

'No data, no science'

By Gwendolyn Craig,
Adirondack Explorer

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Chad Dawson, a former Adirondack Park Agency board member and an expert on wilderness and public land management, was also the lead on drafting a workbook presented last Friday during an APA meeting. The workbook provides a blueprint for measuring visitor impacts and measuring results of any management efforts made to protect parts of the park.

Workbook provides blueprint for APA, DEC efforts to measure visitor impacts

The Adirondack Park Agency and state Department of Environmental Conservation acknowledged last week that they have not been measuring or analyzing visitor impacts in a consistent, scientific way park-wide despite a requirement to do so in legal documents published 50 years ago.

To remedy that, APA and DEC staffers presented before the APA board a workbook on measuring visitor impacts and measuring results of any management efforts made to protect parts of the park.

"I'm cautiously optimistic that they'll actually use it and not just talk about it," said Chad Dawson, an expert on wilderness and public land management.

Dawson was also an APA board member until he [resigned last year over frustration](#) with the lack of discussion and analysis from DEC and APA on projects that were approved. Dawson was also the lead on drafting the workbook presented last Friday, and staff and board members referenced his expertise several times throughout the presentation.

The draft workbook also comes at a time when visitation is up throughout the Adirondacks and different management projects are being put into practice. One in the [spotlight is at the Adirondack Mountain Reserve](#), land accessed by the public through an easement and a popular gateway to a number of High Peaks.

The reserve's owners and DEC are attempting a reservation system this summer. There has been no evidence that the APA and DEC draft workbook was used to make this management decision, but staff members made suggestions that the workbook could be used for primitive tent sites, hiking trail conditions, trail use, visitor experience and the ecology of sites in the park.

The workbook does not address water bodies, which is the subject of a [pending lawsuit around a marina expansion on Lower Saranac Lake](#).

The workbook stems from a requirement in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, the guiding document on management and use of public lands in the park. It charges DEC and APA with examining the carrying capacity—that is the amount of visitor use a unit in the park can withstand without detrimental impacts to its natural resources—and develop limits or regulations to prevent the carrying capacity from being exceeded.

[Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan](#) [Download](#)

In addition to the master plan, the DEC has been charged with identifying carrying capacity in individual unit management plans. Those planning documents are tailored to specific areas in the park.

Josh Clague, a natural resources planner with the DEC, said he believes the department is “beginning to turn the corner” and is addressing carrying capacity and monitoring “in a more comprehensive way.”

Clague described management of the forest preserve like a table. Around the table, he said, are staff expertise, societal expectations, legal requirements, political considerations and resource constraints.

But there has been a seat missing at the table: science.



A DEC presentation shows how science and the visitor use management and wildlands monitoring framework fit into management of forest preserve. Slide courtesy of the NYSDEC

That is where the visitor use management and wildlands monitoring come into play. Clague said that this is not to say the department has never used science when it comes to managing the forest preserve, but the workbook “intentionally creates space for science to have a place in the program.”

Dawson, in a phone interview Monday, said the agency and department have always relied on “professional judgement” and “anecdotal evidence,” to justify management action.

“No data, no science,” he said.

Between 15 and 20 years ago, Dawson assisted DEC and APA staff with workshops on visitor management, using existing federal guidelines addressing carrying capacity issues. About 10 years ago, he said, the state became more serious about drafting a document. Pressure has been building from environmental organizations and with staff internally, Dawson said. He called last Friday’s presentation “an admission that yes, it has to be done,” from both state agencies.

“It’s not rocket science,” Dawson added. “Really, it’s pretty practical stuff. That’s why I was always [in shock that no one would release it.](#)”

Kevin Prickett, a natural resource planner with the APA, told agency board members how the workbook is designed. The document has forms for land managers to go into specific detail about why a management action might be needed, collecting information on the current conditions of a site, identifying what the desired conditions are for a site, considering thresholds for use and monitoring how a management action is doing. The whole process is what state officials and environmental organizations have been calling “adaptive management.”

Clague said the APA and DEC have had a chance to test the workbook on primitive tent sites, though he did not specify where. The DEC and APA are looking at these sites to see how much vegetation is disturbed, what the soil condition is, if there are tree roots exposed, if human and solid waste is a problem and then deciding whether or not a management action is needed based off of those observations.

“We need to start to get some boots on the ground to do some testing of this,” Clague added.

Dawson said the DEC will need to invest in computer tablets for in-the-field use so this survey work can begin. The state budget passed in April did include [\\$1.55 million for addressing visitor use and wilderness protection in the Adirondacks and Catskills.](#)

The agency is also collecting feedback on the visitor use and wildlands monitoring document, said Rick Weber, deputy director of planning for the APA. There is no formal comment period timeline. Those interested in submitting feedback should email SLMP_Comments@apa.ny.gov. APA and DEC staff plan to bring back an update to the draft workbook before the APA board at the end of the year.

Draft visitor use management and wildlands monitoring guide[Download](#)

Art Lussi, an APA board member, said the visitor use management piece was “sorely lacking at this agency,” and called it “a brilliant thing where we’re adding science and specificity. It’s just really exciting for me to see us making that step.”

John Ernst, an APA board member, called the presentation on Friday “very exciting” and “historic.” Ernst asked if the department and agency could get to water bodies and their carrying capacities soon.

Walt Linck, a natural resources planner with the APA and drafter of the workbook, reminded board members that the presentation “goes right back to the language of the (APA) act itself, as it was originally written 50 years ago.” He, too, said he hoped the carrying capacity of water bodies would be a follow-up soon.

Dawson thinks the document will “kick the door open” and that the DEC and APA are “going to have to start addressing that one (water bodies) as well because these things are interrelated.”