The High Peaks Wilderness: This Resource is Limited

By Dave Gibson

In the recent news and comments about ongoing crowding in the High Peaks there are few references to the document which ostensibly is guiding the state’s management actions there: the 1999 Highs Wilderness Complex Unit Management Plan, or UMP. That management plan is downloadable from the DEC website, www.dec.ny.gov. It has a lot of important things to say about applying wilderness management and carrying capacity concepts to the very practical problems of managing the widely varying human use pressures over the great distances and very different environments of the High Peaks.

The final UMP was a long time in coming, and this was due to DEC budgets, staffing and intense pressures and disagreements among organized constituencies for the High Peaks. First broached in 1974, the first UMP draft came out in 1978. Another draft did not emerge until 1994. By the time the High Peaks UMP was adopted as SLMP compliant in 1999, significant compromises had been reached. One of the most significant changes was removal from the 1994 draft of a camping or overnight permit reservation requirement in the heavily used eastern zone of the High Peaks: Van Hoevenberg trail to Marcy Dam, Colden and Flowed Lands.
The late Barbara McMartin, heralded Adirondack guidebook author, historian and activist, was a member of all the High Peaks citizen advisory committees (CAC) dating to the 1970s. These committees were advisory, intended to structure and focus the diverse citizen advice to the DEC as the department climbed the steep hill of drafting a management plan that would comply with UMP guidelines in the State Land Master Plan. The CAC’s did a great deal of work in those years. The last committee meeting, I believe, was in 1993. Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve feels the time has come to re-assemble a High Peaks CAC, as reported in the Almanack recently by writer Mike Lynch.

Anyone wishing to better understand the challenges, controversies and compromises surrounding the High Peaks UMP can read Barbara McMartin’s first-hand account on pages 264-276 of her book Perspectives on the Adirondacks, A Thirty-year Struggle by People Protecting their Treasure (2002, Syracuse University Press). Barbara concludes this chapter by writing: “For all its inadequacies, the HPWA UMP is a fair management tool, one that can guide DEC in the future. It was not groundbreaking, it did not deal with future and inevitable pressures, it has not solved all the problems that the CAC, DEC and APA catalogued. It is a first step, and if the next steps – implementation, revision, and planning for permits – are taken in a timely fashion and with vision, good things might yet be accomplished, for experience has shown that amending unit management plans can be a much swifter process than creating them.”

A memorandum from the Adirondack Park Agency’s State Lands supervisor Chuck Scrafford to his APA executive director in 1999 also provides perspective on the UMP. Scrafford wrote: “DEC staff has done an outstanding job in preparing this Plan. It is comprehensive and reflects a strong commitment to contemporary wilderness management principles and to the High Peaks Wilderness. Those who worked on it should be proud of their accomplishment. I would particularly like to commend Jim Papero, the principal author of the Plan for his unflagging effort and commitment to this Plan over the last nine years and his unwavering commitment to wilderness and professional wilderness management.” A personal note: Dan Plumley and I (then we were with The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks) honored Chuck Scrafford and Jim Papero with the Howard Zahniser Wilderness award in 1999 for their lengthy collaboration to achieve the High Peaks Wilderness UMP.

Scrafford’s APA memo contains important clues to the difficulties both agencies faced in moving the High Peaks UMP forward: “The planning process has been deliberate, building on the valuable work of not only the most recent citizens advisory committee but on the work of earlier advisory groups and Department initiatives. The content of the Plan does not contain dramatically new ideas or recommendations. The issues have been on the table for 45 years and the solutions debated for 25 years, yet the complexity of the issues and the strongly held views of the numerous constituencies have made this effort long and difficult” (emphasis mine).
Chuck Scrafford’s memo then expresses a level of personal and professional passion for wilderness and preservation absent from the rather bloodless, careful, if not scripted APA and DEC staff public communications of today. Scrafford’s wisdom still applies to the current challenges in the High Peaks and other pressured wild spaces in America: “It is my personal hope that this Plan is the first step in managing the High Peaks as wilderness. Everyone likes to say this is the premier wilderness in the Northeast, but it up to us to make it so. The High Peaks Wilderness belongs to all the people of the State and it is our charge to not just manage it for today, but to preserve it for the next generation of New Yorkers. This is not an easy task when it is within a day’s drive of 70 million people and more than 150,000 people a year visit the area. Just as the State must assume its obligation, the public must recognize that this resource is limited and seriously threatened and that without individual restraint the High Peaks Wilderness will continue to be compromised and eventually lost” (emphasis mine).

As a result of the ongoing, unrelenting human pressures on parts of the High Peaks Wilderness since the 1970s I am a believer that parts of that Wilderness require more than indirect user controls – although such indirect controls are critically important. On behalf of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks I wrote to the APA and DEC in 1999 that the UMP had been weakened “to minimize reference to Wilderness Camping Permits as a useful management tool. This despite the continuous growth in human use of the eastern High Peaks and a ten-fold increase in trailhead registration...The 1994 Draft UMP said that ‘wilderness permits are a key management tool for protecting wilderness resources and ensuring high quality visitor experiences.’ This rather factual statement was removed in subsequent drafts and from the Final UMP....DEC has officially moved hardly at all on this issue for 21 years despite justification that has only grown more marked every passing year, informed by over twenty years of experience in permit use by federal, state and provincial public lands agencies throughout North America.”

The Final High Peaks UMP of 1999 included this management statement under the subhead Campsites: “The department will form a working group in Year Three (that would have been 2003) to develop the structure and implementation process for a camping permit system. The working group will afford opportunity for public input and comment. Final recommendations to the Commissioner of Environmental Conservation will be made no later than Year Five (that would have been 2005). The decision to implement a permit system will require an amendment to this plan and will afford opportunity for public review and comment.”

To my knowledge, no working group on this subject was ever formed and no recommendations to the Commissioner were ever made. The user control management action that was taken in 1999, requiring (by regulation) possession of a self-issuing travel permit whenever a hiker or group leader passed a DEC trailhead in the High Peaks eastern zone, was viewed as ineffectual in its goals: conveying rules and information, collecting user data to schedule trail and campsite maintenance, measure use and assess impact, and to plan wilderness management budgets, and “to be used to ascertain if additional user controls are required.” The so-called “trip tickets”
were discontinued not many years after the regulation was issued. This is one of many issues in need of reorganized discussion today and one reason to reform a High Peaks Citizen Advisory Committee.