



26 June 2018

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RE: High Peaks Wilderness Complex Draft Unit Management Plan (UMP) Amendment

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RE: Vanderwhacker Mountain Wild Forest Draft Unit Management Plan (UMP) Amendment

The Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the High Peaks Wilderness Complex Draft Unit Management Plan (UMP) 2018 Amendment, and the Vanderwhacker Mountain Wild Forest Draft Unit Management Plan (UMP) and the Boreas Ponds Primitive Area and State Administrative Areas-2018 Amendment, and the Draft River Area Management Plans for the Hudson River and Opalescent River.

The Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) is dedicated to the conservation, preservation, and responsible recreational use of the New York State Forest Preserve and other parks, wild lands, and waters vital to our members and chapters. ADK is a nonprofit organization with 30,000 members in 27 statewide chapters served by a year-round staff offering programs that help people discover, play in, and protect natural places. Since its founding in 1922, The Adirondack Mountain Club has protected wild lands and waters through the work of its dedicated member volunteers and staff. ADK members hike, camp, snowshoe, cross-country ski, paddle, and cycle the lands and waters of the Adirondack Park.

We respectfully request that you consider the following comments outlined below.

Visitor Use, Natural Resource Protection Regulations and Use Reservations. Proposed Management

ADK applauds the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) for the science-based approach to land use management employed in these UMP amendments. We greatly appreciate the emphasis on monitoring of resource impacts that will trigger management actions to protect and restore the resource. ADK strongly supports this excellent management strategy. However, we are greatly concerned that several key elements of this approach have not yet been defined including, 1) the monitoring protocols that will be used, 2) who will be doing the monitoring, 3) how the monitoring and analysis will be accomplished (i.e., how will the agency provide the needed staff and funding for this critical task?), and 4) ensuring that the monitoring, analysis, and management triggers actually result in management actions to protect the resource.

Lack of Baseline Data

ADK is very concerned that DEC is not tallying and analyzing accurate baseline data on visitor use from trailheads. This becomes problematic when making management decisions like those proposed for lengthening the trail to Cascade. We are concerned that this action will move many aspiring peak enthusiasts to Giant because this peak will then be perceived as the shorter and easier first peak. Without baseline data from the trailheads it will be difficult to measure the impact of management actions.

Name Changes for High Peak Wilderness Sections

ADK does not support changing the names from Eastern and Western High Peaks to Central and Outer High Peaks. This new nomenclature is likely to confuse the public and will result in less compliance with zone-specific regulations. It would be far easier in terms of communicating with the public if the management regulations and actions proposed in the HPW UMP for the “Central High Peaks” would be applied across the entire HPW unit. This strategy would also provide the maximum benefit to the resource. Currently, the Western High Peaks are also experiencing high use with impacts to trails and to habitat from campfires and from camping in non-designated sites. ADK would support a DEC decision to have one set of regulations across the High Peaks Wilderness Unit.

If DEC feels that such an approach is impossible currently, we strongly urge DEC to consider a configuration where the new parcels of Boreas Ponds, Casey Brook and MacIntyre East, and the former Dix Mountain Wilderness be incorporated into the Eastern High Peaks with the management strategy defined in the draft HPWC UMP for the proposed Central High Peaks.

In this case, we also suggest that the line between the Eastern High Peaks and the Western High Peaks be moved to the west and run along the Northville Placid Trail from Lake Placid to Duck Hole, and then following Duck Hole via Bradley Pond Trail to the proposed Andrew Lake Trail south to the edge of the wilderness area. The public will understand the boundaries better if the boundaries are represented by trails. In the Western High Peaks monitoring could be used and management triggers established to upgrade the regulations to the Eastern High Peaks standard when needed.

Group Size

ADK supports the extension of the group size regulations to the proposed Outer High Peaks zone with a group size of 8 people for overnight and 15 people for day use for the entire High Peaks Wilderness Area.

Camping and Fires

ADK supports new regulation that limits camping to designated sites only in the proposed Central High Peaks and should evaluate whether this rule should apply also to the proposed Outer High Peaks zone. Site conditions should be monitored annually and evaluated to assess a need to change the management strategy. We support a ban on glass containers in the entire High Peaks Wilderness Unit. We support mandatory use of bear canisters from the beginning of May until the end of October throughout the entire High Peaks Wilderness Unit. Campfires should be prohibited anywhere in the proposed Central High Peaks zone and should be considered for the entire High Peaks Wilderness Unit. ADK supports a fire ban across the entire High Peaks Wilderness Unit. If this is impossible currently, DEC must quantify the existing condition and current impact of campfires in the High Peaks Wilderness. Areas such as the former Dix Wilderness are currently extensively impacted by campfires.

Trails Construction, Design, and Maintenance

In the context of trail construction, determining what is detrimental to the *user experience* is subjective, and may lead to inconsistency in work standards and expectations of land managers. Sometimes the most sustainable and best solution in terms of resource protection may be at odds with user experience. DEC should more clearly define the term *user experience* and the role it plays in determining best practices, especially in the High Peaks. In the context of trail or recreation infrastructure construction, design, and maintenance, ADK urges that there be explicit language in the UMP that makes it clear that the management actions and deteriorating conditions can be assessed in collaboration with outside experts. It is imperative that DEC land managers collaborate on trail and recreation infrastructure construction design and maintenance decisions with professional contractors who implement management decisions on the ground.

Dogs

Ideally, dogs should be leashed and under an owners control at all times throughout the entire High Peaks unit. ADK supports the proposed regulations that require dogs to be leashed, at campsites and lean-tos, and anywhere above 4,000 feet in the proposed Outer High Peaks zone. However, leashing across the entire High Peaks Unit should be considered given the popularity of the area. DEC should provide Leave No Trace messaging that explains the potential impact of dogs on wildlife, and other users, if not under control, leashed, picked up after, and cared for properly in all zones.

Registration

ADK supports mandatory user registration for the entire High Peaks Wilderness Area. The means of registration should be designed to burden the user to the minimum extent possible consistent with the Department acquiring user controls and information needed for search and rescue operations.

Ski and Snowshoe

ADK supports a change in the ski and snowshoe use regulation to a standard of depth of snow to 12” off trail surface.

Equestrian Trails

We are pleased that DEC has considered the designation of horseback riding trails on some old roads in both the HPWC and the VMWF. However, DEC must ensure that there is an invasive species spread prevention plan and regulations in place for equestrian users.

Educational Outreach

ADK is pleased to see the emphasis on educational outreach and working with partners in the draft UMPs. DEC should consider Leave No Trace Outdoor Skills and Ethics educational programming and messaging throughout the Forest Preserve, especially in popular areas like the High Peaks Wilderness which are experiencing recreational impacts of high use. ADK strongly suggests that DEC Develop a Leave No Trace Skills and Ethics Integration and Outreach Plan. This plan should cover messaging on the DEC web pages, at trailheads, on literature, and in programming. This would ensure consistent Leave No Trace Messaging at every trailhead.

The development of the plan should be coordinated with other state agencies and offices to ensure that promotional efforts for Adirondack Tourism that use state funding incorporate Leave No Trace messaging.

ADK also urges DEC to commit to integrated training of Leave No Trace skills and ethics on the Trainer or Master Educator Level for DEC staff and Forest Rangers. The Master Educator level of training would be especially important for Forest Ranger staff who have significant one-on-one interaction with Forest Preserve visitors. DEC is a formal partner with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics and already has Master Educators on staff. Both the Center and the DEC Master Educators could help develop a plan for the agency and provide educational support, tools, and materials. ADK, which is one of ten site providers of Master Educator Courses for the Leave No Trace Center, could also assist in developing a plan. NOLS Northeast, another provider located in Gabriels, New York, could also serve as a resource in developing a plan.

DEC should also work with the New York Department of State (DOS) and their new ArcGIS Information Gateway¹ to disseminate rules, regulations, and educational information specific to locations, and land units.

Boreas Ponds Tract

The Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) applauds New York State for including the Boreas Ponds in an expansion of the High Peaks Wilderness Area. We are extremely disappointed that the state did not follow through on its commitment to protect Boreas Ponds from invasive species and crowding by restricting access for lands south of the ponds by cars, trucks and snowmobiles. Motorized vehicles should not reach the ponds or be close enough to disturb wildlife or harm water quality. The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) must protect Boreas Ponds and the High Peaks Wilderness from motorized use.

Public Parking for Use of Boreas Ponds Tract

General parking should remain at the current parking lot and gate, over three miles from Boreas Ponds. The current “interim” parking lot should be the primary parking lot for most visitors. ADK had supported a 4 to 6 car parking lot for use only by CP-3 qualified individuals (motorized access program for people with disabilities)² located about 1/10th of a mile south of the Boreas Ponds. However, if DEC intends to make this lot available for universal access by the general public, then ADK rescinds support for this lot.

The CP-3 parking should be exclusively for use by CP-3 permit holders. ADK strongly opposes any provisions for other members of the public allegedly for providing universal access. DEC has proposed parking spaces for “universal access.” Including parking spaces for “universal access” at this lot conflicts with the provisions of the CP-3 program that mandates that CP-3 facilities be unique and not degraded by general public access. The term “universal access” is not provided for in the Americans with Disabilities Act or any state law or regulation. ADK strongly opposes the provision of any parking spaces for “universal access” at or near the Boreas Ponds. CP-3 access at a point 1/10th of a mile south of Boreas

Ponds is supported by the provision of the CP-3 departmental policy. Any CP-3 program access provided must be exclusive and not mixed with any other motorized use since this will undermine the special access available through DEC's CP-3 program.³ This successful program allows those with disabilities to access areas that they would otherwise be unable to enjoy. DEC describes the CP3 program on their web site explaining the use of a TRP for those participating in the CP-3 program,

The MAPPWD permit is a temporary revocable permit (TRP) that provides motor vehicle access to certain state lands administered by DEC. MAPPWD permit holders are permitted uncommon access to activities such as hunting, fishing, camping and wildlife observation. The permit is only issued to qualified people with disabilities, who must complete and submit [an] application....Permit holders can use a permitted vehicle to travel beyond the reach of public roads, to areas where others must hike or bike. The permit provides access for those who seek solitude, connection to nature, undisturbed wildlife habitat, and inclusion with fellow sportspeople. MAPPWD Routes have been carefully selected in order to protect natural areas and recreational activities.⁴

DEC's use of the Boreas Ponds Dam Parking Area for any member of the public and reference to "universal access" for the general public is opaque and attempts to confuse readers regarding the concept of universal access. It also undermines the excellent CP-3 program by destroying the goal of the program which is uncommon access for people with disabilities who may be seeking "...solitude, connection to nature, undisturbed wildlife habitat, and inclusion with fellow sportspeople."⁵ The proposed use of the Boreas Ponds Parking area completely ignores the requirement for "uncommon access." We are very concerned, and extremely disappointed that this flawed proposal is included in the Draft VMWF UMP. **If DEC's intent is to provide universal access for the general public in this parking area then ADK rescinds our support for any type of parking in this location, including CP-3 access. We strongly urge DEC to make this a CP-3 only parking area.**

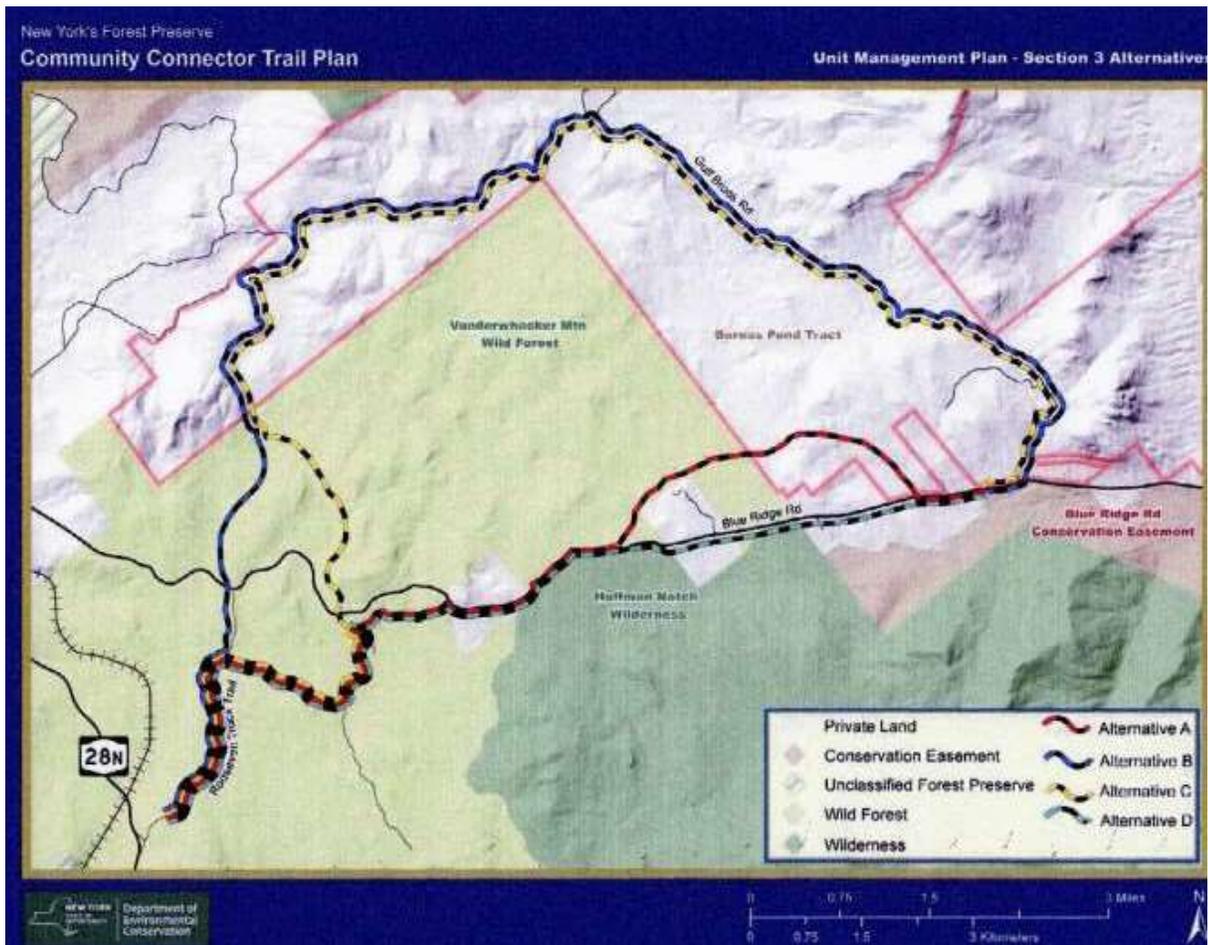
There may be other ways to enhance the High Peaks Wilderness Complex UMP with accessible recreation opportunities, but certainly compromising the experience that persons with disabilities may seek by siting a general public parking area at a CP-3 access site is definitely not one of those ways.

Further, parking areas in the middle of the sensitive Boreas Ponds ecosystem are certainly not in the best interest of the resource.

Although, ADK supports the provision for a parking area for cars carrying canoes or kayaks in the Four Corners area about a mile south of the Boreas Ponds. The proposed parking area is too large and should be reduced to eight to ten spaces. Access to this parking area should be limited to the parking lot capacity and accessible by day use permit only. We are very disappointed that the proposed parking at this lot is not proposed for a permit system.

Snowmobile Community Connector Trail between Newcomb and North Hudson

ADK does not support the proposed snowmobile trail that is defined in the VMWF UMP. ADK believes that several routes along the Blue Ridge Highway, alternatives A and D discussed in DEC's 2015 Community Connector Plan (CCP) (see map below from CCP Appendix 5)⁶ would require fewer trees to be cut than alternatives B and C. Alternatives B and C would require building a new trail from the west end of the Gulf Brook-Boreas Road south route across the trailless triangle of the Vanderwhacker Mountain Wild Forest and potentially compromise remote wildlife habitats and wetland areas around Vanderwhacker Pond. Alternative A would require the least amount of new tree cutting.



Classification of the Waters of the Boreas Ponds

Since Boreas Ponds is surrounded by lands classified for the most part as Wilderness and near the dam by lands classified as Primitive, the Boreas Ponds is closed by the terms of the APSLMP to use by snowmobiles, motorboats and floatplanes. The waters of the Boreas Ponds are Forest Preserve under the judicial decision in the Lows Lake case and must be managed as a Wilderness. We are pleased that there is nothing proposed in the UMP that is inconsistent with regulations and New York State law regarding this issue.

Hut to Hut facilities

ADK is pleased that the UMP does not propose construction, installation, and operation of “hut to hut” type lodging facilities. ADK believes that under Article XIV, Section 1, Department of Environmental

Conservation (DEC) statutes and regulations and the provisions of the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (ASLMP) preclude such lodging facilities on the Forest Preserve. The only camping structure permitted on the Forest Preserve is the lean-to.

Hiking Trails

ADK also supports the proposed hiking trail from the main parking lot to the Boreas Ponds dam to provide a woods alternative to the lengthy and unattractive road walk along the Gulf Brook Road. ADK also supports the proposed properly designed and switch-backed trail up to the Boreas Mountain ridge, the Pinnacle Trail, and the Casey Brook Connector and RNT Loop. We also support the trails that connect the Boreas Ponds to western trails and ultimately the Northville-Placid Trail.

Mountain Bike Trails

ADK also supports the proposed mountain bike trail network that will be similar to the trail networks built by ADK trail crews at Wilmington and Windham. The small parking area to service this trail network off the Blue Ridge highway is well thought out and designed to avoid user conflict.

Cycling should be permitted on roads in areas or corridors classified as Wild Forest and otherwise where it is lawful to ride bikes. The Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (APSLMP) Primitive Area Definition (Page 28) under Bicycles states, “The same guidelines will apply as in wilderness areas except that bicycles may be used: (a) on existing roads legally open to the public and on administrative roads specifically designated for such use by the Department of Environmental Conservation as specified in individual unit management plans; and, (b) on former all-season roads in the Essex Chain Lakes Primitive Area, as described above under ‘Primitive Recreational Trails.’”

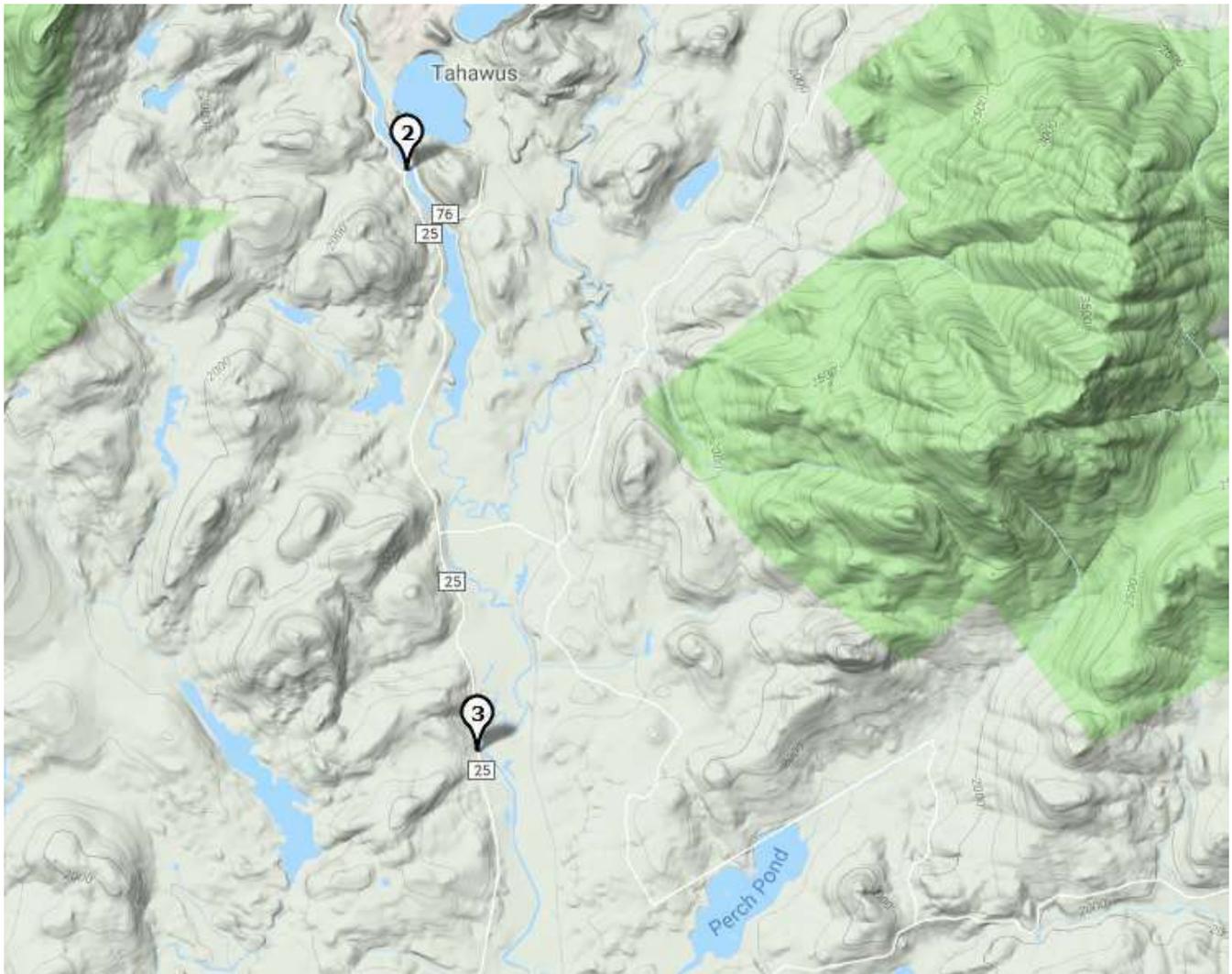
ADK interprets this to mean that in order for bicycles to be ridden on the section of the Boreas Ponds road classified as Primitive (the section surrounding the Boreas Ponds Dam), DEC would need to 1) designate the road as an administrative road and 2) designate the road as open to bicycle use. DEC should consider the designation of horseback riding trails on some old roads in both Wild Forest and Wilderness Areas.

“Historic” cabin at Four Corners, Education, and Invasive Species Spread Prevention

ADK supports the retention of the cabin at Four Corners for use by forest rangers and assistant forest rangers (AFRs) to police the special CP-3 and canoe/kayak parking lots to ensure that no members of the public drive past the main parking lot without the required permits. A gate just north of the main parking lot supervised by an AFR or ESF student would be an ideal way to limit vehicular access to the Boreas Ponds lake area. The AFR could also check cars with kayaks and canoes for aquatic invasive species on the boats. ADK supports the installation of a boat inspection and washing station at Exit 29 of the Northway. DEC should consider providing canoes at the Boreas Ponds that can be reserved and used by the public. DEC should consider having seasonal trail stewards (professional and volunteer) for educational outreach to visitors.

MacIntyre East

The state’s acquisition of this 6,200-acre tract creates an opportunity for a wilderness paddle on the Hudson River, the Opalescent River, and creates camping opportunities on the trail to Allen Mountain. ADK is pleased with the proposed and much needed formal trail designation for the former herd paths up to the summit of Allen Mountain. This will ensure that this popular route gets the trail maintenance that it needs to be sustainable and protect the steep sections of the trail from soil and water erosion. ADK is pleased with the designation and siting of a canoe and kayak parking lot for access to the Hudson and Opalescent Rivers. An additional parking area could be considered on conservation easement lands at or near the junction of Tahawus Road and the Upper Works Road (see map below).⁷ This opens about five miles of the Hudson River including Sandford Lake and five to seven miles of the Opalescent River depending on water level and current. DEC’s **proposed** southern parking area is a great take-out a point where the Hudson touches the Tahawus Road about 3 miles south of the junction of the Tahawus and Upper Works Roads (see map below).⁸ There is generous off the pavement parking at this take-out location. The proposed carry trail from this location should only have to be about 200 feet long.



MacIntyre West

The state's acquisition of this 5,770-acre tract includes 3,000-foot Mount Andrew and 16-acre Lake Andrew as well as Santanoni Brook which flows into Henderson Lake and Sucker Brook which flows into Newcomb Lake. We appreciate that DEC designated several campsites in the vicinity of the Santanoni Range.

Capacity to Withstand Use

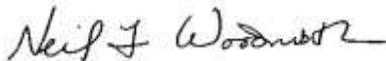
Recently, the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council, a planning entity composed of federal public land agencies (including the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service), posted its Visitor Use Management Framework. **This framework could provide additional insight to DEC's long-term planning process** which currently involves (1) the goal-achievement process; (2) the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) model employed by the U.S. Forest Service; and (3) the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) model employed by the National Park Service. One key component of this framework is the use of a sliding scale for all components of the process, to ensure that efforts match the size and scope of the project as well as the resources available.

ADK urges DEC to clearly define in the HPWUMP and VWFUMP a monitoring methodology, management indicators and thresholds, and a monitoring schedule. According to the VUMF, **“Indicators are defined as specific resource or experiential attributes that can be measured to track changes in conditions so that progress towards maintaining desired conditions can be assessed. Thresholds are defined as minimally acceptable conditions associated with each indicator....Thresholds serve a critical role to alert when conditions are close to becoming unacceptable.”**

ADK looks forward assisting DEC in ensuring that funding exists for monitoring, analysis, and appropriate management actions.

Thank you for the great work you do protecting and stewarding our Adirondack Forest Preserve.

Sincerely,



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¹ <http://opdgig.dos.ny.gov/#/home>

² <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/2574.html>

³ <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/2574.html>

⁴ <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/2574.html>

⁵ <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/2574.html>

⁶ <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/22587.html>

⁷ http://www.communitywalk.com/location_info/1635513/13795004

⁸ http://www.communitywalk.com/location_info/1635513/13009334