Some 15 years ago, three recreational paddlers dreamed of linking a series of lakes and rivers from New York to Maine, creating an Appalachian Trail of waterways. That dream is now a reality.

BY PAUL SCHNEIDER

The northern boreal forest once stretched unbroken from Maine to Minnesota, a vast, mossy sea of trees, punctuated only by archipelagoes of rocky mountain-tops and thin ribbons of water. To early European visitors who came in ships to its fringes, the great northern woods were even more impenetrable and mysterious than the real ocean of water they had just crossed to get to it.

But impenetrable and unbroken did not mean it was trackless, or even a pure wilderness. The Algonquins, Iroquois and others who lived there traversed the region in canoes and on foot, and the paths they used to carry their boats between major water systems — from the Hudson River to Lake Champlain, say, or over the so-called Indian Carry from the Raquette River to the Saranac Lakes — were worn more than a foot deep in places by centuries of traffic. It was all a part of the Great Longhouse, as the Iroquois of upstate New York called it. It was home.

Toward the end of the 20th century, after a half millennium of change left not much of either the forest or its network of watery trails intact, three recreational paddlers — Mike Krepner, Ron Canter and Randy Mardres — came up with a seemingly audacious idea. Calling their project Native Trails, they set out to recreate what they could of those ancient routes, charting for modern travelers a new contiguous water trail from the top of Maine to the bottom of New York’s Adirondack Park.

This past June, after a decade and a half of exploration, infusions of cash and new partnerships, the officially designated 740-mile Northern Forest Canoe Trail was finally dedicated. With festive ribbon-cuttings in four Northeast states, the event was a bit like a blockbuster art opening that redefines a genre. The major segments were familiar to paddlers: some, like the Adirondacks and the Allagash, are legendary. But when entwined with lesser known pieces, like Lubber Lake and Pensioner Pond in Vermont or the two short dips into Quebec, a new singularity emerges that seems both obvious and brilliant. The canoe trail, which some have compared to the Appalachian Trail, is more closely akin to the Boundary Waters of Minnesota, the Everglades Wilderness Waterway in Florida or the Maine Island Trail for kayakers. As such, it may be the most important thing to happen to the northern eco-tourism trade since the invention of gorp.

Not long after the official opening, I paddled out onto Middle Saranac Lake on a breezy summer afternoon, having been driven to the put-in by the folks from St. Regis Canoe Outfitters in the town of Saranac Lake, where I had traded my rental car for...

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a rental kayak. There were plenty of reasons to choose the heart of the Adirondack Park for a launch.

As a purely practical matter, this is the portion of the trail best equipped with guides and outfitters capable of supplying travelers with as much or as little as they may need in the way of boats, equipment, food or even instruction, making it relatively simple to put together a comfortable voyage.

As a purely personal matter, it was a chance for me to revisit the scene of voyages I had undertaken during the writing of my first book, a history of the Adirondacks, and fill in a few blanks in my own map of the park as well. The Adirondacks are where Americans in the 19th century invented the idea and language of wilderness recreation as both a business model and a restorative activity. The park is New York’s greatest environmental (not to mention bipartisan) achievement, a place bigger than the entire state of Massachusetts where “forever wild” forests range over high and low peaks and right down to the water’s edge in the form of

great gnarled giants clinging by serpentine roots to boulders left by long gone glaciers.

It is the birthplace of eco-tourism, a treasure that The New York Times in an 1864 editorial called “a tract of country fitted to make a Central Park for the world.”

“As you, how went the hours?” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in his poem about “the philosophers’ camp,” a trip he took to the Adirondacks in 1854 with the scientist Louis Agassiz and eight other luminaries. “Up with the dawn, they fancied the light air that circled freshly in their forest dress made them to boys again.”

With no intention of making it all the way to Maine, I whiled away happy hours poking up into deserted coves, pushing up streams to the foot of beaver dams, lunching on sunny rocks, trolling for fish and pulling up sweet memories of other trips and other times. Upper, Middle and Lower Saranac Lakes are not the wildest stretch of the Adirondacks, but they’re surely among the most beautiful. There are constant views to the high peaks and, in stretches where the protected Adirondack Forest Preserve gives way to private land, I paddled silently past the huge and fanciful twiggy great camps of bygone financiers and industrialists.

In the late afternoons I pitched my tent on thimble-size islands that I had all to myself and was not at all offended to find that the state had provided a little firewood and, down a short path, a tidy outhouse. The idea of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, after all, is not to go encouraging inns, restaurants, Chambers of Commerce and the like to cater to through-paddlers. This approach, alternating tenting with town life, makes for an extremely civilized way to get away from civilization.

The course of civilization is often winding, however, and for the first decade of its existence, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail hovered somewhere in the dark woods that stretch between “a great idea” and “a great achievement.” During those years, Mr. Kreppner, Mr. Canter and Mr. Mardres navigated obscure waters, studied old maps and assembled blueprints for the route, but ultimately none of them had the time or money to undertake the organizational effort required to turn the fruits of their hobby into a marked and maintained route of interconnected rivers, lakes and portage trails.

In the late 1990’s their work was taken up by Rob Canter and Kay Henry, who owned the Mad River Canoe Company at the time. “Did we have any idea that making the trail a reality was going to completely consume us for five years of our lives? Well, no,” Ms. Henry said recently. “But it was a great project, and it’s becoming a great resource for paddlers and as importantly for local communities along the way who want to get more involved in taking care of their rivers and lakes.”

From their position in the heart of the paddling industry, Ms. Henry and Mr. Canter were able to line up a Who’s Who of outdoorsy corporate sponsors to help sup-
port the work, including Timberland, L. L. Bean, REI, Thule, Old Town and Eagle Creek. Local guides and other experts lent a hand in creating 13 detailed waterproof maps that can be bought individually or in state-by-state sets at the Web site (www.northernforestcanoetrail.org). Teams of volunteers from towns along the route were dispatched to make sure that trees hadn’t fallen across the trail and to plant signs and markers from Old Forge, N.Y., to Fort Kent, Me.

The town of Saranac Lake is making progress in its long effort to recapture some of the tourist trade from nearby Lake Placid. There’s music in the streets at night and a decidedly local feel to the shops compared with those at its Olympic neighbor. “The best thing about doing a trip like this here in the Adirondacks is that you get a little bit of almost everything the canoe trail has to offer in terms of paddling conditions and traveler accommodations,” Dave Cilley said over lunch. Mr. Cilley owns St. Regis Canoe Outfitters and had a hand in developing the Adirondack section maps for the trail. “You get the lakes, the river, the white water and the town.”

Oh yes, as if I had forgotten, the white water. “You should have no trouble with the first two rapids, but definitely get out and scout the Permanent Rapids,” said Mr. Cilley. “They should be running pretty well with the rain we’ve had.”

Thinking about the Permanent Rapids and how many years had gone by since the last time I navigated a similarly angry stretch of water, I almost stayed in Saranac Lake a second day. It occurred to me that if I skipped the Saranac River below, I’d have time to climb tall mountains and visit the Robert Louis Stevenson cottage, where he wrote a remarkably dark little novel, “The Master of Ballantrae,” while recovering from tuberculosis at the famous Trudeau Sanitarium. But pride got the better of me, and by midmorning the next day I was back in my little boat heading out of town toward the Permanent Rapids. Toward the rapids, that is, and, I hoped, beyond.

The river heading out of Saranac Lake was lazy at first, winding in oxbow curves through relatively flat land that alternated from agricultural to woodland. The lonely peak of Whiteface Mountain acted as a sort of pivot around which I and the river were slowly circumnavigating, and I ate lunch onboard while sliding easily off the continent. Some of the camps along this stretch look more Appalachian than Adirondack, though never quite to the point where you might wish you had Burt Reynolds paddling in the stern with a loaded crossbow.

But when the river turned decisively back into the deep woods, the mountain and camps disappeared. As Mr. Cilley had predicted, one small Class II riffle was easily navigated without even scouting, then another.

The third, though, was the beginning of the Permanent Rapids, and when I saw the island that marked its entrance, I got out soon enough to scramble up onto a mossy outcrop and look the thing over and mumble unkind things about my friends who had bailed out on coming along to the Adirondacks at the last minute.

Down below, the Saranac River that had been winding peacefully for miles through pastures and woodlands now squeezed itself between steep walls on its way out of the High Peaks of the Adirondacks. It was positively hurting toward Lake Champlain over a series of ledges and boulders, piling itself up into standing waves two, or even three feet high. But on the whole, it looked much more doable to me than the alternative, which was to haul both boat and gear around the outside. I strapped on my life vest.

Pulling, tugging and generally yee-hawing, I made it into the channel past the island. The standing waves soaked, but didn’t swamp me. The rock I hit — O.K. there were two rocks that I hit — alarmed but didn’t upset the boat. They just slid under the forgiving plastic hull, giving me another reason besides flashlights, bug stuff and periodic inns and pizza to be glad that I wasn’t, in fact, an Iroquois trapper in a birch-bark boat. As quickly as it all started, I was beyond the Permanent Rapids, soaked and wishing I had the energy to drag the boat back up to the start so I could have the ride again. Then it was back to camping on a private island — this
IN THE WAKE OF THE IROQUOIS

THE BASICS

Along its 740 miles the Northern Forest Canoe Trail incorporates many of the crown jewels of Northeast paddling — the Adirondacks, the Allagash, the Rangeley Lakes, the West Branch of the Penobscot, the Adroscoggin and Ammonoosuc — and most short and midlength adventurers will probably gravitate toward one of these. The place to begin any voyage on the trail, however, is www.northforestcanoetrail.org, where you can find an overview of the entire trail and plenty of suggestions for trips of varying lengths. You’ll also want to call the organization’s office in Vermont (802-496-2285) for help finding local outfitters and accommodations, or more up-to-date information on conditions along the trail.

If you choose to paddle in the Adirondacks, which at a drive of six to seven hours is the closest section of the trail to New York City (multi-leg flights to the Saranac Lake airport will take almost as long), start with Dave Cilley at St. Regis Canoe Outfitters (518-891-1838, www.canoeoutfitters.com) in Saranac Lake. He can outfit you for as long or short a voyage as you’re up for, with or without as much assistance in the way of cooking, car ferrying or guiding as you might need. You will need to reserve campsites on the Saranac Lake Islands through Reserve America (800-456-2267, www.reserveamerica.com).

LODGING

When you go into the town of Saranac Lake for a shower and a layover, the Doctor’s Inn (888-518-3464, www.doctorinn.net; $85 to $100) is the good kind of bed-and-breakfast where the owners live in a house next door rather than downstairs. It’s about a mile from downtown, however, so if you want to be in the heart of Saranac Lake, consider the grand old Hotel Saranac (518-891-2200, www.hotelsaranac.com; $85 to $205), which is run by Paul Smith’s College. Finally, if you want to fish, you’ll need licenses from the various states.