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OUTDOORS

Here's to a Year of Preserving the Majesty

By PETER KAMINSKY

As the close of the year brings home the lesson of the mighty and unpredictable power of nature, it also serves to remind us that we are sometimes the guardians, as well as the subjects, of the natural order.

Anglers, hunters and other people who derive pleasure from the outdoors have long been at the forefront of American conservation, and this year, once again, I have asked three conservation organizations to share their wishes for what would enhance sporting opportunities and the chance to enjoy the wild.

New York's Adirondack Park has been an example of the possibilities for the coexistence of development and wilderness.

"The Adirondacks are a safety deposit box for biodiversity, where we find 90 percent of the animals and plants native to the noncoastal Northeast," said Peter Bauer, the executive director of the Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks (rcpa.org). The area includes healthy populations of brook trout and white-tailed deer.

Development and environmental set-asides have gone hand-in-hand in the Adirondacks, in contrast with forever-wild national parks.

But, Bauer noted, a legislative act that has guided this process is more than 30 years old and in need of review to provide incentives for individuals to keep their land timbered and undeveloped. Moreover, with 2.5 million acres of the park in protected forest and 3.5 million acres remaining in private hands, the state has the opportunity to acquire tracts that might otherwise be developed.

Bauer expressed his wish in a call to state action.

"Governor Pataki set a goal of acquiring one million acres of wilderness, and he has come near to that goal, with 750,000 acres statewide and 450,000 in the Adirondacks," he said. "Should the state acquire 250,000 in the final two years of his term, Pataki will have a legacy - both fiscally conservative and progressively green - that his successors can never equal because of the limited amount of open space left."

Perhaps the most pressing issue on the land-use agenda is the question of the survival of the roadless areas in the country's national forests. Totalling nearly 60 million acres, they constitute the largest tracts of wilderness.

Scott Stouder ("closest post office: Pollock, Idaho") is a third-generation logger and lifelong outdoorsman.

Although he characterized himself as more of a hunter than an angler, he is in charge of Trout Unlimited's Public Lands Initiative.

"T.U. understands that the best big-game hunting and the best fish habitats coincide with the areas of greatest watershed protection," he said.

The Bush administration has been uncomfortable with strong federal enforcement of roadless rules and their limitations on logging and mining.

Last summer, the administration announced plans to turn the protection of these lands back to the states.

Stouder said he saw a danger in the defederalization of protection.

Replacing one strong national policy with 50 yet-to-be-invented sets of local regulations could, he feared, leave an opening for development interests to rush into the regulatory vacuum with a maze of roads and large-scale logging and mining operations. Stouder's wish is to do less rather than more.

"We should protect these areas and not only for sportsmen and women," he said. "They are intact migratory routs for elk, wolves, trout, salmon and grayling. They have worked for thousands of years. We must not let them disappear overnight." Not surprisingly, the first two wishes have to do with areas that fit the common conception of wilderness: places with big trees, big animals and lots of water.

But, by far, the largest ecosystems are comparatively treeless, semiarid and not as abundant in glamorous big game. This is the region of the West, comprising most of the basin and range that is referred to, quite poetically, as the Sagebrush Sea.

As ruefully described by Mark Salvo, an Arizona lawyer and the director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, "We are talking about all that land between where people are and where they are going to." This area abounds in game species like mule deer and pronghorn antelope, as well as hundreds of rare birds, wildflowers and smaller animals. Yet it is erroneously thought of as an arid, empty space.

In fact, it is a vibrant ecosystem with more biodiversity than many so-called virgin forests.

"Because it is overlooked, it has received little government protection," Salvo said. "However, protection works."

He pointed to "a spectacular success story" in Oregon, the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, where there has been recovery in pronghorn and sage grouse populations since livestock were removed in 1994.

To focus attention on the fate of the Sagebrush Sea, conservationists have sought to gain endangered-species status for the sage grouse, a lovely game bird that is hardly hunted anymore because its numbers have declined precipitously and its habitat has been degraded.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service was to have ruled last week on a recommendation not to list the species as endangered. That ruling has been postponed.

Salvo's wish is that this beautiful bird, a sure symbol of a healthy sagebrush ecosystem, will be listed as endangered, thereby preserving a major American wilderness.

And with that, let us close the book on 2004 with a wish for good will toward Earth and peace among men.