

The Secrets of Pisgah State Park: A Pisgah Forum with Tom Wessels

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On Tuesday, November 13, over one hundred people crowded into the auditorium at the Keene Public Library. The crowd was buzzing as locals and visitors from surrounding regions in New Hampshire and Vermont came to hear about the ecology and history of Pisgah State Park. This was the first in a series of forums to learn more about Pisgah and get public input about the future management of the park. The featured speaker was Antioch University Professor and local ecologist Tom Wessels. Wessels has been spending time in the 13,500 acre-Pisgah State Park since the early eighties when he started working on a curriculum guide about Pisgah called Yankee Lands. Working on the curriculum project piqued his interest and launched his first wanderings into Pisgah.



Although Wessels does not have a particular spot that is his favorite, any time he goes into the forest bushwhacking, he finds amazing new sites. Pisgah is graced with an incredible amount of wetlands and lakes and a diversity of tree communities. Wessels finds the Pisgah Ridgeline one of the most interesting spots in the park. The bulk of the old growth forest is centered in this core region. You can recognize older trees because of their thick, plated bark. In particular, hemlocks grow there with a rare chartreuse green lichen that fairly glows on the deep brown purple wizened bark. Some of the trees may be over 270 years old in this area--one red maple at North Round Pond is 224 years old! There are also some interesting cultural sites in this area, such as a cellar hole on a ridgetop that is two miles from the closest cellar hole. It's an interesting find so far from civilization, and Wessels suggests that this family might not have wanted to assimilate with the surrounding culture.

To Wessels, this area feels the most “wild and remote.” The exquisitely exposed granite summit bears pitch pine, red pine, huckleberry, and blueberry. Wessels presented slides from a recent autumn hike along this loop, showcasing the brilliant burgundy of huckleberry swimming amidst a sea of multicolored hardwood trees and the dark green canopy of hemlocks and pines.

A well-seasoned hiker, Wessels divulged that even compared to the most remote mountains in the Whites, the Adirondacks, or the Greens, in the park: “If you get up into the summit of Pisgah and you look to the east, it is the most wilderness summit view I have seen anywhere in New England....if you look to Monadnock, there is just one farmstead you can see way off on a distant ridgeline and that is all you can see....just

one.” There are no roads, no houses, no sign of buildings, no power lines....it is “quite phenomenal.”

Pisgah has a rich history of land use, but the most striking feature of the park is that, unlike most of the region in the 1850s, a large chunk of the western side of the park was never deforested for agricultural purposes. On the western side, there is a large holding of thousands of acres that was owned by the Dickenson family who logged in Pisgah as a family business. According to Wessels, they really did it quite sustainably because they were doing single tree selection—cutting individual trees here and there—and doing group cuts, and there is no evidence to indicate past clear cutting. The Dickenson family was able to log in there for a long time—from the middle of the 1800’s to the 1900’s--and maintain a good business and healthy forest and also preserve a lot of old growth tracts. Wessels doesn’t know if this was intentional on their part or those areas were just less accessible.

In any case, the fact that Pisgah has thousands of acres that were never cut for agriculture makes it the largest contiguous block of lower elevation forest in the region that was never cleared. Many of our forests that were opened for agriculture have come back in a very homogeneous way in terms of species composition and structure, but the western side of Pisgah has a very different feel because it doesn’t have that homogenization and there is a lot more diversity. In fact, though it has been altered by logging, it is probably our best example of what the forest may have been like and one of the few places that has never been clear-cut.

Of all of the adventures Wessels has experienced in the park, one particular occasion sticks out for him. Last Spring, Wessels was leading his Principles of Sustainability class over snow-covered ground to the old growth section of the forest. As they were hiking into the forest, there was a little burst of grapple—snowflakes that fall through a super-cooled cloud and get covered in rime ice and look like little Styrofoam balls. The burst of grapple lasted nearly five minutes and about a half minute later, the group encountered some bear tracks. There was grapple lying on top of the snow all around the tracks, but none in the tracks--because the bear’s paws had melted it--and Tom realized that the bear must have passed by just before he and the students arrived! This was just one encounter with signs of the diverse wildlife that roams Pisgah State Park.

Over time, many students have been attracted to study Pisgah State Park. It is one of the largest and least developed state forests in New England. Also, compared to other State parks, Pisgah does not get much use. When Wessels hikes in there, sometimes he will wander for the whole day by himself and will not see anyone else. His guess is that the park is mostly used by people in the surrounding towns, and also from Keene and Brattleboro. It holds very special significance, especially for the people that live right around it, because it is a core area that has large chunks in Chesterfield and Winchester and Hinsdale and Swanzey and, in a manner of speaking, it becomes a linkage for these towns. As early as 1903 and 1905, local citizens recognized the beauty of this less-impacted forest. Newspaper articles called this forest wild and remote and special in its primal nature.

Gazing ahead, it is really hard to predict what Pisgah will look like in the years to come because our forests are affected by a variety of elements—natural disturbances such

as hurricanes, snow and ice loading, and fires; and human disturbances such as the spread of invasive plants and insects, logging, and development. One example of an invasive insect that can cause major changes is the Hemlock wooly adelgid aphid. Hemlock is a major tree species so if the adelgid aphid were to get in there, it could transform the forest in ways that are unpredictable. Although there could be threats with changes in the climate, Pisgah would probably not be hit as hard as other forests because a lot of the species in there are species that extend much further southward...there are not a lot of sugar maple or other trees that require more specific growing conditions. Wessels closed his presentation by mentioning the management plan that is currently being drafted through a unique partnership between the Pisgah Technical Committee (which includes researchers, scientists, archeologists, and local teachers) and the state to help Pisgah State Park remain a healthy, vibrant ecological system.

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