

Enact a permit system in High Peaks

By David Gibson, Adirondack Wild

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Ms. Elizabeth Izzo reported on DEC (state Department of Environmental Conservation)-Essex County discussions (July 3) about Route 73 parking restrictions, hiker shuttles, hiker education, new trailheads and possible hiking fees in the High Peaks Wilderness. Some of these steps are good but completely insufficient to control overuse and comply with the State Land Master Plan's wilderness guidelines.

An effective option left out of the article would more directly address overuse, degradation of wilderness conditions, crowding and future revenue generation at one stroke: a permit reservation system for the most heavily impacted trails in the eastern High Peaks.

A limited entry or permit reservation system for the High Peaks is something DEC has long recommended (since 1975) but has been reluctant to employ. It shouldn't be. Wilderness is a highly limited resource, and quotas to sustain limited resources are commonplace. These systems have been successfully used in other popular wilderness areas, most recently by the U.S. Forest Service on designated trails in federal wilderness in Oregon. That system, in place since 1995, will expand next year to 19 trailheads and nearly half a million federal acres because human recreational pressures on Oregon's wilderness have steadily increased at the expense of wild character, as they have in our Adirondack High Peaks.

In Oregon, USFS sets a quota for the number of overnight and day hikers at selected wilderness trailheads, based upon user data and the capacity of the resource to withstand user pressure. Hikers obtain their permit through a familiar online system. That permit costs around \$6. A certain number of permits are held back for use by locals seeking to hike popular trails spontaneously. The permit system significantly reduces weekend pressures (including trash) on the most popular trails and camping areas, and incentivizes mid-week travel and hiking. The chances of arriving at a trail to actually experience wilderness solitude and to have an unconfined, primitive form of recreation in the interior steadily rise when such systems are in place.

Permit systems are also among the most effective educational tools available. Meanwhile, the penalties for hiking or camping along selected routes without a permit are high enough to minimize violations.

DEC is currently at work to create a new hiking hub at Mount Van Hoevenberg's ORDA (state Olympic Regional Development Authority) facility in North Elba. This is the perfect moment for DEC to launch an experimental permit reservation system here for some of the most heavily used and impacted trailheads into the High Peaks using the Reserve America online system long in use for DEC campgrounds.

A permanent High Peaks permit reservation system would require an amendment to the 1999 High Peaks Wilderness Unit Management Plan, with plenty of public input. The system could be free of charge or not, depending upon whether permit fees and penalties could be dedicated to trail maintenance and user management, including forest ranger patrols.

Hiker pressures on the eastern High Peaks Wilderness have more than doubled since 2007. Forty-five years of departmental promises to institute a permit reservation system here have passed. It's time to act on them.

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