

The Influence of the Adirondacks on the Wilderness Preservation Contributions of Robert Marshall and Howard Zahniser

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Abstract—Two wilderness visionaries, Robert Marshall and Howard Zahniser, were influenced by their personal wilderness experiences in the Adirondack Mountains of New York and the “forever wild” legislation that protected those Forest Preserve areas. Both learned from and contributed to the wilderness preservation movement in the Adirondacks and the nation. The wilderness advocacy roles of Marshall and Zahniser were formative in the development and eventual passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

The national wilderness movement, as we know it today, coalesced in the 1920s and 1930s with the influence of such visionaries as Aldo Leopold and Robert Marshall, who wrote and campaigned tirelessly for the creation of wilderness within the U.S. Forest Service and later for a national wilderness system. Aldo Leopold was chiefly responsible for the establishment of the Gila Wilderness in the Gila National Forest in 1924, based on the importance of ecological processes evident in wilderness and the recreational values that the users enjoyed. However, the Wilderness Act was not passed until 1964, when it established a National Wilderness Preservation System under the management of four federal land management agencies. The Wilderness Act designated more than nine million acres as the beginning of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). The NWPS now totals more than 100 million acres, and the concept of such a national system and, more important, the ideals of wilderness preservation have spread as an international wilderness movement.

When discussing wilderness preservation and the Wilderness Act as an important environmental turning point in the history of the United States, numerous people are often mentioned—Henry Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Benton MacKaye, Robert Marshall, Howard Zahniser and others (Brooks 1980; Magill 1995). Two names often emerge as legendary figures in these historical narratives—Robert Marshall and Howard Zahniser (Glover 1988; Zahniser 1992; Jackson 1994; Magill 1995). Both men had inspirational experiences and love of a wilderness place—the Adirondack Mountains of New York—that shaped how they viewed the wilderness preservation movement.

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The Adirondack Mountains of New York include one of America’s first legally protected wild areas. The New York State legislation that protected these areas and the personal Adirondack wilderness experiences of Robert Marshall and Howard Zahniser directly influenced their wilderness vision and advocacy. Indirectly, the preservation of the Adirondacks influenced the national wilderness preservation movement through these men, their wilderness experiences and their vision of wilderness for recreational use, appreciation, and preservation for future generations. Similar observations over the past 30 years about these two men and their relationship with the Adirondacks (Schaefer 1989; Glover 1986; Zahniser 1992; McKibben 1994; Peterson 1996) suggest that New York’s Adirondacks made several important contributions to the national wilderness movement.

The purpose of the paper is to highlight how two wilderness visionaries, Robert Marshall and Howard Zahniser, were influenced by their wilderness experiences in the Adirondacks of New York State and how this inspiration influenced their contributions to the state and national wilderness preservation movements. Our approach was to review the writings about their experiences in the Adirondacks, as well as literature written by those who knew about or shared those experiences.

New York State Wilderness

The roots of the wilderness preservation movement in New York State began in 1885 with legislation to create the Forest Preserve lands that were to be “forever kept as wild forest lands.” The citizens of the state passed a referendum in 1894 to add constitutional protection to the Forest Preserve lands set aside within the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains. The most often quoted portion of the legislation is Article XIV, which, in part, states: “The lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the forest preserve as now fixed by law, 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.”

The state-owned lands within the Adirondack and Catskill forests were subsequently termed the “Forest Preserve.” These lands, in combination with extensive private land holdings, were established as regional planning and management areas labeled the Adirondack and Catskill Parks.

The specific designation of some of the Adirondack Forest Preserve lands as “wilderness” was first proposed by the state legislature in 1960 and finally adopted in 1972. Today, there are 16 wilderness management units in the Adirondack Forest Preserve, totaling more than one million acres. In

1985, four wilderness units in the Catskill Forest Preserve were created by state agency action and total more than 100,000 acres.

Robert Marshall: Wilderness Advocate, Planner, and Manager _____

One of early champions of the wilderness movement in New York was Louis Marshall, a constitutional delegate and lawyer, who led the debate in favor of creating and protecting the forest preserve. Louis later noted: “the most important action of the convention of 1894 was, I would say without the slightest hesitation was the adoption of section . . . of the Constitution which preserved in their wild state the Adirondack and Catskill forests” (Glover 1986).

Robert Marshall, or “Bob” as he preferred, was the son of Louis Marshall. He grew up exploring and spending his summers with his family at Lower Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks. Bob learned to appreciate the Adirondacks as a user and, later, as an advocate for their preservation. He traveled extensively throughout the Adirondacks whenever he had an opportunity with his brother George, guide Herb Clark and some classmates. Here he began making long treks to distant ponds and mountain tops. Bob and George were the first to climb all 46 peaks in the Adirondacks higher than 4,000 feet. He wrote of the beauty he saw and valued and made long “guidebook” commentaries on what he observed, rating the quality of everything from trail conditions to panoramic views (Marshall 1922; 1923; 1942).

Bob graduated from the New York State College of Forestry in Syracuse in 1924 and went on to earn his master’s (at Harvard Forest) and Ph.D. (at John Hopkins) degrees as a forester and plant physiologist. He became a wilderness resource manager, but he is most often remembered as an activist and advocate for wilderness (Glover 1986; 1988).

Marshall frequently returned to the Adirondacks in later life when not traveling or working elsewhere in the United States. He supported wilderness protection in the Adirondacks, such as the need to stop timber harvesting above 2,500 feet and to prohibit truck road construction into roadless areas. He spoke about and wrote in favor of protecting the “forever wild” land areas because they were often threatened by development interests (Marshall 1953; Schaefer 1966). Bob believed strongly in the value of wilderness and thought that the public should support the wilderness preservation efforts and, thereby, influence agency decisions and legislative actions.

On a trip to the top of Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks in 1932, Bob met Paul Schaefer, from the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, and discussed wilderness preservation at the state and national level. Bob noted: “We simply must band together – wherever and whenever wilderness is attacked. We must mobilize all our resources, all of our energies, all of our devotion to wilderness” (Schaefer 1966). Marshall was one of the founding members of The Wilderness Society in 1935 and encouraged Paul Schaefer and the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks to carry on similar work in the Adirondacks.

One of Bob Marshall’s most significant written works was his article on *The Problem of The Wilderness* (1930), in which

he stated the benefits that accrue from wilderness – physical, mental and aesthetic. He also outlined how exploration had shaped the nation and its culture but concluded with a call to action: “There is just one hope of repulsing the tyrannical ambition of civilization to conquer every niche on the whole earth. That hope is the organization of spirited people who will fight for the freedom of the wilderness.”

The national and New York State trends toward rapid development and the loss of wild conditions were of great concern to Marshall (1930), who reasoned that: “The preservation of a few samples of undeveloped territory is one of the most clamant issues before us today. Just a few years more of hesitation and the only trace of that wilderness which has exerted such a fundamental influence in moulding American character will lie in the musty pages of pioneer books and the mumbled memories of tottering antiquarians. To avoid this catastrophe demands immediate action.” This theme emerged often in his writings as he exhorted both private individuals and agency professionals to act to preserve wilderness while there was still an opportunity to do so and preserve the experience for future generations.

After several trips to Alaska, Marshall returned to the Adirondacks worried that they might have lost their grandeur compared with the places he had visited. After a 1932 trip in the Adirondacks, he commented that he had recaptured, much to his relief, the sense of wilderness that he had experienced in his past climbs on Mount Haystack (Schaefer 1966).

In the 1930s, Bob worked, in several professional capacities, for wilderness management and toward a national policy of wilderness preservation on the national forests. During 1933-39, he worked as wilderness resource manager. Bob was director of the Forestry Division of the U. S. Office of Indian Affairs and then chief of the Division of Recreation and Lands within the U. S. Forest Service. He spent about half his time in Washington, D.C. and the other half in the field studying wilderness issues. Long hikes and backpacking trips were common and kept the field staff busy trying to keep up with his enormous enthusiasm for the wilderness experience. As often as his busy schedule would allow, Bob made trips back to the Adirondacks to stay involved in the issues there and to enjoy their beauty.

By 1937, Marshall had grown more vocal about the need to preserve wilderness after observing the enormous demand by the American public for recreation and tourism opportunities. As a result, he published his most strongly worded warning about the consequences of not preserving wilderness immediately in an article appropriately titled *The Universe of the Wilderness is Vanishing*. Bob clearly stated the choices: “The world is full of conflicts between genuine values. Often these conflicts are resolved entirely from the standpoint of one of the competing values, and thus whole categories of human enjoyment may be needlessly swept away. It is far more conducive to human happiness to attempt some rational balance that will make possible for the immensely different types of people the varied values they crave. Emphatically this is true of the conflict between the values created by the modification of Nature and the values of the primitive . . . the fate of unmodified Nature rests in the activity of its friends.” Through his work with The Wilderness Society, he championed popular campaigns for wilderness preservation and

encouraged supporters to challenge the federal land managing agencies to action. Within the Forest Service, Marshall pushed for protection of roadless areas and included several Adirondack areas, of state Forest Preserve lands, in national studies of roadless areas and recommended wilderness protection—based on their national significance.

In the midst of his seemingly boundless energy for hiking, adventure, wilderness resource management and advocating wilderness preservation, Bob died in 1939 at the age of 38. There are many biographical writings about Bob Marshall that chronicle his life in more detail and describe his many achievements (Marshall 1951; Marshall 1976; Jamieson 1983; Glover 1986; Vickery 1986; Jackson 1994). Some of the most noticeable tributes to him include the creation of the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana, the naming of Mount Marshall in the Adirondacks and the proposed Bob Marshall Great Wilderness in the Adirondacks (DiNunzio 1992). Probably the most significant tribute to Bob Marshall and wilderness preservation was the leadership and perseverance shown by the many people who took up the challenge of ensuring that wilderness would be available for present and future generations. The wilderness preservation movement might have faltered without its most prominent and vital advocate, but that leadership was taken up by others, including one tireless visionary and advocate—Howard Zahniser.

Howard Zahniser: Wilderness Legislation Architect

One of Bob Marshall's fellow charter members of The Wilderness Society, in 1935, was Howard Zahniser. In 1945, Zahniser, or "Zahnie," became the executive secretary of The Wilderness Society and editor of *The Living Wilderness*. The next year, he visited New York's Adirondacks with Paul Schaefer and discussed the need to preserve free-flowing rivers and wilderness areas in New York State and the entire nation. During their wilderness trip, Zahniser shared his national vision and how it related to the New York preservation movement: "In addition to such protection as national parks and monuments now are given, we need some strong legislation which will be similar in effect on a national scale to what Article XIV, Section 1, is to New York State Forest Preserve. We need to reclaim for the people, perhaps through their representatives in the Congress, control over the wilderness regions of America" (Schaefer 1992).

Zahniser fell in love with the Adirondacks and later that year purchased land and a cabin near what is now known as the Siamese Ponds Wilderness. He spent much of his free time there with his family, when he could get away from his busy professional life in Washington, D.C. or from traveling for The Wilderness Society. As an advocate for national wilderness, Zahniser often came to New York to support state efforts for wilderness and river preservation from 1946 until his death in 1964. He found kindred spirits in members of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks. George D. Davis, former executive director of The Wilderness Society, commented in 1992 that "Zahniser not only took preservation ideas and inspiration from the Adirondacks, he also gave to Adirondack preservation."

On one of his talks with a New York Legislative Committee in 1953, Zahniser noted that in the state and the nation ". . . we must not only protect the wilderness from exploitation. We must also see that we do not ourselves destroy its wilderness character in our own management programs. We must remember that the essential quality of the wilderness is its wildness." These observations led to considerable debate and an inventory of potential areas for wilderness designation within the Adirondack Forest Preserve. Wilderness designations within the Adirondack Forest Preserve were not adopted by New York State until 1972.

In 1957, during one of his many trips to New York from Washington, he addressed the New York State Conservation Council with a speech entitled "Where Wilderness Preservation Began," a direct tribute to the state's contribution to the national wilderness movement. Stewart Udall (1988) observed that Zahniser had: "acquired vital insights into wilderness values on hikes in the same Adirondack expanse that had earlier fired the imagination of Bob Marshall. Moreover, when he presented testimony to the New York Legislature in support of the 'forever wild' covenant in the state's constitution, Zahniser formulated in his mind some of the basic concepts he later incorporated into the initial wilderness bill he submitted to his friends in Congress."

Zahniser attended and participated in many hearings and meetings in New York State between 1946 and 1964, contributing to wilderness and river preservation efforts. His time in New York often involved a multitude of purposes, from spending time with his family and friends to both seeking and giving council about wilderness preservation. Many of the 60 or more legislative drafts, of what became the Wilderness Act, were worked on by Zahniser in his cabin in the Adirondacks.

The visionary role of Howard Zahniser was best summarized by Douglas Scott (1992) when he acknowledged that: "Zahniser was the true architect of the Wilderness Act, not merely because he drafted its language and catalyzed the endless details of the legislative campaign to see it enacted, but because he motivated so many to see the need, inspired thousands to think it possible, and emboldened all to preserve, even when discouragement set in. He was happiest, this remarkable leader, when his leadership was least visible, when a dozen others rose to voice the support he had engendered, speaking for wilderness from their own hearts."

Zahniser spoke eloquently of the values of wilderness that were important to him personally, as well as to wilderness users and all of our society—personal renewal, inspirational, educational, scientific, historical and recreational. In his landmark article on the need for wilderness, he states: "In the areas of wilderness that are still relatively unmodified by man it is, however, possible for a human being, adult or child, to sense and see his own humble, dependent relationship to all of life. In these areas, thus, are the opportunities for so important, so neglected a part of our education—gaining of the true understanding of our past, ourselves, and our world which will enable us to enjoy the conveniences and liberties of our urbanized, industrialized, mechanized civilization and yet not sacrifice an awareness of our human existence as spiritual creatures nurtured and sustained by and from the great community of life that comprises the wildness of the universe, of which we ourselves are a part" (Zahniser 1956).

In Sierra Club conferences during 1961 and 1963, Zahniser, as executive director of The Wilderness Society, tirelessly advocated support for wilderness legislation and encouraged others to join with the philosophy: “. . . we are facing a frontier. We are not slowing down a force that inevitably will destroy all the wilderness there is. We are generating another force, never to be wholly spent, that, renewed generation to generation, will be always effective in preserving wilderness. We are not fighting progress. We are making it. We are not dealing with a vanishing wilderness. We are working for wilderness forever.” (Zahniser 1961; 1963).

On September 3, 1964, only months after the death of Howard Zahniser at age 58, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law. Some have referred to the passage of this legislation as one of the great environmental events in the history of our country (Magill 1995).

Adirondack Influences

The Adirondack wilderness movement and the personal Adirondack wilderness experiences of Bob Marshall and Howard Zahniser directly influenced their wilderness vision and advocacy. Some of the influences of the Adirondack wilderness movement on Marshall and Zahniser include: 1) establishing, through example of the “forever wild” covenant in the state constitution, the importance of legislation to protect wild areas and wilderness for long-term stability and preservation; and 2) demonstrating the need for people who value and use wilderness to actively work for its preservation, such as the wilderness advocacy of Paul Schaefer and The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks. The travel and personal experiences of Marshall and Zahniser in the Adirondacks also inspired these leaders to advocate for wilderness preservation and management.

Indirectly, the preservation of the Adirondacks influenced the entire national wilderness preservation movement through these men, their wilderness experiences, and their vision of wilderness for personal renewal, recreational use, appreciation and preservation for future generations. Interestingly, the work of Marshall and Zahniser came full circle over many decades, when the national wilderness definition was modified slightly and adopted to become the legal definition used in the New York State for designation of 16 wilderness areas within the Adirondack Park.

Some authors suggest that the story of the preservation of the Adirondacks, its ecological restoration and the unique mix of public and private interests and lands continues to influence the national wilderness preservation movement (McKibben 1994). For example, the dynamic tension between development and preservation in the Adirondack area may have reached some equilibrium in recent decades. In the Adirondack Park, public lands are interspersed with private lands that are regionally zoned for different levels of development. This attempt to balance these two interests may offer continued insight for national and international attempts at wilderness preservation and compatible private development for regional sustainability.

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