
Urban Man Confronts the Wilderness: The Late Nineteenth-Century Sportsman in the Adirondacks

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In the nineteenth century the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York enjoyed extraordinary popularity among men from eastern cities who camped, hunted, and fished there. This paper examines recreational camping trips taken in the Adirondacks roughly between 1850 and 1900 and describes the attitudes of the campers toward the wilderness and its wildlife and the effects on the nineteenth-century sportsman of the Romantic frame of mind and its faith in the active powers of nature to uplift the human soul.

As Roderick Nash has shown in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, in the nineteenth century significant numbers of Americans turned to the wilderness for recreation and spiritual regeneration. The American wilderness had culturally influential advocates in writers like Thoreau and John Muir and in painters like Thomas Cole and Thomas Moran, among many others. The Adirondack wilderness had its exponents as well, whose scores of books and journal articles told of the physical, intellectual, and spiritual joys of camping in the Adirondacks. These accounts, circulated in an intellectual atmosphere already thick with the Romantic trust in the beneficence and bounty of nature, prompted thousands of

eastern men to set out for the Adirondacks to spend their summer vacations hunting, fishing, and revivifying body and soul in the great wilderness of northern New York.

Yet most accounts of nineteenth-century camping trips in the Adirondacks show that the men who hunted and fished there for recreation, though eager to experience first-hand the adventure of intimacy with the wilderness and stirred by the Romantic impulse to find God in Nature, were nonetheless products of an urban and comfort-oriented society. These sophisticated New Yorkers and Bostonians, fresh from the drawing rooms of Washington Square and Beacon Hill, were unfamiliar with the wilderness and its ways. To make his stay in the wilderness tolerable the Adirondack camper depended on the woodcraft and hard work of locally hired guides, on huge quantities of imported civilized amenities in the form of camping gear and potables, and on the continuing capacity of the forest to withstand abusive exploitation.

But despite their lack of familiarity with wilderness and their reliance on guides and an abundance of gear to provide a mediating buffer between them and it, the sportsmen nevertheless depended on their Adirondack camping trip to help alleviate the anxieties caused by a society even then becoming commercial, fast-paced, and full of the stresses that we associate with contemporary life. Shooting an Adirondack deer, even from pointblank range, or catching an Adirondack trout, even where the trout would jump at any lure cast their way, or just relaxing on the shore of some placid Adirondack lake or drifting with the current down an Adirondack river provided a catharsis these men apparently sorely needed. As one Adirondack enthusiast put it, "I have gone to the woods weakened in body and depressed in mind. I have come out of them with renewed health and strength, perfect digestion, and a buoyant and cheerful spirit."

Not only did Adirondack campers trust nature to restore their threatened emotional stability, but they also packed with them an unbounded faith in the capacity of nature to take care of the physical needs as well - in the form of venison and trout for food and pleasure and in the Adirondack shanty or lean-to constructed out of the living timber of the forest itself. Although there were explicit state laws regulating how the Adirondack sportsman could hunt the white-tailed deer and how many he could kill, it was not unusual for a hunter to kill, by legally prohibited means, a dozen deer in a few weeks, only a fraction of which were used for food. Even though the Adirondack moose became extirpated around the time of the beginning of the Civil War, one of the dominant themes in accounts of Adirondack camping trips is of the infinitude of nature's resources.



Convention participants listen to one of the presentations.