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Adirondack-style debate with an English accent

By JACOB RESNECK, Special to the Enterprise

ARUNDEL, England - Conservationists say natural beauty is being threatened by development, yet residents resent new regulations intent on "protecting" private property from the very people who own it.

Sound familiar?

The age-old fight so common in the Adirondack Park is being played out here in southern England in a 600-square mile area called the South Downs, soon to be South Downs National Park.

The connection doesn't end there. One of the new park's proponents is Paul Millmore, a retired conservation official who has spent many summers in the Adirondacks and regularly corresponds with active green groups in New York.

"The lessons that we learn can be taken to the Adirondacks and the lessons that we learn in the Adirondacks can be taken to the British national park system," Millmore said. "I've always wanted to get as much international thinking into conservation as possible."

Since the 1960s, portions of the South Downs have been one of England's 35 "Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty." This has given it some protection from development in an area that's only a couple of hours from London by road or rail. As housing prices increased so has development which has been regulated by 15 different local authorities that function similarly to New York's towns.

"When you look at the record of those local authorities there's some very bad decisions going through," said Chris Todd, chief spokesman of the South Downs Campaign which has been lobbying for the creation of a national park.

Increased development has understandably led to tensions between conservation campaigners and local officials who say they fear a park would put the squeeze on towns and drive prices up further. Affordable housing will be all but impossible to build in an area being managed as a park, local officials say.

"(There are) people who have lived here for centuries and managed the park, actually created this area of beauty," said Deborah Urquhart, an elected member of West Sussex County Council. "And now, the conservationists basically want to wrap it up in cotton wool and 'protect' it."

The political fight ended last year when the British government announced the South Downs would become England's 35th national park. Unlike national parks in the U.S., no one will lose

their land. Instead, the South Downs National Park will be a patchwork of public and private land overseen by a newly created National Park Authority with powers over planning. In this way, the new authority will function very much like the state Adirondack Park Agency which doesn't just manage wilderness but has to contend with the thousands of people who live within its borders.

"The fundamental similarity to the Adirondacks and British national parks is that they are lived-in landscapes," Millmore said. "So the type of management that you would apply to an English national park is the same sort of management that you would apply to the Adirondacks."

But like in the Adirondacks, with much of the land in private hands, landowners are already nervous. About 80 percent of the land is working farms which led agriculture groups to oppose the creation of a park in the first place.

"We have farmers who are quite anxious over what will happen over the next two years as the park is being set up," said William White, a regional director of the National Farmers Union. He said some farmers recognize the tourist potential and are setting up bed and breakfasts and other businesses to cater to visitors, but others are worried about hikers disturbing their livestock and generally being a nuisance.

"All in all the general feeling was that it's not going to add anything - so why have it?" White said.

Local government leaders like Urquhart also says she has misgivings about the incoming National Park Authority - a central planning body that will operate similar to the APA - being charged with regulating development putting conservation principles over people. Her arguments echo those of people who complain that park proponents seek to keep the Adirondacks as a playground for the rich.

Millmore himself admits that the shift between the local authorities and a new central body will be "radical" for South Downs.

"Conservation goes from being at the bottom of the pile to going to the top of the pile," Millmore said. "Conservation is not a priority as far as most local authorities are concerned."

Urquhart says that even though planning board members will be locally appointed she's concerned that the emphasis on conservation will trump the needs of the communities.

"They are there to work for the park not to reflect necessarily the wishes of their residents," she said, "and so from a democratic point of view it's very concerning."

Emphasis on

historic conservation

But that doesn't mean the historic side of conservation will be ignored, says Millmore. Unlike the Adirondacks, British national parks put an emphasis on conservation of historic places, something he says he finds lacking in the Adirondacks.

"The perception of the (Adirondack) Park is one of everything outside the towns and villages and hamlets," Millmore said, "whereas in this country, we are recognizing that the park includes historic buildings within the hamlets and villages that also need conservation and enhancement as they are a fundamental part of the park."

Millmore said he's often shocked to see beautiful buildings - often entire blocks in small towns - literally crumbling from neglect. Part of the reason, he says, is because conservation groups like the Adirondack Council and Protect the Adirondacks! are solely concerned with ecological conservation and historic preservation isn't considered.

"They don't see it as their role," he said.

Yet any conservation experiment, no matter what side of the Atlantic, is going to have its strengths and weaknesses. With little to none virgin wilderness left in Britain, wilderness managers have a lot to learn from their American counterparts, "You're great on wilderness management whereas we don't do wilderness management here 'cause we ain't got no wilderness," Millmore quipped.

Planners in the Adirondacks should show more concern for the place's vanishing history, he said. But in the meantime, keep the dialog going between wooded upstate New York and England's pastoral southeast.

"There are transfers that should be possible over time that would be really valuable to both communities."