



Acceptance speech: Adirondack Wild Award Ceremony

Jon Leibowitz, Executive Director

October 6, 2023

I am deeply honored and humbled to stand before you all today on behalf of Northeast Wilderness Trust to accept the Wild Stewardship Award. This recognition means a great deal to the Wilderness Trust, and we are grateful for your acknowledgement of our efforts to protect and rewild the Adirondacks and beyond.

First and foremost, I want to extend our heartfelt gratitude to Adirondack Wild for your unwavering commitment to and defense of the wilderness idea; Article 14 of the New York State Constitution; and the Adirondack Park's wild character. Your work is an inspiration to us. I also want to thank Northeast Wilderness Trust's dedicated Board of Directors and, most importantly, the incredible staff who work with me every day to further wilderness protection, including those here today Bob Linck, Conservation Director, Caitlin Mather, Land Protection Manager, Hannah Epstein, Stewardship Director, and Janelle Jones, New York Land Steward.

Northeast Wilderness Trust was founded on the principle that wild places are not just essential for people, but that they hold intrinsic value. That is, wild places and wildlife have inherent value, regardless of any real or perceived benefit to us. This ecocentric worldview is at the very core of Northeast Wilderness Trust, it is our guiding principle and it drives every single decision we make. We proudly protect Nature for Nature's sake, while also celebrating the myriad benefits that wild Nature offers to people. And moreover, we know that the polycrisis we face—climate chaos, extinction, and the decline of human well-being, will only be solved by protecting more wild Nature while simultaneously reimagining our relationship with the world and the entire life community. Rewilding land, hearts, and minds.

It's no wonder then that Northeast Wilderness Trust got its start and inspiration from right here—the Adirondack Park—the greatest example on Earth of rewilding. The Adirondack Park also serves as a premier example and grand experiment of how to find balance between flourishing human communities and expansive wilderness.

Northeast Wilderness Trust's mission, to protect forever-wild landscapes for Nature and people, was plucked right out of the New York Constitution. Our focus on rewilding rather than simply protecting intact Nature is modeled after the history of the Adirondack Park's recovery from industrial landscape to natural jewel and sacred place. And, our very first

conservation project over 20 years ago was right here in the Adirondack Park, in the Split Rock Wildway, in partnership with one of the great rewilding advocates, John Davis.

Since that first conservation easement, Northeast Wilderness Trust has protected over 10,000 acres of forever-wild land in and around the Adirondack Park, including protecting a critical inholding in the Five Ponds Wilderness late last year, now called the Bear Pond Forest, and most recently, 1,700 acres in Moriah now called the Moriah Wilderness Preserve.

Adirondack Park is just one piece, albeit an important one, to an expansive vision that Northeast Wilderness Trust subscribes to of rewilding the Northeast through forever-wild land protection. This vision, much like the original ideas that swirled around campfires and eventually gave rise to the term rewilding, rests largely on the intertwined concepts of cores and corridors, which is why we've recently expanded our conservation efforts beyond the Park to the Algonquin to Adirondacks Corridor—last year acquiring 1,400 acres along the Grasse River, and at the opposite end recently into the Greens to Adirondacks Corridor—where we are actively working on a wilderness preserve in Vermont.

These corridors, or wildways, in turn connect to the rest of Northeast Wilderness Trust's work, where in total, the Wilderness Trust now safeguards 80,000 acres of forever-wild lands and waters. No protected area, not even the Adirondack Park, can stand alone. The Northern Appalachian, Acadian Region is one large living and interconnected system and we are working hard to ensure as much of it as possible is protected as wilderness.

Accepting this award is a reminder of the immense responsibility and opportunity that wilderness advocates have at this precise moment in time. The responsibility comes from the existential challenges of our time that demands even greater dedication to the cause of expanding wilderness conservation while vigilantly defending places already protected from the many interests that try to dismantle them. Northeast Wilderness Trust is proud to champion the cause of wilderness protection and help reimagine what that means and how it is relevant in today's crowded, modern, and hyper-technological world.

The opportunity side comes from the immense growth in interest in wild Nature as it is now well-accepted that old and wild forests offer one of the best natural climate solutions at our disposal. Just this week, in Politco, not exactly a leader in ecological thought, an article titled "New Trees are no Substitute for Old Trees" discussed the immense value of letting forests grow old and resilient. We know that wilderness works, and more people are catching on.

While there will always be detractors who will try to discredit wilderness and dismantle what already exists, chip away at its integrity and wholeness, those of us in this room know its true value; to people, to the wild lands and wild waters themselves, and to our wild cousins who call these places home. Our job to defend wilderness and protect more will never be over. It is indeed a great responsibility and a great opportunity.

In closing, I want to again express our profound gratitude to Adirondack Wild for this remarkable honor. Your recognition only fuels our passion and commitment to wilderness protection and rewilding the Northeast. Thank you again for this award, and for your

enduring dedication to wilderness in the Adirondacks, which enriches our lives and serves as an inspiration to people across the world.

*Jon Leibowitz, Executive Director, Northeast Wilderness Trust
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