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Another Voice: Meeting environmental goals demands some tough choices

Another Voice
Oct 23, 2020

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By Larry Beahan

Most environmentalists agree that New York State's Accelerated Renewable Energy Growth and Community Benefit Act (AREGCBA) puts a very effective instrument for the siting of solar farms and wind turbines into the hands of the state government.

This scalpel has a second edge that clashes with traditional environmental values. Do we want wind turbines on beaches, in parks or forests?

Maybe, sometimes.

With this delicate new tool in the background, I have gotten into some serious squabbles with friends over habitat vs. renewable energy.

Our civilization expends prodigious quantities of energy; air travel, instant worldwide communication, long comfortable lives demand it. The burning of petroleum, methane and coal has supplied that energy. In the process it has cloaked our planet in a blanket of CO₂. Feverish earth writhes in undreamed of disastrous climate events.

Wildfires incinerate the West Coast, hurricanes flood the Gulf Coast, Lake Ontario shores are inundated and the

ancient Buffalo Harbor breakwall crumbles under Lake Erie seiches, all spurred on by the earth's overheated climate.

Our world's demand for energy is taking a terrible toll on our waters, forests and green landscapes: the ecological system that supports life.

But must we clutter up our lakes, our fisheries, the ocean with turbines, our cornfields, vistas and pretty villages with solar panels? A cacophony of protests forced New York State to enact AREGCBA, or give up on climate change.

Now environmental organizations – Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper, Audubon, Adirondack Mountain Club, Sierra Club, WNY Peace Center, League of Women Voters – who have preached clean energy with puritanical intensity – may also disagree with some siting. Long before climate

change seemed important these organizations stood for the protection of parks, wild places, wetlands, rivers, fishes, birds and all living creatures.

Case in point: Unity Island Park in the Niagara River is at the center of an Audubon “important bird area” and a Ramsar “globally significant wetland.”

In 2001, the northern half of Unity Island was designated a park. Half of the park was developed with roads, paths and signage. The other half, a capped landfill, is a grassy meadow with sizable hills used for sledding and the enjoyment of a sweeping view of the Niagara River from the Peace Bridge to the International Railroad Bridge. It is beloved by the hard-pressed, largely Burmese Black Rock community. It is a link in the string of riverine greenspaces we call the Niagara River Greenway.

The City of Buffalo proposes a solar farm on that 28 acres of undeveloped park. The farm could supply the Sewer Authority plant, just south of the park, with all the electrical energy it needs and produce zero CO₂.

Should this land remain park land or become a solar farm? It is a tough call. AREGCBA may tilt the scale.

Larry Beahan is secretary of the Adirondack Mountain Club, Niagara Frontier Chapter.

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