

Land of the free spirit

Lake Clear man founds his own nation

By KATHY CECERI

EXPLORER CORRESPONDENT

If Jamie Sheffield had his way, every country in the world would make respect for the environment a guiding principle of its constitution. Just like his country, the Northern Forest Archipelago.

"The idea of wilderness needs no defense; it only needs more defenders"—thus begins the NFA's founding document.

Perhaps you haven't heard of the NFA. Its capital, Backwoods, lies in the tiny hamlet of Lake Clear, about 10 miles outside the village of Saranac Lake. There, on Sept. 21, 1998, at a spot near his driveway now known as Independence Rock, Sheffield founded his own nation-state and was declared King James II. (Who declared him? "No one said I shouldn't be king," he'll tell you, a bit evasively.)

The NFA's Government House, an 8-by-12-foot rough-hewn cabin, sits behind the split-level home where King James, a special-education teacher in the Lake Placid Middle School, lives with his wife, Queen Gail, an administrator at Paul Smith's College, and their 2-year-old son, Crown Prince Benjamin. Sheffield designed the capital building as a sort of low-level tree house, giving it a "zero footprint" on the land in keeping with the NFA's pledge to protect "the rights of all living and non-living things within its borders." The structure is heated by a woodstove and lit by solar panels, which also charge the king's cell-phone batteries. Plans to add a composting toilet and water hand pump will further advance Sheffield's goal of national self-sufficiency.

Across from Government House, an ammo can marked with NFA stickers serves as a mailbox where NFA citizens—58 at the last census, held once every Blue Moon (the most recent being July 31, 2004)—can send each other mail using NFA stamps. Twenty NFA stamps, imprinted with the country's flag (a tree, moose, loon and crossed snowshoes on a field of white, green and blue), cost one NFA Sweat Equity Buck (\$10 U.S.), the standard hourly wage citizens pay each other for odd jobs and favors. Available in paper bills and wooden or tin coins,



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delivery, however, is on a voluntary basis and depends on whoever happens to be passing through.

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The NFA has a constitution, a parliament whose members are elected, by e-mail, every six years, and judges who are appointed for lifetime terms. The cabinet of ministers in charge of information, foreign relations, finance and the like can be contacted through the NFA's Web site. But King James himself is ruler for life. "I think a monarchy is a horrible form of government, except when I'm the king," he says.

The Northern Forest Archipelago extends way beyond

is larger than the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, which occupies only a hectare of land in Rome. It's true that the NFA is surrounded by another country, but so is the Navajo nation. Nor is King James worried that his country isn't formally recognized by the United States; neither are Tibet or Taiwan.

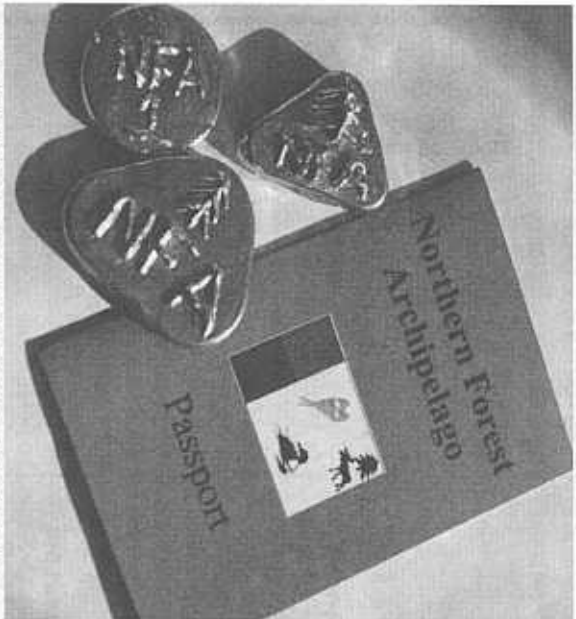
"I'm in good company," Sheffield insists. "There are lots of countries the U.S. doesn't recognize."

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The Northern Forest Archipelago extends way beyond the Adirondacks to the upper reaches of New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, an area sometimes called the Northern Forest. Sheffield, 35, a New York City native who spent boyhood summers in the Adirondacks, was drawn to the idea that the wilderness and its inhabitants throughout the Northern Forest have much in common. Maine, where Queen Gail grew up and where the royal family has its Summer Palace, is "not very different from this," he observes. So he designed the NFA as a country made up of unconnected chunks of private land and public protectorates, stretching across the Northeast.

"I like the idea of an archipelago," says the monarch. "I can't protect the whole Northern Forest, but I can protect little pockets here and there."

But is the NFA for real?

According to Sheffield the archipelago is a very small nation-state that meets all the criteria set forth in Article I of the 1933 Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States. It has a sovereign government exercising jurisdiction over well-defined territories with permanent residents and maintains diplomatic relations with several other sovereign states. It may be small, Sheffield points out, but so are Vatican City and the Principality of Monaco. The Royal Family's 28-acre parcel in Lake Clear alone

is larger than the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, which occupies only a hectare of land in Rome. It's true that the NFA is surrounded by another country, but so is the Navajo nation. Nor is King James worried that his country isn't formally recognized by the United States; neither are Tibet or Taiwan.

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Whatever its status at the UN, the Northern Forest Archipelago is securely part of the growing body of micronations, entities which issue passports, stamps and currency and confer titles and awards. The Wikipedia Web site says micronations are created for many reasons: Some are exercises in social simulation, while others ("almost exclusively the domain of male adolescents") are formed solely to give their creators an ego boost.

Many micronations break away from their mother country to bring attention to a cause. In 1982, Key West, Fla., became the Conch Republic and seceded from the U.S. over a Border Patrol blockade of the only road from the mainland. (It quickly surrendered.) A few go to great lengths to establish their legitimacy. The eccentric British family that turned a once-abandoned World War II defense platform in the English Channel into the Principality of Sealand fought and captured German-led invaders in 1978. And thanks to the Internet, which has greatly increased communication between micronations, events like Intermicronational Olympic Games are held regularly, featuring events like tennis-ball shot put and Frisbee discus.

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In addition to postal and monetary systems, a flag, and a constitution, Sheffield has given the NFA a national anthem, "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)" by Marvin Gaye, and a motto from Edward Abbey, "Wilderness is not a luxury, but a necessity of the human spirit."

The NFA doesn't collect taxes or fees from its citizens, but pays its expenses, mainly the cost of its Web site, through online gambling, e-commerce links and exports. Among the items available for sale on the NFA Web site are Backwoods Bathub Goo, made with essential oil of birch and balsam, and souvenirs such as oval bumper stickers and the NFA Army Knife, "ideal for dealing with picnics, camping, [and] simple repairs" but "woefully ... inadequate for harming other people." Stamp and coin dealers who specialize in issues by small countries have helped boost the kingdom's economy.

Anyone applying for NFA citizenship must live within the Northern Forest and agree to abide by its mission: protecting the area's woods, waters and wildlife, engaging in their sustainable use and enjoyment, and spreading the word about their value and beauty so as to promote and ensure their protection over time.

Non-landowning NFA residents must actively support an environmental organization in the area (the king's favorite being the Nature Conservancy for its direct action in buying up land and protecting it). NFA citizens often adopt public places, such as a favorite campsite, that they promise to maintain. (The royal family has adopted a campsite at Follensby Clear Pond, where the king once spent a winter's week in subzero temperatures.) These become NFA protectorates, part of the network under King James's stewardship.

For the ruler of his own nation, Sheffield is surprisingly modest; for a while he wasn't even sure he wanted to talk about his other life. He's clearly pleased with what he's created, the cabin he built and his knowledge of sovereign nationhood—even if he's not anxious for it to get around. "I'm afraid that I'm the biggest nerd anybody knows," he says. ■

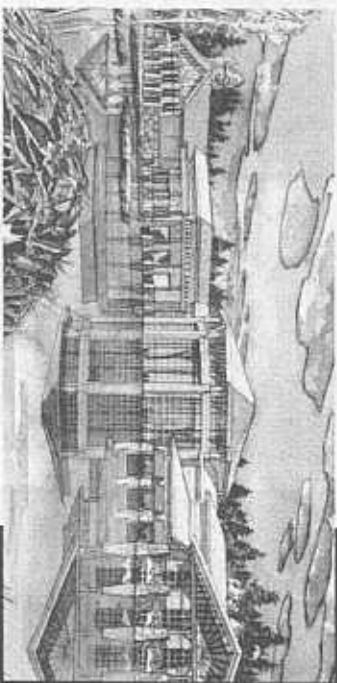
Kingdom online

To find out more about the Northern Forest Archipelago, read its constitution or purchase bumper stickers, stamps or souvenirs, visit the kingdom's Web site: www.northern-forest-archipelago.org



The king outside his Government House in Lake Clear.

Photo by Sue Bibeau



“The Adirondacks are a badly-needed model for the whole world.

The Museum can be

the lens through which

THE NATURE MUSEUM OF

The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks

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Founded in 1901, The Association was the first organization formed to protect the Adirondack region and its legacy of wildness for the benefit of present and future generations. The Association continues to defend the spirit and letter of the State Constitution's "forever wild" provision.

We are guided by our vision...

We envision an Adirondack Park in which the wild character and ecological integrity of the public Forest Preserve is assured, private forests and farms are managed sustainably, and where diverse, vibrant, local communities and economies accommodate the needs of residents and visitors alike.

