

Editorial

Resort poses no risk

By Richard D. Sanford, Editor

Regulators should take a macro view and give The Resort at Catskill Park and the planned expansion of Belleayre Mountain Ski Center some "cap and trade" credit when they consider the environmental impact of the two projects on the Catskill Region.

The Catskills are currently undergoing an accelerated reforestation that is unprecedented in history. Take a flight in a small airplane and cruise over the Catskills at 5,000 feet and you'll see almost nothing but solid forest from Schoharie County in the north to Deposit in the south and from the Hudson Valley in the east to Oneonta in the west. You'll see an ocean of trees with almost no visible sign of man's presence. It's visually stunning. And a little scary.

You can see a few strips of highway along the major state roads in the region, you can see a few small towns, the City's reservoirs, the New York Power Authority's two reservoirs in North Blenheim, and not much else other than solid forest. Town and county roads are almost invisible from the air as the canopy of trees pushes in on them. The major rivers, both branches of the Delaware, the Schoharie, the Beaverkill, the Neversink, and the Esopus are visible, but barely as the woods close in on their banks.

Locally the Halcott Valley, not too many years ago, was host to 50 dairy farms. Today there are two. Not long ago the New Kingston Valley boasted 40 dairy farms. Today, two. The Millbrook Valley was solid dairy farms from Arena to the headwaters of the stream as was the Dry Brook Valley. Only a few beef cows roam there now. Today, the forest is reclaiming what used to be meadows and pastures and hay fields faster and faster with each passing year.

Plenty of evidence

Evidence of the reforestation and its effects are everywhere. *New York Times* journalist and author Jim Sterba, in his recent book *Nature Wars*, tells the story of how the reforestation of much of the northeast has brought a resurgent wild animal population into conflict with humans. He says, "This may be hard to believe but it is very likely that more people live in closer proximity to more wild animals, birds, and trees in the eastern United States today than anywhere on the planet at any time in history. For nature lovers, this should be wonderful news — unless, perhaps, you are one of more than 4,000 drivers who will hit a deer today, your child's soccer field is carpeted with goose droppings, coyotes are killing your pets, the neighbor's cat has turned your bird feeder into a fast-food outlet, wild turkeys have eaten your newly-planted seed corn, beavers have flooded your driveway, or bears are looting your garbage cans."

He understates the case of what's happening here. As the forest expands and people leave, bears are moving into the villages. At least two live in Arkville, three or more called Margaretville their home last summer. They've developed a fondness for pizza and all things garbage. Other critters that weren't here 30 years ago are flourishing. Coyotes roam freely, fishers, unheard of just a few years ago, scream in the night, people who know what they are looking at are reporting not-infrequent sightings of wolves and mountain lions. Wild turkeys have become "rats with beaks and feathers" and bald eagles sit on practically every dead tree along the river. Hawks and owls don't even rate a head turn because they are so abundant.

Critters are everywhere

A friend owns a small pond in which he's tried to raise fish. The hatchery truck was barely out of sight before a steady stream of kingfishers, merganser ducks, great blue herons, osprey hawks and bald eagles began to take their toll. Recently, mink and an otter moved in to dine on the survivors. Ask anyone, who's tried to grow corn in a mountain valley or raise bees, how he/she feels about bears. You better be ready to hear the F bomb.

The point isn't that I dislike the ever expanding forest or its thriving critters. I've even come to accept, like my friend with the fishpond, that when you put food out for wild animals and they come and eat it, you have no right to be mad at them.

The point is this. The Catskills Region is so large and their environment is so healthy that it would be hilarious to listen to resort opponents rail about an environmental threat if it wasn't so sadly untrue and the consequences so serious.

Keep perspective

Look at the Resort proposal from this perspective. The Department of Environmental Protection has purchased 170,000 acres of land over the past 15 years to protect the City's water supply. Almost all of that land will be reclaimed by the forest in coming generations. New York State owns 287,000 acres of land, now mostly forested, inside the Blue Line of the Catskill Park that is designated "forever wild." Add to this tens of thousands of acres of forestland in private hands and it becomes very hard to see how building a 200-acre resort, which represents just 0.0004 percent of the City- and state-owned land, can possibly do any measurable harm to the environment of the Catskills. The thunderstorm that passed over the region last Wednesday, as the public hearings on The Resort were being held at Belleayre, most assuredly sent more mud into the Pepacton and Ashokan reservoirs than will ever migrate downstream from The Resort, even during its construction phase.

There is no environmental threat to the Catskills today, and that includes the proposed Resort and an expanded Belleayre Ski Center.

And, among all the critters that roam the Catskills, only one species is under threat. It isn't the bears or the coyotes or the fishers or the eagles. It's those of us who are trying hard to work and live here.

We need to push the forest back just a little and we need the economic stimulus that The Resort at Catskill Park and an expanded Belleayre Ski Center will provide. Plans for both should be approved without further delay.