

POPULATION PRESSURE AND THE FOREST PRESERVE

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During the past decade, the pressure of a rapidly growing population has become more and more difficult to deal with. In the field of conservation this is only too apparent.

Indeed, it is evident that, until this pressure is relieved, conservationists are strategically on the defensive. It is true that at times we are able to carry out successful offensive operations. Such offensives are, however, almost always local in nature. They are tactical and not strategical. The best we can hope for, in the long run, is to gain time — to hold the line until conditions become more favorable.

To do this with a reasonable degree of success is often difficult. As a matter of fact we cannot expect to win in every operation. The taking of Forest Preserve lands for the *Northway* is an example of defeat for the forces of conservation. As an example of success may be mentioned defeat of the effort to remove the Great Horned Owl from the protected list. This maintained unimpaired New York State's excellent law, protecting all Hawks and Owls. Incidentally, the fact that this law was enacted, is a notable victory for the cause of conservation in New York State.

At the present time, our chief objective is, without doubt, to keep the Forest Preserve, in so far as this is possible, forever wild. The New York State Forest Preserve is in many respects unique, both in respect to its size and the constitutional provision for its protection. I know of no similar tract within the bounds of any other State. In 1895 a constitutional amendment was adopted for the purpose of permanently protecting the wild character of the Preserve. The amendment is familiar to practically every member of the Federation. It is quoted here, in part, simply for the convenience of those who may wish to refer to it.

"The lands of the State. . . constituting the forest preserve . . . , shall be kept forever as wild forest land. 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."

The Forest Preserve, both because of its size and because it is almost unpopulated, in so far as lands now owned by the State are concerned, is and has been, peculiarly vulnerable to the pressure of a rapidly growing population. In this connection it should be remembered that New York State has, as a whole, a high density of population and a total population greater than any other State.

Legislatures, whose members have, for the most part, little knowledge of ecology and who, quite naturally, yield to the demands of the uninstructed portion of the electorate for a place to play, have been responsible for a large part of the existing damage to the Preserve.

In spite of the protests of conservationists, constitutional amendments have been passed, authorizing the construction of ski facilities by the State within the limits of the State Forest. Roads have been constructed, ostensibly to facilitate fire protection, but which have opened up wild land to hunters and others. Roads have been improved, so that where traffic was formerly sparse it is now heavy. Permits have been granted for the building of camps. These camps in many instances were temporary in theory, but

virtually permanent in practice. They have been the cause, in many cases, of the destruction of wild land.

The most serious threat to the Forest Preserve at the present time, seems to be the proposal to lease State land, within the Preserve to private enterprise for the purpose of enlarging and improving ski facilities. These facilities already exist on private land, which borders the Forest Preserve.

The area desired is Hunter Mountain, located near the village of Hunter in Greene county. It involves the construction of a cableway to the summit and the cutting of approximately twenty miles of trails, one hundred feet wide, along the slopes. Hunter Mountain, which is one of the highest peaks in the Catskills, would be completely ruined as a wild area.

This lease to private enterprise, requires a constitutional amendment to be legal. The proposal was passed by the old legislature, as quietly as possible. It must now be passed a second time by the newly elected legislature and then presented to the electorate in a referendum. It is to be hoped that the second passage of this amendment will be more difficult than the first.

This proposal serves as an illustration of the constant threat to the integrity of Forest Preserve presented by uncontrolled population growth. If this proposal should become law, by the passing of the amendment in question, it is evident that a host of similar proposals will be made speedily by other organizations, who wish to lease space in the Preserve for assorted enterprises. A precedent will have been established for the lease of portions of the Forest Preserve to private interests.

It was hoped by many conservationists that the recent approval by the electorate of \$75,000,000 to be used by the State, mainly for the purchase of recreational areas, would remove the growing pressure on the Forest Preserve, at least in part. Evidently this is not the case. Already there is a movement on foot to divide the Preserve into two parts. Two-thirds of it are to be used principally for the development of recreational facilities by the State — public camp sites and the like. Apparently the "forever wild" provision in the constitution of the State is to be ignored or abolished in the case of most the Forest Preserve. By way of pacifying the advocates of conservation and those who prefer wildness to public camp sites, ski runs, etc., about one-third of the Preserve is to be maintained as wilderness. How long it will be maintained in this condition is questionable. So long as uncontrolled growth of our population continues, demands for the violation of the Forest Preserve will also continue. Such demands will become more pressing as our population increases.

I am enough of an optimist to believe that this condition will not last indefinitely. Sooner or later, it will be realized by the majority that uncontrolled population growth is a menace to human welfare. It is to be hoped that the realization of this menace does not come too late. In the meantime everything possible should be done to guard the Forest Preserve from harm.

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