



Vandals knock down Pharaoh Mountain fire tower

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SCHROON LAKE — The disputed Pharaoh Mountain forest fire observation tower toppled over some time in the past week, apparently weakened by sabotage.

A Department of Environmental Conservation officer and a forest ranger climbed to the summit of the mountain to investigate the incident Tuesday. According to DEC spokesman R.W. Groneman, the DEC discovered April 1 that one leg of the tower had been sawed through. No other legs had been cut recently, he said.

Schroon Supervisor John Kelly said people first noticed the tower was down on Monday. He surmised it fell over some time that day or over the weekend.

Details were sketchy as of press time Tuesday, and Groneman said it was unclear whether there had been further vandalism since April 1 or if the tower simply fell over as a result of that cut.

The structure had been the target of at least one other act of vandalism last spring, when two of the roughly half-inch thick, steel, L-shaped legs were sawed through with a hacksaw. The DEC then reinforced the legs. The DEC also intended to repair

the most recent damage but bad weather delayed the plan, according to Spokeswoman Madeline Gallo. The DEC has not yet determined whether it will try to remove or restore the tower, Groneman added.

DEC Commissioner Thomas Jorling Tuesday issued a statement calling the action "deplorable and malicious." The DEC is conducting a full investigation, he said.

Many town of Schroon residents, including Kelly, say they suspect the radical environmental group Earth First! of knocking the tower over to protest that a man-made structure was being allowed to stand

in a state-designated wilderness area. The group often employs "ecotage" tactics.

A state plan for the Pharaoh Lake Wilderness Complex called for the removal of the 35-foot-tall structure, but the action was put on hold while the tower's historical significance and possible preservation were studied.

"It's pretty shocking," said E. Melanie Crear, a student at the State University of New York at Albany and chairwoman of a community committee to save the fire tower. "A lot of local people and tourists have hiked to it for a lot of years. You can see it from town (Schroon Lake), so it became a very popular landmark. Local people consider it as sort of a rallying point for their rights."

Jeff Elliott of New Hampshire, an Earth First! activist who was punched by Warrensburg Supervisor Maynard Baker at a protest in the Pharaoh Lake Wilderness Complex in 1990, said he has never objected to the tower or tried to knock it down.

"Earth First! doesn't really care about the viewshed. That really has no effect on biodiversity. We're more concerned that a road is being actively used and is not going through a natural successive process of healing," said Elliott, referring to the disputed Crane Pond Road in the same wilderness area. "If it was Earth First!, they would've done some road damage, or improvements, as we would say."

But Elliott said tearing down a fire tower would be consistent with the agenda of other Earth

Fire tower has long history

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SCHROON LAKE — A wooden fire tower was first built atop Pharaoh Mountain in 1909. It was replaced with the existing steel structure in 1918, and it is one of 60 state-owned fire towers remaining in New York today, none of which are in use.

The Department of Environmental Conservation and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation are in the process of evaluating whether any fire towers should be preserved as historic landmarks.

A 1989 DEC unit management plan for the Pharaoh Lake Wilderness Area calls for the removal of the Pharaoh Mountain tower, but the DEC put the recommendation on hold pending the outcome of the joint study.

Melanie Crear, chairwoman of a committee to save the fire tower, said more than 450 forest fires were sighted from the observation tower. Her group would like the tower to be restored.

A DEC spokesman said damaging a state-owned fire tower amounts to a felony charge of criminal mischief as well as a possible violation of environmental conservation law.

The fire tower is not the only source of controversy in the Pharaoh Lake Wilderness. The management plan also called for the closure of Crane Pond Road to motorized vehicles, in keeping with state policy that motorized traffic is not permitted in wilderness areas.

Local rights activists removed boulders blocking the road in the summer of 1990 and clashed there with Earth First! members on Labor Day that year. The road issue has also been left open pending negotiations between Gov. Mario Cuomo's aides and local government officials.

First! members, which he labeled the "Billboard Faction."

"Or radical right wingers would go out and do something they perceive Earth First! would do just to fuel the fire," Elliott surmised.

But Crear, who lives on Crane Pond Road, said local people have worked so long to protect the tower through legitimate

channels that they would not have jeopardized it just to inflame passions. She added that an official with the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation recently told her that fire towers, like Pharaoh Mountain's, which are over 50 years old would probably be protected under a forthcoming recommendation.

