



A Blue Lining

Activist and *The End of Nature* author Bill McKibben on the Adirondacks' next 50 years

Bill McKibben at Chapel Pond in the town of Keene, 1989.

It is, of course, difficult to predict the future. But since I have a half-decent track record, let me offer an Adirondack forecast for the next 50 years, secure in the knowledge I won't be around to see how I'm wrong.

Thirty years ago this autumn, from my house in Johnsbury, I wrote the first book for a general audience—*The End of Nature*—about what we then called the greenhouse effect. At the time it was mostly a series of warnings: if we didn't do as the scientists advised and cut back on our use of coal and gas and oil, the temperature would begin to steadily and sharply rise, and with that all manner of trouble would ensue. We didn't do as the scientists advised—indeed, as a planet, we spewed ever more CO₂ into the atmosphere. And now that series of warnings has turned into a series of bulletins, updates from an endless series of fronts in what

increasingly resembles a global war: fire turns a city called Paradise into hell inside of half an hour; Greenland melts at a record rate; the Great Barrier Reef loses half its coral to hot water in just a few years.

This will only increase. So far we've raised the planet's temperature about two degrees Fahrenheit, but we're on a course—even if every nation kept all the promises they made in the Paris climate accords—to raise it six or seven degrees. The increase in damage won't be linear—it will be exponential. The United Nations predicts somewhere between 200 million and a billion climate refugees in the course of the century.

So what does that mean for this remarkable corner of the planet?

The first thing to say is: we won't escape damage in the Adirondacks. We can already see substantial change, even in the early phases of global warming. Winters on average are getting shorter—besides thermometers, one way you can

tell is the spread of disease-bearing ticks across our area. I'd argue that in certain ways the psychological experience of wandering the woods and clearings of the Blue Line has already changed in powerful ways. I know people who stay indoors because they're terrified of Lyme. And when it rains now, it tends to seriously pour—the kind of storms that drop more than two inches of rain in a day has gone up 75 percent in the Northeast, because warm air holds more water vapor than cold. It's going to be soggy and winter is going to resemble mud season, and the birch and beech and maple that give us our autumn glory may well give way to drab oak and hickory. Ugh, in a word.

But the second thing to say is: everything is relative. Compared with much of the rest of the world, the Adirondacks is poised to do—well, less bad. Partly that's location: being farther north, all things considered, is better on a warming planet. As the Arctic Ocean continues to melt, we may even see the occasional winter (like last year), because it seems to be causing the jet stream to get stuck, and if one happens to be on the right side, cold air can come plunging south. And partly it's because of the genius of the men and women who protected so much of the Adirondacks over the last century. Bigness is the best defense on a fast-warming world: most of the planet, facing flood, would do anything for giant, intact wildernesses to soak up the torrents. And most of the world, facing sporadic drought and fire, would give its eye teeth for a woods so deep and intact that it offers at least some natural resistance to wild blaze.

Which means that I think the Adirondacks will become relatively more attractive. It has (relatively) secure access to water and (relatively) robust defense against some of the worst effects of heating. On a fast-heating world, those are remarkable assets. Or look at it another way: for the last century people from the Northeast, the Adirondacks included, have been relocating to Florida. Anyone want to make a bet how long that trend is going to hold? (If so, I have some prime Miami Beach

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The Adirondacks has other counterintuitive assets, of course. In an over-wired world where people report a remarkable loss of community, intact small towns may start to look a little more attractive, for instance. But that implies that we keep those communities strong. That hasn't been easy in the face of climbing second-home prices—you can see it in the pressure on the schools. So planning for a future of increased attractiveness means planning, above all, for ways to bring in year-round residents, with all that implies for building the necessary housing in our hamlets. My wife, the writer Sue Halpern, and I recently did a series of stories about immigrant and refugee enclaves around the country. It left us thinking that these were precisely the sort of hard-working, education-loving residents any community should hope to have resettle among them. I wouldn't fear an influx of people from other parts of the world ravaged by climate change; they seem to me likely to bring youth, vigor and enterprise, all of which we would need.

And I'd predict an influx of another kind, too: people looking to see how the Adirondacks managed to be as hardy as it is in the face of climate chaos. Resilience is going to be the watchword of the future, as growth was the watchword of the past. And we have real lessons to teach: perhaps ironically, this place where humans took a large step back, limiting their use of the world around them, turns out to be better protected than the spots where we squeezed every last penny out of the world around us.

The Adirondacks, for the last 50 years, has been a nostalgic place, reminding us of how much of the world once looked. In the next 50 years I think it's going to serve mostly as a model for a working future on a broken Earth. ▲

Bill McKibben is the best-selling author of numerous books, including *The End of Nature*, *Wandering Home*, *Eaarth*, *Oil and Honey* and his most recent, *Falter*. He's co-founder of 350.org, a global grassroots climate movement. He has contributed to *Adirondack Life* since 1988.




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