

ADK Council: Overuse, poor maintenance threaten trails

HIKING: Relocation, reconstruction needed to prevent damage, executive director says

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ELIZABHTOWN — About 130 miles of foot trails in the Adirondack Park's High Peaks Wilderness Area show heavy damaged due to overuse, poor design or lack of maintenance, the Adirondack Council says.

"These trails need much more than maintenance — not for user convenience — but to correct and prevent further damage to the park's forests, pure waters, wildlife and wild character," Adirondack Council Executive Director William C. Janeway said in a press release.

"The experts we have consulted concur that these trails are in need of significant redesign, reconstruction and repair. And all trails need improved annual maintenance."

HIKERS CONCERNED

According to regional tourism officials, total visitors to the 9,300-square-mile Adirondack Park rose from 10 million in 2001 to more than 12.4 million so far in 2018.

About 80 percent of all visits occur in the six months between May and October.

There has been a growing concern about overuse of Adirondack trails, and according to a survey conducted last year, hikers are among those who want to find a solution.

Surveyed on Columbus Day weekend were 202 hikers who climbed Cascade Mountain, according to a press release from the Adirondack Council.

Most said, according to the survey, that they would be willing to support limits on trailhead parking, temporarily close eroding trails and require mandatory education to prevent damage to the High Peaks Wilderness and other sensitive areas of the Adirondack Park.

SURVEY RESULTS

The 2017 survey, was developed working with the State Department of Environmental Conservation and conducted at the Cascade Mountain trailhead in Keene over two days on Columbus Day weekend of 2017.

Adirondack Council staff members conducted the study in cooperation with DEC staff and Adirondack 46ers volunteers.

Among the results:

- A majority of those surveyed were willing to pay a fee to hike if the money was spent on protection and better management of the Forest Preserve.
- Respondents supported education by a two-to-one margin (58 vs. 30 percent), such as requiring all hikers to watch a video on how to hike and camp without damaging the forests, waters or wildlife.
- They also supported parking limits by a margin of 68 to 20 percent, including enforcement of "no parking" zones outside of parking lots and on roadsides.
- Two-thirds of those who responded favored parking limits.

FOCUS GROUPS

"There's no question that a significant portion of High Peak trails suffer from overuse and less-than-adequate design, despite the best efforts of the state, ADK and other limited trail crew efforts for decades," said David Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, in the release.

"This initial assessment was based on the recommendations of four focus-group meetings that took place last spring, which we had first called for the DEC to undertake over two years ago.

"We support fully the Adirondack Council's call for sustainable trail redesign and ecological restoration.

"At the same time, we must deal with the root of the problem: vastly unsustainable hiker numbers, without permit controls.

"We need to set responsible limits for day use hikers. Otherwise, we compound the landscape's ecological vulnerabilities and degrade the wilderness experience."

TRAIL PROFESSIONALS

The Adirondack Council's assessment included a map of the High Peaks Wilderness Region showing the portions of these popular hiking trails that need attention.

The organization drew upon the expertise of trails professionals and others, who provided input for the evaluation, the release said.

Among them were representatives of the Adirondack Mountain Club, Adirondack 46ers, Adirondack Hamlets to Huts, Adirondack Trail Improvement Society and Split Rock Stonework and Trails.

The Adirondack Council made all decisions regarding which trails, or trail sections, were included in the report, Janeway said.

A FOOL'S GAME

"Absent proper, effective, inclusive and easily adaptable permit controls, limiting and mitigating far too high hiker numbers on these long identified impacted trail segments, trail designs and trail management will always, eventually fail," said Dan Plumley of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, in the release.

"Effective and true wilderness management requires both: sustainable trail design and re-construction, as well as proper wilderness limits on the number of daily users on the most popular trails.

"One without the other is merely a fool's game, which is what we have been playing for 19 years."

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Janeway said the report is a preliminary snapshot, designed as a prelude to the comprehensive study needed to assess the cost and timeframe of all repairs, reconstructions and annual maintenance.

"We need to consider hiker safety, erosion, wildlife habitat degradation, user experience and other natural resource impacts on overused and under-maintained trails," he explained.

"Many trails were created without the benefit of sustainable trail design standards. Trail design and maintenance should account for slope, soil types, water, vegetation and other physical features.

"So each trail presents a unique set of challenges.

"The state can play a significant role in controlling the impact of trails by following sustainable standards, while dedicating funding to user education and new staff who are dedicated to trails and wildland management."

VISITOR EXPLOSION

Janeway said much of the success of the Adirondack Park is due to the extraordinary men and women who work for the State Department of Environmental Conservation.

"What they accomplish is amazing, since their staffing levels have been reduced by close to 25 percent from 10 years ago," he said.

"Over that same span, we have seen the Forest Preserve, state Environmental Protection Fund capital monies, community economic development funding and the DEC's responsibilities grow, along with the explosion in the number of annual visitors.

SUSTAINABLE TRAILS

Janeway praised the state's care of the Adirondacks.

"The state purchased and designated as Forever Wild Wilderness Adirondack lands and waters, including the Boreas Ponds, while successfully promoting the park as a world-class outdoor destination," he said.

"Sustained successful preservation requires world-class management and stewardship."

Janeway explained that "sustainable trails" is a term used by trail professionals such as Jeremy Burns of Split Rock Stonework and Trails.

Burns also leads the Student Conservation Association Americorps trail crews, which work alongside the Adirondack Mountain Club, Adirondack Trail Improvement Society paid trail crews, volunteers and state staff.

Burns says the three components of "sustainable trails" are:

- Physical: They must adhere to certain design standards.
- Social: They should provide a positive user experience appropriate for the planned user group.
- Environmental: They must protect the resource.

NEEDS NEW INVESTMENT

Much of the current High Peaks trail system does not meet these criteria because these principles were not well known when most of the current trail network developed, Janeway said.

"The Adirondack Park is a world-class outdoor resource that needs a world-class trail system that is well-designed and well-maintained," he said.

"A new investment in clean water and wildlands, wildlife and user safety would preserve the Adirondacks as Forever Wild."

Founded in 1975, the Adirondack Council is a privately funded not-for-profit organization whose mission is to "ensure the ecological integrity and wild character of the Adirondack Park," according to the release.