

Catskill Park Advisory Committee Meeting Notes

Wednesday, July 29, 2020 at 10:00am
Held via Zoom Conference

Jeff Senterman welcomed all present to the meeting and thanked everyone for taking part virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He said that the meeting was shorter than normal to make it work better for a virtual situation. He asked that everyone be patient and respectful as we worked through having a meeting in this format.

Discussion:

Jeff Senterman opened the discussion of Catskills High Use Issues and Areas. He reviewed the well known high use areas in the Catskills, including Peekamoose Blue Hole, Kaaterskill Clove, and others, and reported that the impression by most Catskill Park users is that visitation has increased across the board. It appears that many trailheads are filling up regularly, and weekday use now rivals past weekend use.

He also mentioned that in addition to increased use, we are seeing an increase in the diversity of the visitors to the region. That diversity includes people from many racial and cultural backgrounds that haven't traditionally been active in the Catskill Park. The diversity also includes many people who are new to the outdoors and seem to be finding the outdoors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He said that he hopes that we recognize that this increase in diversity is a good thing and that the presence of non-traditional user groups doesn't generate discord by itself. He said that he understands that this takes place in the background of incredibly high use across the Park that needs to be properly managed to protect natural resources and public safety.

Sean (Town of Hunter Councilperson) echoed Jeff's impressions about the increasing levels of use. He stated that the Town of Hunter is seeing increased use. At a recent public town meeting, locals and first responders and town officials discussed the issue. Sean reported locals are frustrated and have been asking the town to respond to the litter and traffic issues. He states they are open to any and all solutions. First responders at the meeting also reported serious concerns especially regarding the safety around traffic issues. Sean reports frequent contact with Ranger Dawson regarding these issues.

According to Sean, safety, access for first responders, and traffic flow led to the Town's decision to begin towing cars that are parked illegally. They have set up an impound lot.

Reports of a lack of social distancing in the Clove were discussed and that many of the visitors weren't wearing masks.

The use of North/South Lake (an intensive use area) for handling some of the recreators seeking swimming or picnicking was discussed. N/S Lake has been held to 50% capacity

due to COVID 19, but could be used to help manage traffic and crowding. The need for signage on route 23A to direct visitors to N/S Lake was discussed.

Tom (NYCDEP) reported that usage is double what would normally be expected on DEP lands too. He reported double the number of permit applications as well. Rail trail counters show uptick since COVID 19. Weekday numbers rival previous weekend numbers.

DEP has also noted an increase in prohibited activities that include:

- swimming in the reservoirs,
- parties/BBQs,
- trespassing in secure areas

Maria (Catskill 3500 Club) reported an increase in fire rings and tree cutting and “just a lot of impacts on tops of the mountains.”

Jeff agreed, reporting the impact on trailless peaks is noticeable, including increased definition of existing herd paths and increased COVID-related litter on trailed and trailless peaks (wipes, gloves, masks), as well as an overall increase in trash.

Ramsay (Catskill Mountainkeeper) agreed as well and reported similar observations at Alder Lake, Big Pond, and Beaverkill Campground. He reported that the areas are overwhelmed with a chronic overflow of people. He said that while the NYSDEC staff are doing a great job, the traffic and sheer numbers are overwhelming the infrastructure. Increase in illegal camping at Big Pond was also reported, and local folks have been reaching out to Ramsay about these issues.

Lisa (Morgan Outdoors) concurs. She noted that her recent visit to Frick Pond seemed positive, though.

Kathy Nolan reported that the Claryville Swimming Hole is experiencing a significant increase in use. She reports that because of restrictions at Blue Hole, crowds are now moving to smaller swimming holes in the vicinity.

Brainstorming about what can be done, some suggestions included:

- Signage,
- parking,
- permits,
- closures,
- efforts to disperse use
- increase capacity at N/S Lake or Blue Hole?

Maria noted in response to Kathy’s suggestions that Woodstock has closed swimming holes.

Maria asked DEC staff about litter pick ups and the use of volunteers.

Jeff Rider (DEC) responded: lots of volunteer groups are active in the Catskills at this time. DEC would like to team up with volunteers – coordination with DEC is key for the safety of all volunteers, and actual removal from the site of garbage that has been collected. Use of either a Volunteer Service Agreement or a Temporary Revocable Permit to ensure groups work with DEC, and have coverage by DEC’s workers comp insurance is important.

Sean mentioned that Ranger Dawson had also requested that volunteers be organized and coordinated with DEC.

Kathy Nolan mentioned the increased volunteer and steward presence at hot spots throughout the Catskills.

Ann (Catskill Mountain Club) reports that CMC trails are seeing double normal usage levels. She also mentioned the litter pick up at Big Pond.

Andy (Catskill Center) reported that Peekamoose Blue Hole, Kaaterskill Falls and the Kaaterskill Clove stewards are reporting increases in visitation and high numbers. Also increased garbage: dumpsters are getting filled and overfilled. Carrying capacity is being exceeded. Andy feels the permit system is working: it’s doing what it was designed to do. This year they are seeing an increase in people using the permits. He also notes there have been more confrontations than normal, and particularly at Kaaterskill Falls, the stewards are seeing more confrontational attitudes and behaviors and more belligerence. He reported the stewards role is educational while the AFRs focus on parking. He notes that in Platte Clove all the above increases have been seen as well as an increase in the creation of social trails.

Katie Petronis, Deputy Commissioner for Natural Resources of the NYSDEC added that DEC is looking to create short term solutions for this summer. She notes that the key variables in all high usage they’ve seen is easy access and a water source or feature. She mentioned partnering with DOT regarding short term signage and parking solutions.

Carol O’Beirne (Central Catskills Chamber of Commerce) reported an increase in inquiries, mostly seeking hiking. She has been directing visitors to the DEC website, NYNJTC, and the Catskill Center. She requests information for the chamber of commerce to provide for the public. She suggests a PR campaign directed at downstaters, and reports there are issues with high levels of visitation on Main Street too. She wants to see outreach occur before these visitors reach the Catskills.

DEC Updates:

Peter Frank reports outdoor recreation took off beyond anyone’s expectations. A huge increase in inexperienced users is reported. Huge numbers of new users. DEC is committed to finding solutions. He predicts there will be some drop off in numbers, post-COVID and also notes that DEC has been integral in the NYS COVID response.

Regional reports

Region 3:

Bill Rudge reiterated what has been stated regarding increases in use. He states there's been a huge surge in visitation where a water feature is present: they are seeing both the greatest increase in use and the greatest impact to the resource in those areas. He noted that there are many different areas and with limited staffing it's been challenging to stay on top of every area and every issue. DEC has been reaching out to other law enforcement agencies and continuing an ongoing dialog with stakeholders at Peekamoose Blue Hole. The area and the department's efforts to maintain public safety and protection of the natural resource are undergoing continual evaluation.

Bill noted that every area is unique, with specific issues and concerns, and thus will need unique solutions.

Pine Rohrs reported on the Shandaken Wild Forest draft UMP, noting that it will go public soon and that there will not be a public meeting due to COVID 19, but that the public comment period will be announced and comments sought.

Ian Dunn reported working with the Catskill Center and volunteers so that now the Tremper Fire Tower is open to the public 24/7. Visitors may gain access to the tower any time. This is a pilot program designed to increase public access.

Working with Tahawus trails, construction of a new trail to the Red Hill Fire Tower is underway. New parking area is also being constructed.

Ian reports that he has been contacted by a number of volunteer groups interested in assisting the department with litter pick up. He states that all interested in helping should contact him (region 3) or Alicia Sullivan (region 4). Ian underscores the need and expressed the desire to help facilitate volunteer efforts.

Ian reported that the flights needed for lean to construction have been delayed. This autumn is possible but it's still unknown.

Region 4:

Jeff Rider reports that water-based recreational visitation numbers have been astronomical. Due to COVID restrictions, the department saw the "summer rush" begin much earlier and it never reduced. He reports that while N/S Lake is technically limited, they are allowing roughly double the car allowance daily. They have been monitoring the beach area carefully. He also notes that the Kaaterskill Clove area has been a hot topic for the department, again mostly due to highway congestion and trash. He states that the number of people using the Clove for recreation is roughly one-third of the number at Kaaterskill Falls.

Mountaintop Historical Society has been a great partner to DEC. The visitor center itself is closed but their parking area has been used to park approximately 200 cars per day. This has been a key resource for visitors to the area. The Historical Society has asked for assistance regarding garbage and security.

The Molly Smith parking area has been closed. Infrastructure improvements were made including some rock work. After the work was completed the decision was made in concert with law enforcement to keep the parking area closed for the time being.

The department has been increasing the number of garbage sweeps done each week, added signage and moved some messaging sign boards lower into the Clove, hoping to assist more visitors in finding their way to N/S Lake as an alternative to K Falls or the Clove.

Jeff (Rider) reported that parking tickets are not a sufficient disincentive. Towing seems more helpful. Also linking the ticket to the registration would help as many tickets are simply ignored.

Regarding Colgate Lake, the Sheriff's office will be enforcing no parking restrictions on Colgate Lake Road. Continued heavy use has meant parking issues and road congestion problems have been ongoing and severe.

Greene County additional issues include COVID-related concerns regarding lack of social distancing. Jeff noted when he observed groups that while many were not masked, it appeared that groups were staying distant from other groups, limiting unmasked mingling to their own immediate group.

Jeff (Rider) thanked and applauded the Hunter Mountain Fire Tower volunteers for their excellent work during the COVID crisis and increased visitation.

Sean spoke to the issue of the demographics and behavior of the visitors to the Clove. He talked about the need to reach these folks and communicate with them.

Jeff (Senterman) responded by reminding the group of our own demographics and that inclusivity is key. He reminded the group that we need to stay cognizant of how we talk about and address these issues within the context of inclusivity. With regard to concerns raised about antagonistic behaviors and difficult interactions, DEC staff acknowledged the tensions and the posturing. Both locals and visitors have displayed antagonistic behavior witnessed by DEC staff.

A question regarding water testing came up and DEC responded that water sampling has been done at Blue Hole and results were negative. Kaaterskill Clove samples will be taken and tested.

Ramsay added that LNT is trail oriented, and wilderness oriented, and that the LNT language doesn't resonate for roadside water-seeking recreators. He suggested making the language of any signage or outreach more blunt and more concrete. He also suggested visible garbage containers.

Regarding towing in the Town of Hunter, it was suggested that addressing the issues in one area could lead to moving the problem to another area. Coordination between regions 3 and 4 to ensure that a strong enforcement policy in one location doesn't create a new problem in another location was suggested.

Michelle Yost suggested creating a table or spreadsheet identifying locations and efforts to address problems, as a resource for all. Jeff said he'd set up a task force with Kathy Nolan to undertake this.

ACTION ITEM: Establish a Task Force to identify hot spots and problem areas in the Catskills and the actions and efforts that have been taken to address those problems. Place in a table format for use by CPAC and other groups/agencies trying to address high use issues across the Park.

Alicia Sullivan provided her updates in writing. Several UMP updates and trail improvement updates re: work by Tahawus Trails were included via Zoom chat.

DEP updates:

Their focus has been on keeping lands open and their programs running. Steam cleaning and recreational boating programs were impacted but are now back up and running. Rest rooms at Ashokan rail trail were closed but are now back open. Stewards coordinated by the WLC and the CCCD installed several dog waste stations after concerns regarding an increase in dog poop bags was noticed.

The Ashokan Quarry trail is now open.

Shavertown Trail reopened after the work was completed. They are considering a new vista.

Many different outreach programs did get cancelled but staff is now gearing up for the hunting season.

There has been a slow down on initiating new projects due to budget issues.

Paul Lenz noted that so far the Department has not seen significant negative results of high use. He expressed the belief that parking areas limit use.

DOT updates:

They are moving forward with a Catskills Park viewer - a public facing platform that will allow the public to see roadwork in a given area. They are also working with DEC on a gateway project, and looking to hold a transportation subcommittee meeting in August.

Stakeholder Updates:

Jeff thanked the two stakeholder groups who provided written updates prior to the meeting. He said that he had distributed those reports with the final agenda. Jeff said that he would appreciate it if more stakeholders could submit these reports ahead of time so he can send them out to the entire CPAC membership and so that meetings move more quickly, especially in this virtual format. If a group submits a written report they are also welcome to provide a verbal update, but the hope is that CPAC members can review the written reports ahead of time and ask questions if necessary and/or the stakeholder can provide any timely update since the report was written.

CCCD update:

The Catskill Center is currently seeking a consultant to work with on developing an internal Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion plan for the organization. Part of that consultants work will also be to assist in the creation of a Catskill Park working group on JEDI issues and have that group begin to work on a JEDI plan for the Park.

Catskill Fire Tower Project updates:

Balsam Lake Mountain is opening after COVID related closure.

Red Hill is celebrating its 100th year anniversary.

CMC updates:

Report was submitted and circulated. They are working to provide hikers with information via their website to disperse use.

Catskill Park Coalition update:

Jeff said that the Catskill Park Coalition held a great lobby day in 2020, right before COVID issues. Very successful - included items in the EPF like funding for the Catskill Science Collaborative and the Catskills Visitor Center. It also included additional stewardship funding in general for the Catskill Park. Challenge is in the current funding environment due to COVID-19 response, the State has not been able to make these investments yet.

Jeff said that he's not sure if the Coalition will be holding a lobby day in 2021, and even if one was held, it won't look like the normal lobby day. He said to stay tuned for developments as we work around COVID-19 and for Coalition members to look for an invitation to start discussion 2021 efforts soon.

CRISP:

John Thompson from CRISP provided an update of the work that the CRISP team has completed in the region. He also reported that the Catskill Center's Catskills Invasive Strike Team has been active this year. He said that the Catskill Center's CRISP staff have been working with the Strike team at 14 different sites, mostly campgrounds, with 3 invasive species targeted. They have also addressed 8 Giant Hogweed sites with 192 stems dug up.

Catskill Scenic Byways update:

Catskill Mountain Scenic Byway submitted a written report. Mountain Cloves Scenic Byway provided a quick update of activities that have occurred.

Catskill Science Collaborative update:

This year there are 4 fellows doing research in the Catskills. The projects are focused on sediment, bear education, hemlock woolly adelgid, and stream habitat.

Catskills Visitor Center update:

The Visitor Center, after being closed due to COVID-19 concerns, is now open using a walk-up window for the public. The grounds are also open, including the ability to climb the stairs on the Fire Tower (the cab is open when staffing levels permit).

Hunter Area Trails Coalition:

Things are moving along. The HATC expressed the desire to see CPAC become more of an action group with more actionable items shared.

NYNJTC update:

There are summit stewards at Slide and Giant Ledge. They got a late start due to COVID but are out and doing trail maintenance as well as hiker education. The TC is seeking to fill trail maintainer vacancies. Perspective offered from outside the Catskills - the TC notes that extremely high use is being experienced in areas from the Hudson valley to the Delaware Water gap. The challenges of heavy use are being experienced everywhere. The TC also reminded all volunteer groups that they do have a VSA in place which could be used for those wishing to organize litter pick ups. Contact TC staff to arrange.

Woodstock Land Conservancy update:

WLC updated the Committee on the status of the 850 Route 28 Project adjacent to the Bluestone Wild Forest and the Ashokan Rail Trail's activity this year.

Adjournment

Jeff said that he'll work to schedule the next meeting (also in a virtual format) in about three months. He said to look out for a doodle poll to assist in scheduling that meeting.