

## Student Reflection

### Caroline Colan

*Caroline Colan studies Geography at Middlebury College and will graduate in February of next year. She spent the summer working as a Conservation Associate with The Nature Conservancy in Keene Valley, New York*



I am from Readfield, Maine where I have grown up in an old yellow farm house all my life. I currently attend Middlebury College in Vermont which sits just below the Green Mountains in the Champlain Valley. At Middlebury, I study Geography and Environmental Studies, and am very involved with the Mountain Club as an Advanced Winter Hiking Guide and former president. This summer I have moved across Lake Champlain to the New York side, where I work as a Conservation Associate for the Adirondack Chapter of The Nature Conservancy in Keene Valley.

I have always lived in a small place with a tight community; I feel at home when I know a place well and why it is the way it is today. Maybe that's why I became a geography major. Often when I say I am majoring in geography, people ask what that means and what I do. Some of my professors describe the study most simply as "*the why of where.*"

During my time at Middlebury, I have traveled to the Adirondacks to hike and cross country ski, but never spent more than a weekend in the Park. I could tell from the long drives and my friends tallying their '46ers that the Adirondack Park was a big place, but through living, working, and exploring here this summer, I have begun to really figure out the Adirondack's why of where.

The park's boundary, referred to as the "Blue Line" contains 6 million acres, 2.5 million of which are part of the state forest preserve and are protected as Forever Wild "for the use of all the people forever (T. Morris Longstreth)." This patchwork of private and public land makes up the largest state park in the country.

All this came to be at the 1894 Constitutional Convention when the Forever Wild amendment passed, requiring all future state land acquisitions in the Adirondack region to become part of the forest preserve. The uses of this land are regulated by the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) and designated as wilderness, primitive, canoe, wild forest, or intensive use. Any development on these lands requires approval by two consecutive legislatures for a constitutional amendment.

While not everyone in the park feels the same way about conservation, forestry, tourism, the economy, or climate change, it is clear that because of the way the park was created, even topics like healthcare, schools, attracting families to the area, etc. are all environmental issues here. And increasingly, environmental issues today have become political and often partisan issues.

A couple weeks ago, I attended the Common Ground Alliance, a conference of more than 180 people of the park who work for non-profits, town governments, higher education institutions, businesses, state agencies, and government offices who came together for the purpose of addressing the most pressing issues and working to create solutions through creativity and compromise.

While Forever Wild may sometimes be controversial, it's also what makes this place so special, and as we've discussed at ALPINE, our landscapes – wherever they may be- connect us in powerful ways.

Seeing the work of this group, particularly in the context of today's political climate, has been really inspiring. While all these different organizations have slightly different goals, missions, and visions for the park, they were all willing to come to the table.



It is also a really interesting and inspiring time to be working at The Nature Conservancy as they work to adapt their traditional mission of land acquisition to include more of a human focus, doing more projects that are focused on benefiting both nature *and* people. For example, The Conservancy is retrofitting culverts to increase stream connectivity for fish migrating upstream in the warmer months which also reducing flooding, and sponsoring micro-enterprise grants for businesses in the central region of the Adirondack Park in order to strengthen communities with large amounts of protected lands.

Between my studies at Middlebury College, my work at The Nature Conservancy, and my participation in the ALPINE Summer Institute, I have seen again and again how important it is to take a multi-disciplinary approach to conservation that focuses on creative and collaborative solutions based upon a place's unique history, culture, socioeconomics, and particular environmental landscape. We need to understand *the why of where* before we can fix it.

While this method of conservation problem solving is more complex than straight land acquisition of the past, the challenge excites me! Participating in ALPINE with a diverse group of students and young professionals all at different points in their career development has helped to focus my energy and ideas about my own next steps in this field. It has been inspiring to see what my peers are doing, the passion for their work, and their drive to make change. It has also resulted in colleagues and friends in the field who I'm sure will work together again in the future.



As I head into my last semester at Middlebury College, I hope to do senior work on the relationship between conservation and socio-economics in Adirondack Park, and post-college, pursue environmental law and policy, and the intersection between conservation and working lands. I'm sure the contacts I have made through my internship at The Nature Conservancy and through the ALPINE Network will aid me in this research and in my future work.