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**People, Nature, and Hope in the Adirondacks**

I like to think that every environmental historian has their “place.” This doesn’t have to be the place that they study, necessarily. It could be where they’re from, or just the place they see in their mind’s eye when they sit to write about the complex interconnections between humans and the world around us. For me, that place is the steep, rocky hills and deep, narrow river valleys of the Arkansas Ozarks where I grew up. No matter where else I’ve lived, whatever other places I’ve tried to study, the Ozarks are always sitting there in my mind, filtering my understanding of the rest of the world.

For Matt Dallos, the Adirondacks are most certainly his “place,” and throughout his wonderfully readable and ambling recent book, *In The Adirondacks*, the reader feels his deep appreciation for the region that holds a powerful yet misunderstood place in the American cultural imaginary. For most people, particularly those of us who have never traversed the Adirondacks, the region calls to mind alpine peaks, deep, impenetrable spruce forest, and those wooden chairs that always seem to sit dockside by a lake or large body of water somewhere, and that always lean just a bit too far backward for my comfort. This image, of the Adirondacks as primal wilderness, or, at best, primal rusticity, Dallos cautions us, is a remarkably blinkered one, missing much of what makes the region unique, and, well, interesting.

More than a space that is “forever wild,” as the state of New York declared it in the 1890s, to preserve what is now the largest state park in the contiguous United States, the Adirondacks illustrates the deep interconnections between people and nature. Throughout the book, part history, part travelogue, Dallos provides us with a textured portrait of the mishmash of landscapes that make up the park. Among other things, the region has served as a homeland for Indigenous people, a working landscape for trappers, traders, and hunting guides, and a travel destination for a wide
range of people from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, from the rich and famous denizens of the “Great Camps” to the working- and middle-class folks who have long pitched tents and trailers in scenic campgrounds and parks. All these landscapes coexist and collide with each other within the boundaries of the park, and as a result present a far messier and far more human place than any “forever wild” bumper sticker or rustic wooden chair ever could.

Throughout the book’s chapters, Dallos continues to dig into this messiness, reflecting on the complex characters who have defined the region’s history, including famous Abenaki guide Mitchell Sabatts, a man who witnessed firsthand massive changes to the region across the nineteenth century and who came to be emblematic of both the settler conquest and erasure of the Indigenous Adirondacks in favor of a “pristine wilderness,” as well as the persistence and adaptability of Native people who continue to live and thrive in the region. Dallos also introduces us to men like Verplanck Colvin and Paul Smith, legendary explorers and boosters of the region who could wax lyrically about the natural beauty of the region even as they sought to develop and “civilize” it. Dallos also takes readers on a tour of a region defined as much by shabby roadside convenience stores and faded neon hotel signs as it is by rugged peaks, dense forests, and tranquil lakes.

All of this, Dallos argues, reveals a far blurrier distinction between wilderness and humans within the “Blue Line” of the park boundary than many of us might like to think when we load up our cars with camping equipment and head into the interior. Dallos believes it presents a better, more democratic vision of what conservation and public lands might be in this country. In the Adirondacks, humanity is ever-present, hard to ignore if you’re really looking. Within this vast park thousands of people of varying socioeconomic statuses have lived and continue to live. In the end, Dallos sees in the Adirondacks something of a messy utopia, a place where humans and nature are intrinsically linked, where separating the two becomes so difficult as to be pointless, and where a more honest, and perhaps more widely applicable vision of America’s public lands might originate from.

This is a provocative argument, and one I am inclined—particularly after soaking up Dallos’s wonderfully approachable prose for a couple hundred pages—to agree with. After all, one of the major foundational questions of environmental history has been wrestling with the limitations, and indeed the outright falsehood, of the division between humans and nature. Big-name scholars such as Bill Cronon, Louis Warren, Karl Jacoby, and Mark Spence wrote field-defining articles and books about the creation of parks and wilderness areas and the flawed, blinkered, and often racist and colonialist ideologies and disposessive practices that undergirded the creation of mythic places such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and, yes, the Adirondacks. Here at last is a portrait of a park that embraces all that good work and comes away with a deep history and deep geography of a place defined by that complex interplay of a bunch of loaded binaries: civilization/wilderness, modern/primitive, and human/nature.

Yet one wonders if Dallos is a bit too close to his subject here. Is the Adirondacks, which, as Dallos admits, is overwhelmingly inhabited by and visited by white people, somewhere that could serve as a “model” for mixed-use conservation areas across the country? Dallos, who spends much of the book deconstructing the myth of the Adirondacks, still struggles to escape that myth’s intense pull. Personally, I would have liked to see Dallos engage more with the racial violence and dispossession that has produced such a white region in the first place. Although he touches on the erasure of Indigenous people, and their persistence despite it, these sections of the book could have been expanded. Perhaps if Dallos dwelt more
on these stories, he might have come away with a more complex, less optimistic vision of the region.

But perhaps Dallos presents this optimistic vision because, well, what else can he do? In this country, defined as it is by the intertwined theft of bodies and land that manifests in an ongoing settler colonial project and the pernicious persistence of structural white supremacy, what are our public lands but a reflection of that? Dallos dares to dream that the Adirondacks could be something different. That its history, as violent, racially exclusive, and imperfect as it is, might not exclude it from a better future. After all, Dallos is right that the Adirondacks, the “fractured mosaic” (p. 173) of public and private, towns and wilderness areas, trailer parks and mansions, offers more space for inclusion, for democracy, than, say, Yellowstone or Yosemite, with all their neatly bounded lines, cleanly dividing humans and nature, “civilization” and “wilderness.” In Dallos’s vision, these places become far more than the big green, bordered spaces on maps. They become reflections of our troubling histories and our—hopefully—more equitable futures.

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