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Hiking expanded

Groups join forces to save landscape, develop more local trails

By ALVIN REINER, Staff Writer

ESSEX — Though the High Peaks draw thousands of hikers each year, trails through the lower elevations have their allure and need for preservation.

An effort is now under way to designate and develop hiking trails in North Country communities.

Champlain Area Trails, Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership, the Adirondack Council, the Eddy Foundation, 2C1Forest, and the Northeast Wilderness Trust have banded together to provide a multi-pronged approach to save the landscape from over-use, provide wildlife with natural byways and offer hiking opportunities.

Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership Director Chris Maron recently recalled a 2006 encounter he had with a Greek tourist who inquired about a place to hike.

Maron, together with Steven Kellogg and Bruce Klink, later developed an idea for a local trail system.

Jim Northup of Northeast Wilderness Trust said the intent is to "conserve a wild-way stretching together parcels of wild land that will benefit wildlife, nature and people.

"We want to create a greater permeability for wildlife to be comfortable."

Kellogg, a nationally known author and illustrator who lives in Essex, is a firm believer in developing the trail system.

"This is such an exciting idea to have people hike from hamlet to hamlet. The scenery here rivals the Lake Country of England."

EASEMENTS NEEDED

Northup indicated the project will involve either buying or obtaining conservation easements on hundreds of parcels of land.

Conservation easements are legal agreements between landowners and a land trust or government agency that limit uses of the land in order to protect conservation values.

They allow land owners to continue to own and use land and to sell it or pass it on to heirs. But hikers could use the land, as well.

In Vermont, Northeast Wilderness Trust is doing a similar project that will go from Button Bay to Camel's Hump, as well as to the Northeast Kingdom and into Canada.

TRAIL NETWORK

Champlain Area Trails board member John Davis, who is conservation director for the Adirondack Council, said they looked at maps "and realized that a trail network between Essex and Westport could easily be established using lands already open to the public. These include the state's Split Rock Wild Forest, Adirondack Land Trust's Coon Mountain Preserve, Eddy Foundation property and willing landowners."

Eventually, the hope is to create trails north from Essex to Willsboro and Keeseville.

"We also want to go south to Port Henry and Crown Point, as well as west to Elizabethtown and to the borders of the Jay and Giant wilderness areas," said Champlain Area Trails board member David Reuther.

"Our dream is to eventually create a network of trails like they have in Europe, where visitors take the train to a trailhead, hike from town to town for a week or two and then return to their homes by train."

PREPARING TRAILS

Champlain Area Trails makes the trails user friendly, with maps, trail descriptions and guides to flora and fauna one might come across during the hike.

Most of the hikes are described as "there and back," with "mild" ratings.

Hundreds of hours have already been volunteered by crews to create or improve trails. Existing trails, many previously used by loggers, have become overgrown and need to be cleared.

The trails are kept narrow to reduce erosion and prevent vehicular intrusions.

'GREAT RESOURCE'

Volunteer Donna Sonnett of Essex considers the trails "a great resource out of the High Peaks as a draw for this area. It is very accessible and provides a different view of the Adirondack Park. It's a great opportunity for spotting wildlife, such as deer, bear and coyote. It's quite a thrill." Sonnett feels the trails will be good for local businesses and draw Vermont tourists, as they are close to the ferry.

Another volunteer, Keith Giles of Westport, notes the unique terrain and ecology in this area.

"I have felt the Adirondack Park needs to balance preservation with recreational opportunities and tourism. This is a way to get back to nature without being overly strenuous."

Taking a break from clearing a trail, Kevin Raines of Wadhams said that in a relatively populated area, "the quiet of these trails is amazing. I just fell in love with this place. For me, a lot of the draw is the land itself and the people who live here. The persistence of the people matches the persistence of the landscape."

LOW-IMPACT USE

Bill Amadon is at the forefront of making the trails a reality by leading trail crews.

"I grew up bushwhacking," he said. "I feel this is low-impact use of the land and will be great for local businesses. We are trying to create trails that are not difficult, but there is a lot of variance in the woods, from grown-over farmland to a progression of forests.

"Hikers can see a lot of changes and different species of trees, ground cover and flowers.

"These trails give a recreation potential that is more than just walking the local roads. We need to encourage a trail system and thus people will be more in contact with the land, rather than have it be something that needs to be tamed."

RESPECT

Amadon said it's important to work with private landowners. Hikers need to respect the landowners and stay on the trails on easement lands, he said.

"There also needs to be more education through the schools.

"We want to encourage diversity and not create polarization, such as motorized vehicle users and tree-huggers.

"I try to develop the trail to be self-sustaining and thus need little maintaining.

FUNDING

Champlain Area Trails has received financial support from International Paper Co. Foundation, Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadricentennial Mini-Grant Program and the Eddy Foundation.

Eddy Foundation President Jamie Phillips is a member of the Champlain Area Trails Board of Directors.

"We are pleased to make our land available for this segment of the trail network," Phillips said. "The trails provide residents with a nearby place to hike and offer visitors non-motorized outdoor recreation opportunities."