but shut out the sportsmen and women. The upstate communities still wait for the boon to their economies promised as justification for sinking more than \$50 million into the purchases that have yielded little more than a collection of yellow barways that block access to the lands that we all helped pay for.

For the Governor, saving the Gooley Club could be a small but important step towards showing that he really does understand and appreciate the billions of dollars that New York's sporting community pumps into the state's economy.

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