

Evaluating a Working Forest: Integrated Monitoring of the Former Finch, Pruyn Lands

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Contemporary land conservation projects involving public and private sector actors can navigate traditional political and economic constraints

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<http://www.nsrcforest.org>

Project Summary

The politics of forest land use are rooted in two tensions, how land is used and whose interests are represented in land use decisions. We analyzed the potential of a large-scale “working forest” land deal to navigate these tensions in New York State through detailed analysis of the Finch Pruyn transaction. We reviewed the distribution of property rights outlined in management plans, and interviewed representatives from environmental groups, public agencies, timber interests, and local communities. We found alignment between designated land uses and ecological and socioeconomic goals expressed by diverse interviewees. We interpret this relaxation of tensions as reflecting the embrace of socioeconomic issues by conservation organizations and the benefits of investing in local outreach. Our analysis highlights the extent to which this public-private working forest deal navigated the political economy of forest management. Despite completion of the deal – and the single largest expansion of the Adirondack Park in 100 years –, the durability of this financial and political model for structuring ownership and management of land remains unclear. Beyond questions of the willingness of The Nature Conservancy, the state of New York, local communities and commercial actors to engage in similar practice in the future, the massive sell-off of land owned by forest products companies is near completion. Achieving future large scale protection will apparently require purchasing land from institutional investors (TIMOs and REITs). This then represents the new opportunity space and a focus for research, strategy, policy and partnership formulation.

More generally, land conservation is now understood to be directly implicated in questions of rural development. Conservation organizations must develop capacity to integrate socioeconomic data and considerations into their work. This partnership between TNC and Cornell speaks to this ambition.

Lastly, the ability of landscapes designed to be multifunctional to deliver on expectations of those layering on ecological, economic and social claims is not known. We reviewed existing approaches to integrated ecological & socioeconomic monitoring of large-scale working forests (50,000+ha). We conclude that monitoring and evaluation is under-funded and our ability to derive lessons scientifically is quite limited. Theory development is needed to specify relations of socioecological systems and more data collection is required if we want to subject these efforts to empirical assessment. Further capacity building is needed in public and private sector organizations to support land acquisition and dispensation in a manner that is informed by ecological science and is financially and politically sustainable.

Background and Justification

- Large, intact forests in the northeastern U.S. provide habitat for diverse species and ecological services such as timber production, water purification, and recreation. Despite extensive reforestation following abandonment of agricultural land through much of the 20th century, degradation and fragmentation of eastern forests have increased since the 1970s, driven in part by the fragmenting of large industrial forest ownerships. In the 1980s, forest products companies began selling land, driven by industry restructuring, tax disincentives for land ownership, and heightened competition in globally integrated markets. Nearly 10 million hectares of forest land in the northeast were sold between 1980 and 2005, reflecting a nationwide pattern.

Background

- Many sales have entailed lands being transferred from forest products companies to institutional investors, such as Timberland Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs) and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs). For example, in 2001 the Georgia Pacific Corporation sold 4.7 million acres in several states to Plum Creek, a REIT. Whereas forest products companies historically managed lands to provide stable wood supplies and to buffer price risk, financial investors often operate on short timelines and manage lands according to real estate or timber markets.
- Although TIMOs and REITs are the most common purchasers, there is no single trajectory for tracts put up for sale. Lands may be subjected to “highest and best use” parcelization and real estate development, intensive timber production, or conservation forestry (i.e., logging subject to conservation restrictions). Uncertainty regarding which land uses will result from these sales has generated concern among environmental groups as well as those interested in maintaining the forest industry.

Background

- A small proportion of formerly industrial timberlands have been converted into protected areas. In the northeastern U.S., less than 2.3% of timberlands sold between 1980 and 2005 were purchased by conservation organizations or public agencies. These efforts are constrained by limited funds and by concerns about the effects of “locking up” forest land on the forest products industry, employment, property taxes and recreational access. Conversion of timberlands to protected areas is therefore closely linked to debates about economic and social justice, as well as cultural continuity in rural communities.

Methods

- Case study; Finch Pruyn Working Forest
 - We reviewed public documents including the conservation easement, the forest management plan, press releases and media coverage. Our emphasis was on tracing the redistribution of property rights to understand formal allocation of rights and responsibilities under the terms of the deal.
 - We conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with purposefully-selected individuals from environmental organizations, public agencies, local government, the forest products industry, recreation groups, and local residents. The interviews were not intended to statistically represent the region's population. Instead, we worked with The Nature Conservancy to identify representatives of a wide range of interest groups and individuals with varied levels of involvement in design of the FPWF.

Methods II

- Literature review on monitoring of socioecological outcomes of working forests.
 - We were able to identify a total of eight published and unpublished studies that provided sufficient details on monitoring methods, indicators, and results to support our analysis of current monitoring practice.
 - These studies were identified through a combination of direct experience, interviews, and a literature search. We also conducted semi-structured expert interviews with four researchers engaged in forest-monitoring programs at the US Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the Canadian Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, and the University of Maine. The interviews were focused on the integration of ecological and socioeconomic indicators, program costs, challenges facing monitoring programs, and how the resulting data were used to inform management or policy.
 - We conducted a full text search of three major databases (Thomson Reuters Web of Science, BIOSIS Previews, and Environment Index, for the keyword *monitoring* in combination with *working forest*, *conservation easement*, *forest certification*, or *sustainable forest management*).

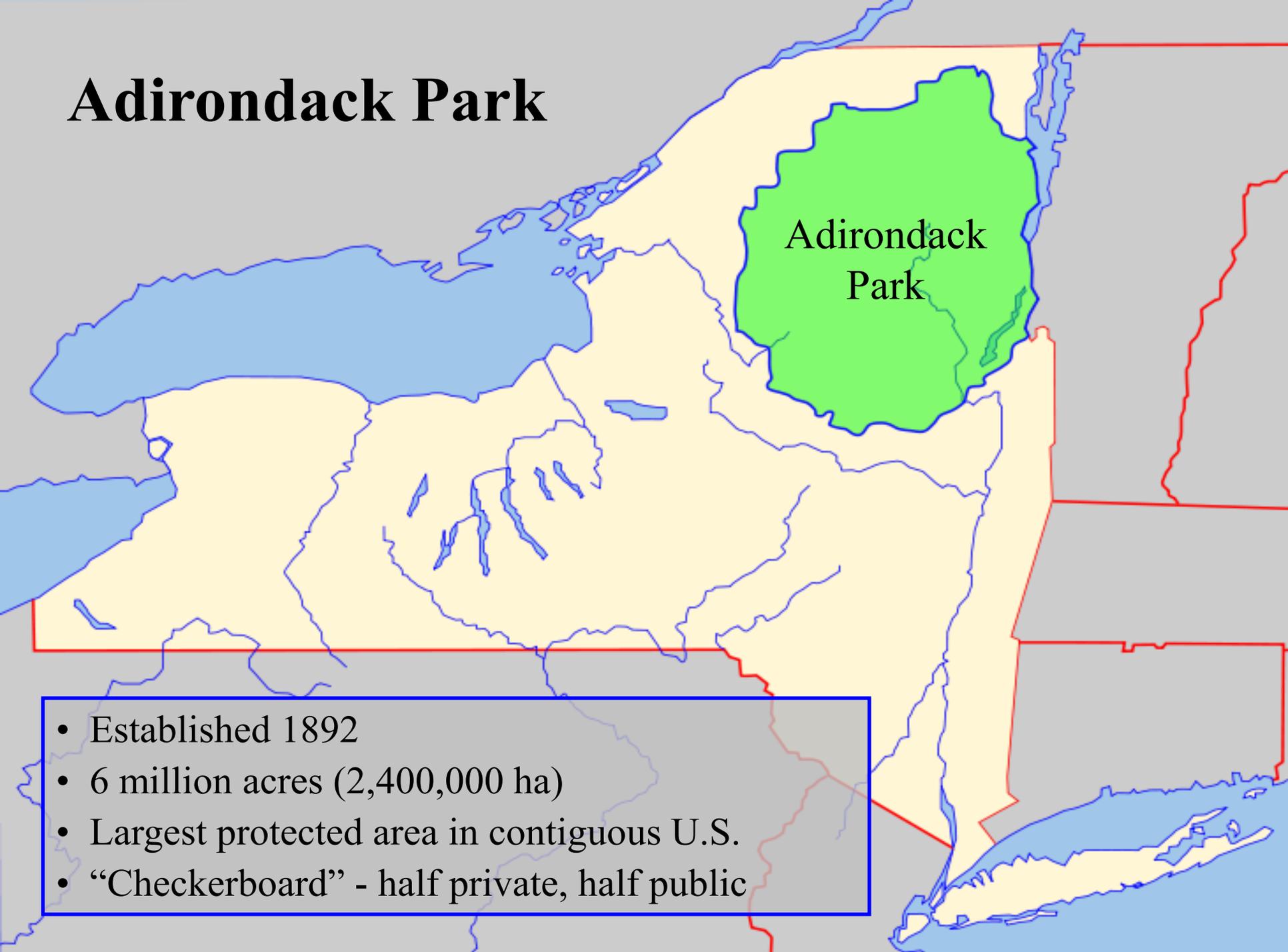
Results

The Finch Pruyn Working Forest is the latest in a series of large, expensive, and controversial land deals that seek to reconcile interests in environmental protection, timber production, recreation and economic development. The case highlights opportunities to combine private and public sector investments and allocate property rights in novel ways. As such, it shows great potential in terms of achieving multifunctionality and fostering common ground among traditionally opposed sets of actors. In seeking to integrate demands for conservation and economic development, this transaction may be seen as part of broader efforts to advance sustainable resource management.

Implications and applications in the Northern Forest region

- Following set of slides offer graphic representation of the land deal and the redistribution of property rights

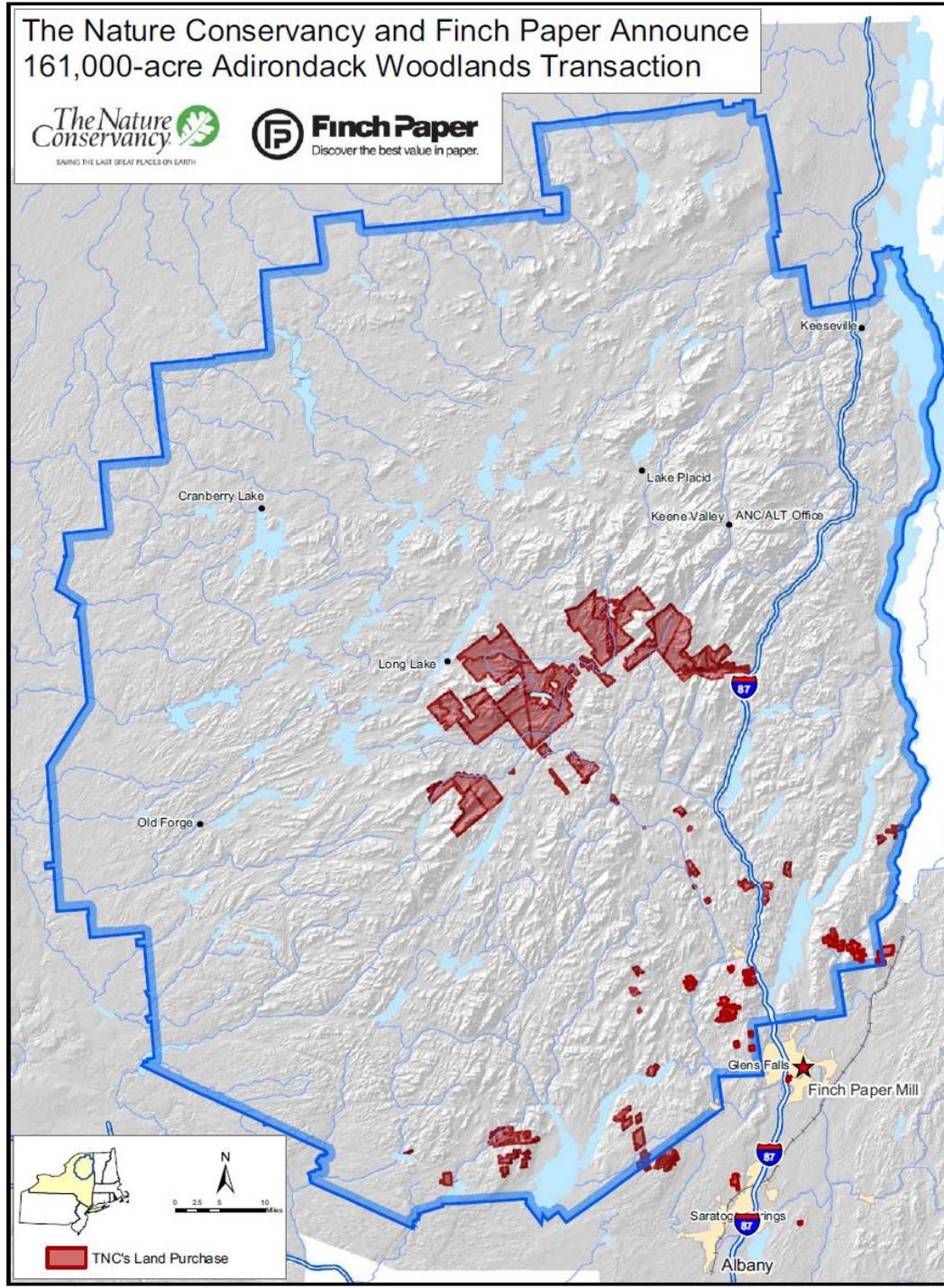
Adirondack Park



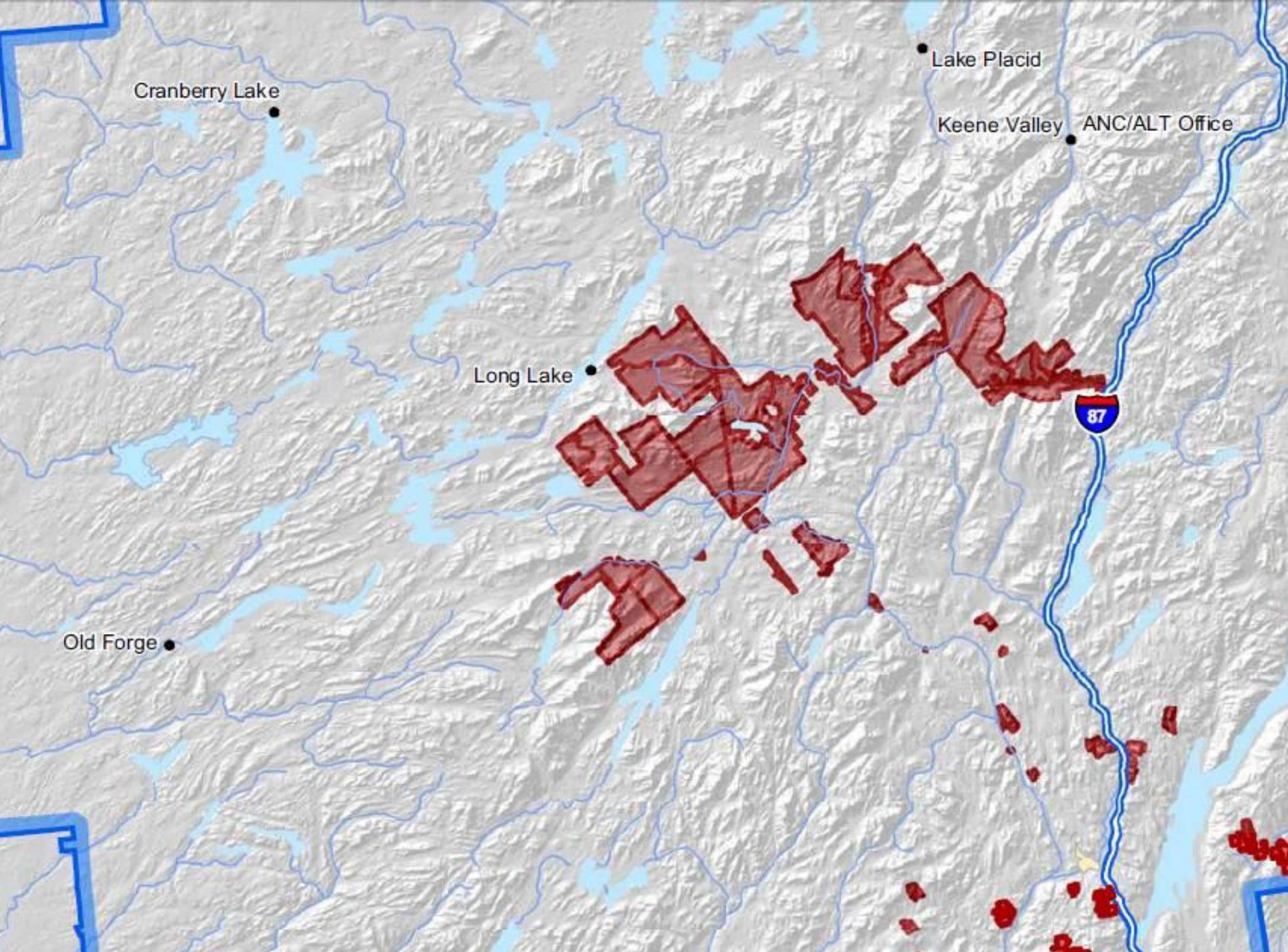
Adirondack
Park

- Established 1892
- 6 million acres (2,400,000 ha)
- Largest protected area in contiguous U.S.
- “Checkerboard” - half private, half public

The Nature Conservancy and Finch Paper Announce 161,000-acre Adirondack Woodlands Transaction



 TNC's Land Purchase



Cranberry Lake

Lake Placid

Keene Valley ANC/ALT Office

Long Lake

Old Forge

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The Finch Lands: A Plan for the Future of the Northern Holdings

The Nature Conservancy 
SAVING THE LAST GREAT PLACES ON EARTH



New York State
Forest Preserve
~60,000 acres

Community
development
~1,000 acres

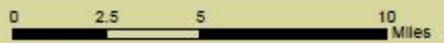
Timber investment group,
conservation easement
~90,000 acres

- Northern Holdings Plan**
- Proposed State Easement
 - Proposed Forest Preserve
 - Proposed Community Enhancement
 - Proposed Private Easement

- Other Lands**
- Pending Forest Preserve (OSI)
 - State Forest Preserve
 - Private Land



Map prepared by:
TNC-Adirondacks GIS
2008
Keene Valley, New York
Copyright 2008, The Nature Conservancy



Future directions

- Continue to research adaptation, innovation and scaling up of models for constructing working forests
- Evaluation of the trajectory of land ownership and management in the Northern Forest as the sell-off of industrially-owned timber land comes to an end and institutional investors churn their portfolios
- Continue to contribute to social scientific capacity building in conservation organizations

Published articles

- Neugarten, R., S. Wolf, R.C. Stedman. 2012. Forest rights and forest fights: Working Forests in New York State. *Society and Natural Resources*, 25 (12): 1205-1220.
- 2011. Neugarten, R., S. Wolf, R. Stedman, and T. Tear. Integrating ecological and socioeconomic monitoring of working forest. *BioScience* 61 (8): 631-637.

Research presentations

- Wolf, S. Construction of working forests in the Adirondacks: What can contemporary experiences tell us about institutional complementarity, hybridity and stickiness? Yale University, Yale Forestry Forum. Feb 9, 2012.
- Neugarten, R., S. Wolf and R. Stedman. “Forest at work: a case study of conservation and sustainable forestry in the Northern Forest.” Presentation for the 73rd Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society. August 12-15, 2010. Atlanta, GA.
- Neugarten, R., S. Wolf and R. Stedman. “Forest at work: A case study of conservation and sustainable forestry.” Presentation for the 17th Annual Conference of the Adirondack Research Consortium, May 19, 2010. Lake Placid, NY. Available online: <http://conserveonline.org/workspaces/cornellworkingforest/documents/neugarten-arc-presentation-5-18-10>
- Neugarten, R. S. Wolf and R. Stedman. “Cutting the trees to save the forest: The Finch Pruyn working forest.” Presentation for the 94th Annual Ecological Society of America Meeting, August 7th, 2009. Albuquerque, New Mexico. Available online: <http://conserveonline.org/workspaces/cornellworkingforest/documents/draft-esa-powerpoint>
- Neugarten, R. S. Wolf and R. Stedman. “Criteria and indicators of sustainability for the Finch Pruyn project.” Presentation for the 16th Annual Conference of the Adirondack Research Consortium, May 21, 2009. Lake Placid, NY. Available online: <http://conserveonline.org/workspaces/cornellworkingforest/documents/rachel-draft-arc-presentation-5-15-09>

Graduate training

- Rachel Nuegarten, MS 2010, Cornell University, Natural Resources. Thesis title: "Forest At Work: Conservation And Sustainable Management Of The Former Finch Pruyn Lands" (link to ecommons: <http://dspace.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/17706>). Currently employed as Manager, Conservation Priority Setting, Conservation International, Washington, DC.