



## Should DEC repair the Duck Hole dam?



**Yes** By Tom Wemett

By Bill Ingersoll **No**

**D**UCK HOLE is a magical place. Whether hiking on the Northville-Placid Trail or paddling and portaging from Henderson Lake (via the Preston Ponds), those who arrive at Duck Hole are in awe of the stunning vistas and quiet solitude. It is one of the most remote and most scenic water bodies in the High Peaks.

The pond—and thus the dam that impounds it—should be preserved for its historic, scenic, and recreational values as well as its fishery and wildlife habitat. Incidentally, the dam also keeps silt from contaminating the Cold River, which starts at Duck Hole, and thus protects the wild river's native fishery.

The Santa Clara Lumber Company constructed the Duck Hole dam in 1912. The Civilian Conservation Corps rebuilt the dam in 1937. The state Department of Environmental Conservation's assessments in 2007 and 2008 found the dam to be deteriorating but still functioning. DEC has not decided on a course of action, saying in one of the reports that "there are no plans to breach or repair the dam."

Some contend that the dam should be allowed to deteriorate, as it is a man-made structure in a designated Wilderness Area. However, the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan allows dams to remain in Wilderness Areas. The document requires that "in the reconstruction or rehabilitation of such [existing] dams, natural materials will be used wherever possible and no new dams will be constructed."

The High Peaks Unit Management Plan supports "maintaining Duck Hole Dam in safe condition" and states that "Duck Hole will be managed as an Adirondack brook trout pond to preserve its native fish community." The citizens advisory committee that worked on the UMP said in its report: "Duck Hole—maintain impoundment for scenic and recreational values."

At sixty-one acres, Duck Hole is one of the larger ponded waters in the High Peaks Wilderness. It is one of only three ponds in the Wilderness Area that contain brook trout and only one other species, making it very popular with anglers. Duck Hole is also home to nesting loons.

A DEC decision to rehabilitate a dam must take into consideration such factors as "the need to maintain fishery and wildlife habitats and resources; the need to maintain upstream wetlands; and the need to protect vistas and other aesthetic values." To anyone who visits Duck Hole by foot or by paddle, it is absolutely clear that this jewel of a pond meets all the above criteria.

DEC estimates that fixing the dam will cost \$500,000 to \$1.5 million. Some argue that the expense is another reason the dam shouldn't be repaired, especially given the state's budget problems. However, a non-government organization or sponsor group could bring together the resources needed to make repairs to the Duck Hole dam at a much lower cost to the state.

DEC is open to just such a process. A sponsor group would need to hire an engineer to review DEC's assessment of the dam, inspect the dam, update the assessment, and put together a work plan to stabilize the dam for the next ten to twenty years. The plan will need to address the use of native, natural materials; transportation to the site of material and tools (accomplished perhaps via horse and wagon on the Ward Brook Trail); and a volunteer work force with proper experience (several such groups exist currently in the Adirondacks).

With community support and a volunteer effort, the Duck Hole dam and the pond can be saved with very little or no cost to the state.

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**I**'VE BEEN TO DUCK HOLE many times, and I agree that it is a beautiful place—one of the most distinctive landmarks in the High Peaks. I have seen the dam up close and heard lots of arguments for keeping it. However, what I have yet to see is a detailed assessment of the structure or a work plan for its repair. I am skeptical that a major reconstruction could realistically be accomplished, beyond a simple "patch" for a short-term repair.

Clearly the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan allows the retention and reconstruction of existing dams, but the plan does not *require* their retention either—it simply leaves open that option. It *inarguably* envisions any such reconstruction effort to be largely muscle-powered, though. There are well-defined limits on what kind of motorized equipment could be used, and while some materials could be flown in, land-based motorized access is out of the question.

This is a structure of massive logs anchored at both ends by rock cribs, miles from the nearest road. So how do the dam's supporters plan to reconstruct such a large structure in such a remote setting by hand? And pardon my engineering naiveté, but wouldn't just about *any* major reconstruction effort require the temporary draining of Duck Hole so that the structure could be accessed? Is this about preserving the pond and its natural beauty, or are we really talking about preserving the integrity of the object?

And why do nearly all these dam discussions focus on Duck Hole, anyway? Further south along the Northville-Placid Trail, at a pretty little spot called Cedar Lakes, a wood-and-concrete dam is failing right now, as you read these words. The abutment at the dam's north end is in a state of partial collapse, and the entire structure is being undercut by flowing water. Go there in late summer, and the lakes will be down by several feet from its springtime level.

However, old topographic maps show that both Duck Hole and the Cedar Lakes were natural ponds before they were enlarged in the twentieth century. But—and this is a critical point—there *was* a Duck Hole before, there *was* a chain of Cedar Lakes before, and there would continue to be even if both dams were breached. So what, exactly, are we afraid of losing?

There is nothing static about wild environments. Old-growth forests are blown down, mountainsides slip away after torrential downpours, and entire ponds repeatedly come and go at the whim of the beavers.

These events are neither good nor bad; they are

just the latest paragraphs in the ongoing story of natural forces acting upon physical objects. And in Wilderness Areas we have consented to allow this story to proceed without our direction or interference. We are just there to witness the wonders.

So let's let the dams go. They had a respectable run, but they were never intended to last forever. Let natural events take their course, and allow the ponds to return to their historical levels. If safety is a concern, then by all means dismantle the structures to avert catastrophic failures.

Rather than taking on the cumbersome and unnecessary task of reconstructing the dam at Duck Hole, I would advocate instead the rehabilitation of the trail system in that area. Why not reroute the trail from Upper Works to better appreciate the scenic beauty of the two neighboring Preston Ponds, both of which are natural and in no danger of going anywhere? Why not make these the focus of our appreciation, if the thought of a smaller Duck Hole is too much for some of us to bear?

**BILL INGERSOLL** is the publisher and co-author of the Discover the Adirondacks series of guidebooks.



The Duck Hole dam was rebuilt in 1937.

Photo by Phil Brown