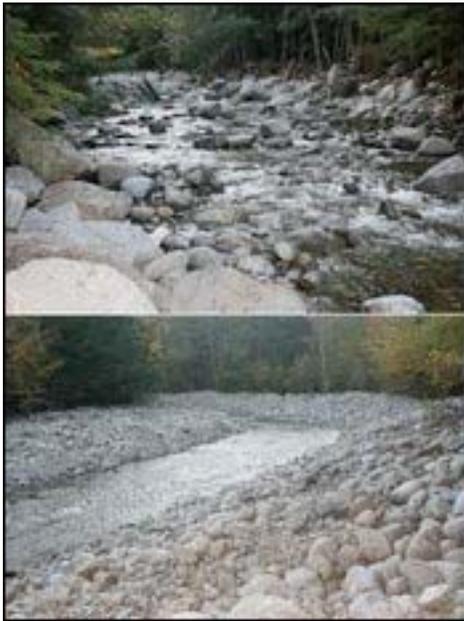


Trails, streams forever altered in storms' wake

Groups push to re-do river repairs

By Stephen Williams, Gazette Reporter
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Johns Brook in the Keene Valley is pictured before, above, and after Tropical Storm Irene.

ADIRONDACKS — A year after Tropical Storm Irene, hiking conditions in the High Peaks backcountry aren't the same as before, and never will be again.

The same can be said for some of the wild streams flowing out of the northern High Peaks and down into places like Keene and Keene Valley, which were also severely damaged.

But slowly, hiking trails are being re-routed or rebuilt to bypass spots where mud and rock slides took them out during the Aug. 28 flooding — and plans are being made to revisit what many consider botched initial stream repairs.

A handful of once-popular hiking trails remain closed a year after the storm, and some footbridges are still out. The Adirondack Mountain Club in early September will come out with a new High Peaks trail guide that reflects the changes, so future visitors can be better prepared for what to expect.

"In the High Peaks, there were some significant changes because of Irene damage, footbridges washed out, trails rerouted, that kind of thing," said John Kettlewell, the club's publications director.

The club, with volunteers and professional crews, does much of the physical trail work in the High Peaks. A club crew has built a new footbridge across Marcy Brook downstream from Marcy Dam, on one of the most-traveled trails into the High Peaks. Marcy Dam was washed out and its footbridge destroyed by the storm surge.

Immediately after the storm, the state Department of Environmental Conservation decided to close all the High Peaks hiking trails, keeping the public out of the woods through the Labor Day weekend.

Downed trees, washed-out trails and other unexpected circumstances would have made it easy for hikers to get lost, Kettlewell said.

Essex County Emergency Management Director Donald Jaquish said closing the trail system was the right decision, as many people would have gone hiking or camping over the big holiday weekend, and some of them would have been inexperienced or unprepared seasonal visitors.

"If that hadn't happened, there would have been deaths," Jaquish said.

While trail repairs continue, much public attention has focused on what happened to highly visible wild streams like Johns Brook that can be seen from major highways.

The emergency stream restoration work done in the immediate aftermath of Irene has been widely criticized on both aesthetic and environmental grounds.

With normal environmental reviews waived by a governor's emergency order, the damaged streams had their eroded banks lined with large amounts of heavy crushed stone, creating conditions that critics contend damaged the natural fish habitat and could make future flood damage worse.

"In the name of the governor's emergency order, world-class Adirondack and Catskill trout streams were, however unintentionally, treated like sluiceways," David Gibson and Dan Plumley of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, recently wrote on the organization's website.

Adirondack Wild, Trout Unlimited and other groups petitioned Cuomo in late September to reimpose the environmental review regulations, which the governor did a few days later, bringing work to a halt.

The state Department of Transportation last December installed some fish-friendly rock riffles in Johns Brook where it passes under Route 9N in Keene Valley, but that work was limited to within the highway right-of-way. Most of the other streams remain as they were after initial repairs.

But there's some hope that will change.

This summer, 2,800 feet of the East Ausable in Keene Valley was reconstructed again, but this time with extensive planning and with the involvement of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, DEC, the Essex County Soil and Water Conservation District and several private groups, including Adirondack Wild and Trout Unlimited.

In the Rivermede project, which will cost \$120,000 to \$130,000, large trees cut from nearby Rivermede Farm and wads of roots and strategically placed boulders have been used to establish a new, more-natural channel for the Ausable River.

The river there will be narrower and deeper, increasing its ability to keep water within the natural channel, and reducing the potential for floodwater to spill over its banks.

"The objective is to make the river back into a stable form, to increase fish habitat, and make it so it looks totally natural," said Carl Schwartz, coordinator of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, which did the project.

Biologists knew the Ausable had become wide and shallow well before the storm, and planning for the Rivermede project began 15 years ago. But after Irene, the Fish and Wildlife Service came in with advice on how to use local trees and materials to reduce what had once looked like a \$2 million cost.

In Hamilton County, a similar project is being done on the Sacandaga River north of Wells to repair other damage done by Tropical Storm Irene, Schwartz said.

Schwartz said the approach used at Rivermede can be replicated on other streams to restore their natural hydrology, though techniques would vary from stream to stream, depending on their natural condition.

"The plan is to try to go into some of those other streams that were made to look like rock ramps," Schwartz said.