



# AARON MAIR

## THE SIERRA CLUB PRESIDENT ON RACE IN THE ADIRONDACKS AND HIS VISION FOR A TRAIL TO HONOR FALLEN SOLDIERS

BY JAMES M. ODATO  
PHOTOGRAPH BY DAESHA HARRIS

**AARON MAIR SMILES** when he tells the story of his first meeting with the Sierra Club, in 1994. But the smile does not quite reach his eyes.

"I walked into the New York City club," he says. "All white.... They hadn't seen a black man there." He assumed the group would help fight the garbage incinerator in his inner-city Albany neighborhood. Instead he got a curt response: "Did you ask the NAACP?"

Now, 22 years later, he is the first African-American president of the 2.4-million-member conservation organization, and the Atlantic chapter is just one of many under his national leadership. The recollection of that early putdown fuels Mair's quest to make the club more inclusive. He is pushing to make it better reflect America, he says, and he has plans for his own backyard, the Adirondacks. He recently challenged participants at an Adirondack Diversity Advisory Council symposium in Newcomb. He called on them to find ways to make the mountains more welcoming to all people, especially in light of recent examples of the reception some people of color still receive in the Adirondacks.

At the symposium, a black athletic director for a summer camp at Paradox Lake recounted how he was ordered out of the Ticonderoga Walmart to calm a situation in which a white customer lobbed a string of racist insults at the man and three other non-white camp counselors. "Instead of asking the harasser to leave, the black folks were asked to leave," Mair says.

On another outing, a Lake George restaurant employee made bigoted comments to the counselors. Mair says the episodes described "broke my heart."

Just a few weeks after the Newcomb gathering, Mair was targeted himself. While he was being photographed for this magazine at an Adirondack riverside near Exit 24 of the Northway, a group of men and women on a lazy Schroon

River float engaged Mair in banter. The exchange turned hostile after they learned he is head of the Sierra Club and surmised that he opposes logging and hydraulic fracturing. The men, who appeared to be in their 20s or early 30s, jeered Mair and insulted him and two photographers—both persons of color—using the N-word several times and making sexualized comments to the female photographer. The encounter left Mair and the photo crew stunned. "They were as offensive as they could possibly be," Mair says, describing the taunts as "denying and negating my right to be there."

These kinds of incidents—though hardly exclusive to the North Country—can discourage people of color from enjoying the park, Mair says, noting that places that lack racial diversity can "be perceived by whites to be their territory." He plans to continue urging tourism and economic-development professionals to consider the power of minority spending. And he intends to promote the Adirondacks to people of color, while pushing nonprofits to infuse diversity into their ranks. "The chamber[s] of commerce and other groups have to be engaged in what we all look like," he says.

Peter Nelson, coordinator of the Adirondack Diversity Council, says he is designing an action plan aimed at encouraging positive changes by Adirondack businesses and intends to use Mair as a sounding board.

Naturally upbeat, Mair says he tries to turn bad situations around. In his 56 years he has led many fights against environmental injustice. For too long, he says, underserved communities have been cut off from the natural world because of poverty, existing land-use planning and politics. "Parks and open space are some of the great heritage rights," he says. Having access to "fishing, walking or just admiring the greatness of creation around you ... can be a very transformative asset and influence on one's soul."

That's why he has been quietly working on a project to expose more people to the Adirondacks. Mair says his number-one priority before his term as Sierra Club president ends, in May 2017, is to bring together federal, state and local governments and other interested parties to create a special preserve in the North Country: a memorial trail to honor fallen soldiers. It would link forestland in and around Fort Drum, in Jefferson County, and extend into the Adirondack Park, giving the military community a (Continued on page 56)

Hand painted signs designed in the Adirondacks for the Adirondacks.

[www.adirondackpeach.com](http://www.adirondackpeach.com)

## Balsam Fir Wreaths

Freshly cut, handcrafted in the Adirondack tradition from fragrant balsam & Fraser fir boughs. Beautiful 22"- 24" wreaths gaily decorated. For you, or as a gift. Shipped to arrive first week of Dec. \$24.95+ s/h per wreath. Call for discount on orders of 10 or more. Order online at [www.critzfarms.com](http://www.critzfarms.com).

**Critz Farms, Inc.**  
PO Box 29, Cazenovia, NY 13035 • (315) 662-3355 FAX (315) 662-3040

## Northeast LIVING LIGHTS

Botanical Lamps, Shades, Finials & Nightlights

Customize your lamps with your choice of shade colors, botanicals and finials.

Handmade Botanical Lamp Shades

Chestertown, NY  
518-494-7538  
[www.NortheastLivingLights.com](http://www.NortheastLivingLights.com)

## Adirondack Chocolates

Give something special this holiday season.

Handcrafted chocolates in the Adirondacks since 1977.

1-800-232-4626 [www.adirondackchocolates.com](http://www.adirondackchocolates.com)

**AARON MAIR**

Continued from page 29

woodland space in which to hike, heal and pay tribute. "It is a perfect affirmation of their sacrifice," says Mair.

The proposed trail would knit Fort Drum with Watertown and run through the western Adirondacks into an area of streams, waterfalls and old-growth forest unofficially known as the Bob Marshall Wild Lands Complex. Large portions of the trail would run outside the Blue Line, but much of it would traverse the boundary.

A draft lays out two routes that offer multiple trails in a network that begins or ends in Old Forge. One, called the Otter Creek to Black River Route, would follow Route 28 to Thendara, enter the Ha-De-Ron-Dah Wilderness and unite with trails near Otter Lake. The pathway would then enter Otter Creek State Park and continue, using Whetstone Gulf State Park, to Fort Drum, a roughly 60- or 70-mile trek.

Another route would use a Moose River trail along Beaver River west into the Independence River Wild Forest to Soft Maple Reservoir and north through the Oswegatchie region. It would follow the West Branch of the Oswegatchie at Harrisville to Fort Drum, a total of 130 miles.

Mair, a Civil War and Revolutionary War buff and a Navy veteran descending from a line of soldiers, has four daughters, the two oldest of whom are West Point graduates on active duty in the Army. On visits to Fort Drum, where one daughter was stationed, Mair was struck by the region's economic distress and the base's isolation from the Adirondack Park. The trail he envisions could stand as a national model, a place to help mend wounded spirits and bodies, he says.

The "tribute corridor" would allow returning soldiers, enlisted personnel, families, residents and tourists to connect with the land and honor the heroes who fought for it, he says. Names of the fallen would be on the deeds of the parcels, so that a parent would have a "living place" to explore and say, "My son or daughter died for this land." It would be "a powerful tribute," Mair says, while also "edu-

**AARON MAIR**

cating people of the cost of war."

For eight years he's been contemplating the honor trail as he's risen up the ranks of the Sierra Club. The club has begun a study for the project, and Mair has consulted with officials at the environmental advocacy group the Adirondack Council, which is supportive and is sharing data it collected for its Bob Marshall Wild Lands studies. Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan sees ways to create a trail through private lands of the park while avoiding forever wild tracts. The honor trail, he says, could improve travel among hamlets and villages that need an economic boost.

The trail idea is consistent with the Adirondack Park's history as a place to cure and treat the ill, says Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks. From the 1870s through World War II, tuberculosis patients flocked to Saranac Lake for the crisp, fresh air. "There is a growing understanding of the benefits of using the woods for PTSD victims and therapy," says Bauer. "These have been the healing woods in the Adirondacks for decades."

Mair says he would need to persuade public leaders of the value of creating such a trail, which might entail purchasing land, securing easements or a combination of approaches. He doesn't mind a challenge. Since the early 1980s, he has been involved in numerous high-profile fights on environmental issues and has had some successes. But he also knows that his ideas on securing more open space don't always sell with politicians.

Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune says Mair has been advancing ideas about the honor trail internally. More meetings are planned on the proposal. "I wouldn't underestimate Aaron or the power of this particular vision," Brune says. "It's early, but I would give it a good chance of coming to fruition at some point."

Mair says the honor trail plan could make New York's great park even more special. "It is not an impossible dream." 🌿

# Allen's Fine Jewelers

Adirondack Beads For Bead Bracelets

Tree of Life Bracelets  
14k gold, sterling silver and titanium

**THE Adirondacks DESTINATION™ BRACELET**  
"The Destination™ You Love... To Wear!"

Recognized by locals and loyal visitors alike as "The Symbolic Treasure of the Adirondacks"

Mountain Scene Bracelet

315-369-6660 or 941-266-5565  
[allensfinejewelers.com](http://allensfinejewelers.com) [info@allensfinejewelers.com](mailto:info@allensfinejewelers.com)  
3017 Main Street, Old Forge, NY 13420 (across from High School)

Fits Most Popular Bracelets

## Holiday Joy

So much fun!

Shopping fun!

Holiday shopping delights—quality art, rustic furniture, designer accessories, book collections, mountain resort wear, trinkets, giggles, grins & pure joy for every room in your home & everyone in your life!

**Hudson River Trading Company**

[HudsonRiverTradingCo.com](http://HudsonRiverTradingCo.com)  
290 & 292, Main Street, North Creek  
518.251.4461 • Open Daily

Where holiday shopping is fun!

**Sandra Hildreth Adirondack Paintings**  
Home/Studio Open by Appointment, Saranac Lake, NY  
518-891-1388 [SandraHildreth.com](http://SandraHildreth.com)