

Letter to the Editor

April 17, 2002

To the Editor:

I am writing in response to Mark Sagoff's revealing article, "On the value of natural ecosystems: The Catskills parable."

Dr. Sagoff's revelations are a blow to environmentalists who bought in to the notion that economic analysis can prove preservation is better than development. The facts of the Catskills Parable — an oft-cited example of the economic value of preservation — have apparently been misunderstood and misinterpreted.

The hope of environmental preservationists that economic arguments could make their case was probably always a forlorn one. Some disagreements are rooted in fundamental differences in preferences that do not easily submit to arbitration by economic calculation.

One group wants to preserve public wilderness unsullied by snowmobiles; another group thinks wilderness is a "good" only if viewed *from* a snowmobile. What to do? For a conflict like this there really is only a political solution. Any attempt to apply economics to the problem would be a charade.

Arguments for preservation of wilderness — as for public investment in art or cultural events or for exemption from taxation of religious groups or myriad other causes — cannot ultimately be resolved by economic analysis. The political process, though much denigrated, is a messy but effective arbitrator of passionate differences.

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