

A Proposed Adirondack Wilderness Planning Strategy

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Introduction

Forty-four percent of the Forest Preserve land within the Adirondack Park has been allocated into 16 wilderness areas. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) is designated to manage those wilderness areas and other management units within the 2.3 million acres of land in public ownership in the Adirondack Park. Those wilderness areas must be managed within the guidelines of the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (State of New York, 1989). However, planning and management of the wilderness areas in the Forest Preserve has been slow due to many constraints and pressures (Dawson, 1990; Dawson et al., 1994).

These 16 Adirondack Wilderness areas include over one million acres in the Forest Preserve and constitute the majority of all state and federal designated wilderness in the 11 northeastern states (State of New York, 1989). With large populations in the Northeastern United States, some wilderness ar-

reas experience high user densities and some professionals and public groups advocate that user limits need to be set to maintain user solitude and the integrity of the resource. The pressures of recreational users and interest groups have created the need for a broader strategy on how wilderness areas in the Forest Preserve can contribute to balancing the preservation and use goals in the Adirondack Park.

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Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (APSLMP) first defined wilderness, only 7 of the 16 wilderness area unit management plans (UMP) are completed or near completion (NYSDEC, 1985, 1987, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1994a, 1994b). The UMP completion rate of 44% in the Adirondack wilderness areas is similar to the

38% that was reported for completion and approval of national wilderness UMPs in 1988 (Reed et al., 1989).

Wilderness Planning

Following a review of the existing Adirondack wilderness area UMPs and the APSLMP, Dawson et al. (1994) reported several observations. First, the 16 wilderness areas have a high degree of variability in recreational conditions and use with reported use ranging from hundreds of visitors in the Pepperbox Wilderness to over 100,000 visitors in the High Peaks Wilderness. Information about wilderness area size, miles of trails, and number of lean-to camping facilities suggests differences in accessibility and user solitude. The number of user trips varies by day of week, season, trail location, and wilderness area. Although very little information is available about Adirondack wilderness users (Wildland Research Center, 1969; Snowden, 1976; Alberga and Dawson, 1994; Dawson, 1994; Dawson and Hammitt, 1996), Dawson et al. hypothesized that users are being displaced by crowding, loss of solitude, and localized environmental impacts. Second, that the carrying capacity analyses, as man-

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dated by the APSLMP, are inadequate in the current Adirondack Wilderness UMPs due to little or no research and information on physical, biological, and social impacts of use and management.

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Currently, Adirondack wilderness areas represent a continuum of wilderness conditions and opportunities that could be maintained to provide for a diversity of wilderness user experiences. Maintaining this continuum will be difficult since ongoing planning efforts in the intensively used High Peaks wilderness area (NYSDEC, 1994a) suggest limiting party size and redistributing some use to other less crowded areas. Also, ongoing NYSDEC planning efforts to increase and distribute use across all wilderness and other management units within the Forest Preserve, using information and educational initiatives, could significantly change current wilderness use patterns.

Recommendations for a Strategic Wilderness Plan

Dawson et al. (1994) recommend the creation of a comprehensive, integrated, and proactive strategic management plan that considers the 16 wilderness areas as integral parts of a larger Adirondack Wilderness System. This comprehensive planning approach is appropriate within the current APSLMP guidelines and it would

ensure that individual wilderness unit management plans and implementation practices for the 16 areas are integrated within the framework of an Adirondack Wilderness System.

Improving the carrying capacity analyses requires that research be conducted on the physical, biological, and social conditions in the wilderness areas (Hendee et al., 1990; Hendee and Ewert, 1993) and that indicators or measures of these conditions are standardized across the 16 areas. These indicators of conditions must be appro-

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priate and applicable across the entire Adirondack Wilderness System and allow for monitoring of changes within the units and system wide. Such universal indicators of change would allow the carrying capacity analyses to be included in a more comprehensive planning framework.

These recommendations for a Adirondack Wilderness System Strategic Plan may appear obvious or easily achieved to some readers, but it will be difficult to successfully conduct such a planning and management process in the Adirondack Forest Preserve due to several situations. The 24 year his-

tory of current management places the NYSDEC in the dilemma of managing without most wilderness UMPs for so long that current users have likely reached the conclusion that what they are experiencing is the result of planning and management as intended under the 1972 APSLMP wilderness designation. Current uses, both appropriate and inappropriate, are well established and will have their advocates during the planning process. Furthermore, the many situations that impeded the NYSDEC from completing unit management plans to date are not likely to change in the near future. To successfully plan for and manage the 16 Adirondack wilderness areas, we must do as Cole (1993) suggests and "increase investment in planning, acquisition, and dissemination of knowledge." Such endeavors will not be without their difficulties and rewards. Those rewards are for present and future generations to appreciate.

This proposal is meant to stimulate thought and discussion about the UMP process for the Adirondack Wilderness areas. It is not presented to undermine the hard

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work and efforts of NYSDEC staff and public volunteers working on UMPs, but rather to focus on the need for: (1) baseline recreational

information to use for comparisons over time and for carrying capacity analyses; and (2) a strategic and systematic planning approach (i.e., beyond the APSLMP) that considers the interrelationships among the wilderness areas and between the wilderness areas and the wild forests and primitive areas of the Adirondack Park. □



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