Being Permitted

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Being permitted is better than not, but either is still a loss of personal freedom. In our Adirondack High Peaks Wilderness we have chosen Hardin's "mutual coercion mutually agreed upon" to achieve a higher good than mere personal preference. We are still permitted to visit the mountains but we are not permitted to camp in large groups, to let our dogs run loose, camp above 4,000 feet, or camp within 150 feet of water-bodies except at specially permitted, "designated" campsites. All too soon, I believe, we will need more and even greater restrictions. I think we should consider how user fees and reservations for backcountry permits could work to protect our wilderness values as we develop the remaining unit management plans (UMPs) for the Forest Preserve.

Certain scenic attractions in the Adirondacks, like many of our beautiful and often sublime vistas, are traditionally the visitor's destination. The aesthetic value of these destinations is among the values we cherish that make protecting the Adirondacks worthwhile to society. The problem is the number of visitors. For example, on a single day not long ago, more than 400 people visited Mt. Marcy. As many as 60 or 70 hikers were actually on the peak at the same time.

According to the recently approved High Peaks UMP, use levels since 1988 have nearly tripled to at least 140,000 registered visitors annually. During July and August, between 20,000 and 30,000 people register each month at the trailheads, mostly to visit just popular eastern High Peaks.

Imagine if only a fourth of all these thousands of people, or their dogs, happen to defecate or urinate along the trail. Consider, too, how many people don't bother to register. No wonder it's difficult to find that private place you might need along the trail without stumbling through fields of tissue. Our wilderness trails are really becoming just long, narrow, septic corridors.

Beyond annual totals, the number of users in the same area at the same time obviously has a significant impact on our real or perceived experience of solitude and the degree to which our activities may be unconfined. Our scenic attractions have become so very popular that many of us no longer even consider seeking "wilderness" values at these locations. Those attracted to the phenomenon of solitude within Nature must seek it elsewhere in what is left of the backcountry.

I am hopeful that, so long as there are still "outstanding opportunities" available for solitude somewhere, even if not everywhere at the same level or even in the most beautiful places, some primary wilderness values will have been preserved.

The admirably crafted — however compromised you might think — High Peaks Wilderness UMP and its new restrictions may be an important step toward accepting the even greater restrictions we must accept in the future. The goal of the public servants we've hired to stand as guardians of wilderness values, both human and wild, is to support the optimum level of human use without damage to ecological processes or species. Protecting the biodiversity and ecological values of our Forest Preserve is the highest purpose of the wilderness designation even if that means, in some places, we fail to provide all the social values of a wilderness such as outstanding opportunities to experience solitude and
unconfined forms of recreation. Solitude and unconfined activities clearly become a secondary concern to damage and crowd control at our most scenic attractions.

At some point in the near future, it seems apparent to me, even the most sophisticated education programs and non-intrusive structural arrangements (like strategically located and sized parking lots), coupled with the very best made and maintained trails to places like Mt. Marcy, will simply be inadequate to protect the ecological processes of wilderness from the hordes of the viburn-soled and their dogs. Even if the DEC, with the help of the ADK and all the other wonderful volunteer groups that build and maintain our trails, had all the money they needed each and every year, there would still come a time when there are just too many people. People want to visit the best mountain vistas and there will be a lot more people in the coming years.

The fact of the matter is: there will never be enough funds from volunteers or appropriations from the state to have the well-maintained trails we already need. The state of New York will never adequately fund primitive hiking trails in the Adirondacks. It simply isn’t politically feasible given our diverse society and its many, frequently conflicting values. And why should New Yorkers, especially those neither hardy nor adventurous nor rich enough, pay for the enjoyment of the few who can enjoy this kind of recreation? Further, why should New Yorkers pay the full cost when nearly half of the registered visitors to the High Peaks aren’t even New Yorkers? It is only right that the people who use and enjoy the trails, including foreign visitors and those from other states, pay their share of the cost. User fees are the appropriate mechanism for funding the necessary trail construction and maintenance.

Perhaps a reasonable approach to take is to authorize the ADK and other recognized trail user groups to collect the user fees on the trails they officially adopt in order to fund the DEC-supervised trail improvement and maintenance activities on those trails. Importantly, in addition to acquiring the necessary funds for the specific trails, the process of collecting these fees by the user groups would vastly improve data collection for management decisions and visitor education activities.

In our society’s efforts to deal with pollution we have found that dilution is not the solution, because in the end there is no ‘away.’ Likewise, the solution to the over-use of trails to our most scenic attractions is not the deliberate dispersion of visitors to the backcountry or other scenic destinations. That only destroys the opportunities still available for solitude at sites only a little less attractive than the most popular sites. It also jeopardizes the best remaining areas needed for the protection of Northern Forest species and ecosystems. The increase in use of these less-used trails would require them to be upgraded and better maintained as well, further draining needed funds from the heavily-used trails.

Instead, I suggest a limited number of backcountry permits for those trails not popular enough now to be adopted by a user group. These permits and the user fee might be administered in a manner similar to the DEC’s current system for camping reservations at popular lakes. To my way of thinking, the reservation limits should be no higher than current use-levels and maybe even less. As an advocate of wilderness values, I even believe that proof of rescue insurance should be required as part of the permit process. The high cost of rescuing some wilderness enthusiasts from the consequences of their actions can never be adequately planned for and sucks desperately needed funds from other important budget lines at the DEC, like trail maintenance operations. Besides, with very little use pressure in these remote areas, marked, cleared, and maintained trails and campsites beyond what the users can or might do for themselves are not appropriate or necessary for preserving wilderness values.

Personally, I would like to see regions of the Adirondack wilderness returned to great trailless tracts of land in its natural state which, while not a trackless wilderness, would nevertheless offer outstanding opportunities for a truly primitive and unconfined experience in search of solitude among the Other. To me and others who relish the challenge, bushwhacking with map and compass, maybe getting lost, crossing bridge-free rivers, maybe falling and getting hurt, pushing and shoving a canoe over land and around fallen trees between lakes, and finding suitable campsites are all important aspects of the wilderness experience.

In this issue of AJES, I am pleased and honored to display the art of Barry Hopkins, Jon Erickson, the new President of the Adirondack Research Consortium, describes some of the Consortium’s successes and calls for more activism from the membership to promote several new and exciting efforts. Mike Rechlin, et al., announce a new timeline study of forestry practices and invite other investigators to participate. An exciting aspect of this collaborative research effort is that it also doubles as an interpretive display at the Visitor Interpretive Center in Paul Smiths. In Perspectives, Betsy Lowe presents the development of the Adirondack Natural History Museum in Tupper Lake. Our Feature articles in this issue include Mary Rutley’s look at black flies and Wayne Ouderkirk’s essay on wilderness philosophy, which brings us full circle and reminds us of what the Adirondack wilderness means.

Comments?
Please direct your comments, suggestions or ideas for material for AJES to Gary Chilson, Editor, Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies, Paul Smith’s College, Paul Smiths, NY 12970, chilsog@paulsmiths.edu.