

## The Catskills : A Defining Landscape, Undefined\*

By Judith LaBelle

A few years ago, the Italian Forestry Minister was invited to address a meeting of local leaders in a region similar to the Catskills, with forest covered mountains surrounding small valley communities. The thermal spa resorts that had been the region's mainstay had fallen out of favor and the local officials were clamoring for development.

The Minister reminded them of the Biblical injunction: "The last shall be first." He explained that while they saw themselves as behind other regions in the race to develop, they could move from being "last" into being "first" by learning from what had happened elsewhere."

The same challenge and opportunity confronts the Catskills. What could the Catskills learn from the experience of others? Many things. Change cannot be stopped; but it can be managed and shaped. There is strength in numbers; communities working together can be more effective than when they are isolated. A strong regional identity is key to being competitive in the new economy.

"Regional identity" may sound soft and unimportant. But think about regions that have a strong identity – the Napa Valley, Vermont (it is a *small* state), Tuscany, the English Lakes District, and Provence. These are distinctive places that attract tourists, and for whose products consumers will pay top dollar because they perceive a connection between the high quality environment and high quality products. They are also places that attract entrepreneurs and small businesspeople to live and work.

But the Catskills have never had a single, clear identity. They mean many things to many people. The resorts of the Borscht Belt. The "mountains." The Catskill Park, defined by the "blue line" within which all State-owned land is part of the Forest Preserve and held as "forever wild". The New York City watershed, which provides 90% of the water for more than 9 million New Yorkers.

The problem is that these meanings do not relate to the same geographic area. The resort area was in Sullivan County, south of the areas encompassed by the other definitions. There are mountains outside the Park as well as inside. (When you look at a state map, the Adirondacks Park makes sense geographically; the blue line around the Catskill Park *looks* political.) The Forest Preserve is within the Catskill Park, but composes only about 40% of it. More than half of the Catskill watershed is outside the Park. Formal recognition of the transcending importance of the natural resources in the Catskills has traditionally come from outside. Leadership within the Catskills has been most effectively galvanized when trying to fend off or shape these efforts.

For example, the Forest Preserve created by the State of New York is located in only two areas - the Adirondacks and the Catskills. In the Adirondacks, the investment made by the People of the State of New York in acquiring and paying taxes on Forest Preserve

land was recognized by the creation of a regional agency that has land use authority for projects of regional importance. When something similar was proposed for the Catskills, it was opposed and stopped. Land use authority in the Catskills remains a matter of local control, with no entity to provide an overarching vision for the region.

Similarly, when the City of New York began to take steps to protect water quality within the watershed (to avoid a \$X billion water filtration plant), local leaders rallied to force an approach that respected the needs for economic development in their communities as well.

The traditional reliance on local control may reflect, in part, the geography of the Catskills. The communities are often separated by long stretches of forested hills that have militated against their working together. This is compounded by the strong independence of character needed to make a living in a rugged area.

But the Catskills are no longer so isolated and the economic context has changed. In the old economy, development in rural areas was based on resource extraction, often without regard for environmental impact. In the new economy, successful rural development is based on sustainable use of resources and quality of life.

Yet the opportunity this affords to a region like the Catskills can be lost if it is overrun by “old style” development. The recent spurt in real estate values, coupled with pending proposals for casinos and hilltop resorts, suggests that the area is no longer regarded as being remote and development pressures will only continue to increase. The impacts of these changes will transcend municipal boundaries and managing them will require a regional effort.

But perhaps the current forces of change provide a moment of opportunity for the Catskills: the time may be ripe for local leaders to define the region from within.

The Catskills and the Adirondacks are not typical American “parks,” since they encompass communities as well as state-owned land. They are more typical of European parks, many of which benefit from well-developed identities and might be a source of useful ideas.

European parks are designed to encourage economic development while protecting community character and environmental quality in the finest cultural landscapes. The French regional park approach might suggest a way to address concerns about local control, while promoting a regional identity.

French regional parks are created when local leaders come together to gain recognition for a region they believe to be of national significance. They undertake a planning process to clarify their sense of the region’s distinctiveness, their goals and how they intend to achieve them – usually based on using their local land use authority in complementary ways, educating residents and visitors alike about the region’s distinctive qualities, and developing incentives for private action consistent with them. Designation

as “park” generates tourism as well as project funding. At the end of the process, each community decides whether it wants to become part of the park. (Holdouts are allowed to reconsider and join later.) While this may result in “Swiss cheese” to start with, it allows the communities in the region to define the region, without forcing participation.

While we don’t have a regional park structure with funding support, as the French do, it is clear that funding is more readily available from state and federal sources when initiatives are undertaken at the regional rather than local level.

The Catskills are on the cusp of change. The question is whether that change will be determined by leadership within the Catskills or a diffuse set of economic and political forces from without.

Can the leadership within the Catskills rally to this challenge?

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