

ADIRONDACKS

Group proposes permit system for High Peaks

DEC begins regulating number of hikers at one Catskills site

BY STEPHEN WILLIAMS *Gazette Reporter*



CARL HEILMAN II/THE ADIRONDACK COUNCIL

A group of Adirondack conservation advocates says the High Peaks regions and the Boreas Ponds tract, pictured above, should be protected by requiring a permit system for hikers.

With growing concern about the impact of large numbers of people hiking in the High Peaks Wilderness, one environmental group has called for a permit system to control public access.

Such a system would reduce recreational overuse and protect the wilderness, said Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve. Adirondack Wild wants the state to establish a permit system for the High Peaks and the Boreas Ponds, which are being added to the wilderness.

"Direct controls on hiker numbers have to be instituted through a wilderness permit system," said Adirondack Wild partner Dan Plumley, who lives in Keene.

The idea interests others, as well.

"We believe that a discussion about all possible options is something that ought to be on the table. It has certainly been done at other places," said John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council.

Adirondack Wild submitted the idea in a comment letter to the state Department of Environmental Conservation just ahead of Wednesday's deadline for public comment on possible amendments to the High Peaks and VanderWhacker Wild Forest unit management plans. The amendments will set the rules for public

access to Boreas Ponds and reroute or relocate some of the most popular trails and trail-heads in the High Peaks.

DEC spokesman David Winchell said the agency has reviewed about 3,000 public comments since the draft amendments were released in March — “90 percent of them form letters.” He said DEC is in the process of preparing a summary, and he would not comment directly on the permit suggestion.

While the idea of requiring hikers or campers to acquire permits has been around for years, it has gained new impetus in both the Adirondacks and Catskills, as state tourism promotion and social media raves have brought more people to state forestlands.

This week, DEC announced it will impose the first permit system in the forest preserve for access to Blue Hole on Rondout Creek, a popular destination in the Catskills.

“The new permits support DEC’s ongoing efforts to preserve this natural resource by reducing environmental impacts like trash, damage to vegetation and trees, and soil erosion,” DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos said Wednesday in announcing the permit system.

At Blue Hole, in Ulster County, a no-cost permit will be required on weekends and holidays between May 15 and Oct. 15. Permits will be limited to 40 per day, but each can cover up to six people. Permits will have to be reserved in advance.

Adirondack Wild noted that permit systems are commonly required for federal wilderness areas. Not limiting access to the High Peaks, according to the group, would violate the state land use master plan’s requirement that the wilderness have “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined kind of recreation.”

Sheehan said the Adirondack Council agrees some kind of use restrictions may be needed to protect wilderness areas.

The permits could be free, he said, as are the permits for Blue Hole.

“We can understand the desire not to impose any costs on people who want to use the Forest Preserve, but having a way to limit the impact on the High Peaks Wilderness Area and on its water and wildlife would be beneficial in the long term,” Sheehan said. “We have responsibility to keep the Adirondacks as nice as they are now for the people who come to the Adirondacks in 50 or 100 years.”

While the High Peaks are where use pressure is greatest, Sheehan said heavy public use is also an issue for some state forestland around Lake George and Old Forge, as well.

DEC officials have not said when a decision will be made on the land use plan amendments. Seggos will make the final decision but could modify it as well as accept the recommendations.

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