BioOne COMPLETE

Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills

Author: Rudaz, Gilles

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 28(3) : 334

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm039

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

Books

Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills

By David Stradling. Seattle, USA: University of Washington Press, 2007.
xxvii + 311 pp. US$ 35.00.
ISBN 978-0-295-98747-7.

As he explains in the preface, David Stradling started his work on the assumption that little scholarly attention was given to the mountain range of the Catskills in the State of New York, USA, and felt it would be appropriate to "write a corrective history, one that gave the Catskills their due, placing them within the grand narrative of our nation's tourism and conservation history" (p xvi). The author, an environmental historian, has brilliantly achieved this task. The book has 2 main orientations: "the cultural causes of environmental change and the evolving ideas about rural landscapes" (pp xxi–xxii). As the title indicates, it focuses more specifically on the relationship between the mountain range of the Catskills and the city of New York.

The book has 7 chapters, representing 7 major developments that have marked the relationship between the City and the mountains. Starting with the early settlements in the Catskills right after the American Revolution, Chapter 1 is about their transformation into a productive landscape. It focuses on agriculture and early extractive industries (tan bark, barrel hoops, and bluestone for sidewalks). Chapter 2 highlights the role of literature and painting in the making of the Catskills as a cultural landscape and their highly influential place in American culture. Indeed, it was in these mountains that the romantic conception of nature in the USA bloomed, as best expressed by the Hudson River Painting School. In Chapter 3, Stradling presents the development of tourism and the building of grand hotels and railways. In Chapter 4, he focuses on the protection of the mountain range, conceived as a place of wilderness, which led to the creation of the Catskills Park in 1904. The issue of watersheds is at the core of Chapter 5, which includes an account of the building of reservoirs in the early 20th century by 'thirsty' New York City. Chapter 6, "Moving Mountains," focuses on Jewish tourists and the ensuing 'extension' of the Catskills mountain range towards the South and closer to New York City. Chapter 7 is about the suburbanization of the mountain range. Central to this process is the development of roads, and especially of the New York Thruway, which was built in the 1950s, bringing the City closer to the mountains. The possibility that the Catskills may lose their distinctiveness and become a suburb of New York City appears as a central concern. These new developments gave rise to a need for regional planning in the 1970s. Although planning was carried through the 1980s, the goal was not attained (p 238). Confirming the role played by New York City in the entire process of the making of the Catskills, the City had a great impact also in the planning process.

This scholarly book is very well written, entertaining, and accessible to any readership, even for people not from the area. Knowing nothing about the Catskills and being familiar with the European Alps, I found many striking similarities between the 2 mountain ranges. However, scientists have played key roles in the making of the Alps, which seems not to be the case for the Catskills. This book is highly informed. It goes into detail using many localized examples, but not without placing them into wider contexts. The book includes attractive illustrations and 3 maps. As a reader unfamiliar with the region, I would have appreciated 2 more maps: a regional one showing the distance of the Catskills from New York City and from the other New York mountain range, the Adirondacks, to which Stradling often refers; and a topographic map of the Catskills showing the various issues he addresses: railways, roads, watersheds, the Catskills Park… However, this gap is easily filled by consulting an atlas.

A great contribution of this book is that, in addressing the relationship between 2 socio-spatial entities, Stradling challenges the orthodox dichotomy of 'us, the locals' versus 'them, the exogenous stakeholders.' He goes beyond this reductive perspective to describe the interactions at play and show how some actors blur the lines between the 2 categories. Stradling's main argument is that the Catskills are the product of a relationship: "Thus, making the Catskills landscape and the region's distinctive culture became a collaborative effort: a process that mixed the capital, labor, interests, and ideas from both the city and the country" (p xvii). In a similar perspective, the author avoids using the social categories 'locals' and 'tourists' in a homogenizing way.

This book, focusing on a specific mountain range and its relationship with a specific city, offers much wider reflections about conservation in American culture, ideas of countryside and wilderness, the development of tourism, the cultural construction of places and interactions between the city and the country.

Gilles Rudaz
Environmental Policy and Planning Group, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA.
rudaz@mit.edu

doi:10.1659/mrd.mm039

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use