

Autumn in the Adirondacks

For most of my life I have been intrude by some aspects of American New England life that had been presented on films and TV centred around the cabins on the lake, the colours of Fall and the woods. All of these were alien to me as an Australian and well outside my experience. Our Australian shacks looked nothing like the cabins of New England; Australia is generally bereft of lakes and fairly short of mountains of any stature; I also wondered how could such a populous country as America still have woods; and most of all the concept of Fall was hard to grasp when we had only rare glimpses of it in Australia from the few exotic introduced tree plantings and most of those were in southern states and cooler areas than where I lived. So I really felt the need to experience and to authenticate whether the images I had seen on the screens were real or as fictional as some of the plots grew as the years rolled on.

Once liberated of paid employment, high on my agenda was to experience a Fall in New England. In 2011 I finally took the opportunity to experience a Fall. I checked the timing and discovered that the second week in October was the optimum time to be in New England. Then was the dilemma about where was the best place to be to experience this blaze of colour. Luckily I had another curiosity that helped direct me. In 1975 a friend, Peter Stanton had produced a Management Plan for Fraser Island commissioned by the Fraser Island Defenders Organisation that had pointed to the Adirondacks as providing what he then thought could be the best model for managing my favourite place on Earth. Thus I decided that the Adirondacks should be our destination.

We extended our original five-day itinerary through the Adirondacks by two days to include a part of the mountains of Vermont from Mt Mansfield State Forest down through the Green Mountains National Forest. This enabled us to appreciate an even greater extent of the brilliant autumn colours of this region.

I grossly underestimated the excitement and sheer enjoyment I would derive from witnessing this stunning spectacle. I had seen images through photographs and film but assumed that these were exaggerations but was amazed to discover just how real these were. The shades, textures and experience were much greater in three dimension than I could have imagined.

To say that the colours were awesome is a great understatement. As we drove randomly about 800 miles during a week of meandering through this countryside we continually felt ourselves mutually and simultaneously gasping with sheer delight at the richness of the vista before us. I have driven countless thousands of kilometres throughout Australia and recently driven through the beautiful Scottish Highlands and at other times through the national parks of South Western United States but never before have I ever drawn such continual exhilaration from the scenery. It was all to do with the colours of the leaves. I remember the excitement of coming across the carpets of wildflowers in Western Australia but such experiences were intermittent.

In the Adirondacks it was difficult to escape the colour that provided an aura for the whole landscape. What I hadn't anticipated also was the settings for such a riot of colour. The whole glaciated mountainous landscape was punctuated with lakes and streams and these added a dimension and texture to the scenery which meant that it was more than just the leaves that were composing the vista.

I also hadn't anticipated the multiplicity and variety of the 3000 plus lakes left behind by the glaciation of the last ice age. They were jewels sprinkled so liberally throughout this magnificent landscape. In the lakes the reflecting autumn tones ranged from the crimson and vermillion of some maples through oranges and browns to gold, yellow and lemon to be enhanced by the rich deep green of the evergreen conifers. But it wasn't only the leaves in the trees that enriched this landscape. Fallen leaves were blanketing the ground with the same assortment of colours. Driving past such spectacular and gaudy scenes were thrilling but not as much as walking through the forest. It was an ever-changing experience but in places the whole canopy was a golden ceiling overhead while our feet shuffled through layers of fallen leaves.

What I had set out to do was to experience a Fall in this country. I hadn't anticipated being so thrilled by it. Luckily our time was immaculate. However I wonder whether people in a 100 years' time will be able to enjoy such an experience. Already in the first half of the 20th Century, the North American forests lost three billion chestnut trees. They were once the most dominant tree in the eastern USA due to an alien fungus. Since then countless of the favoured elm trees have succumbed to the dreaded Dutch-elm disease. Since the early 1980s American spruce-fir forests have been decimated by fungal diseases. These pests and diseases were very specific in the species they attacked. The debilitating impact of acid rain on the forests hasn't been so discriminatory affect not only the forests but life in the lakes and their chemistry.

The New England forests have survived so-far despite these losses of some species until now these. Now comes a more potent threat. Maples, the trees that added the greatest variety of colour to these stunning forests, are already growing at their lowest latitude in North America. Climate change will inevitable cause these and probably other species to retreat northwards. It is a sobering thought to think that in order to enjoy the luxury of modern living and to support an ever growing population the Americans are not only depleting their sources of energy but also risk depleting such magnificent forests.