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August 8, 2008

Mr. Mark Hohengasser
NY State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation
(Via email: mark.hohengasser@oprhp.state.ny.us)

Subject: **Minnewaska State Park Preserve Master Plan**

"The Trail Conference was founded in 1920 with two principal purposes: to establish and maintain a system of hiking trails, and to protect places of natural beauty ... Our interest in Minnewaska derives from both of these purposes. Hiking in this section of the Shawangunks has been a major activity for over a century."

Albert "Cap" Field

Dear Mr. Hohengasser,

The above comments were made by the then Trail Conference Executive Director at a 1980 public hearing on the proposed 590-acre Marriott Corporation development that would have violently shattered the natural beauty of the northern Shawangunks. When DEC approved the EIS submitted by Marriott, the Trail Conference joined the Friends of the Shawangunks and the Appalachian Mountain Club in a lawsuit against the DEC and Marriott. After the Second Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against Marriott in 1985, the corporation abandoned their plans for the development. The Trail Conference then joined other conservation groups to urge that this unique area be permanently protected, and the lands were eventually acquired by the State and absorbed into Minnewaska State Park.

Today, the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference is a federation of 100 organizational members and 10,000 individual members, whose volunteers are dedicated to the stewardship of a 1,700-mile network of hiking trails, including 52 miles within the Minnewaska State Park Preserve (Minnewaska SPP). The Trail Conference contributed to the existing Minnewaska State Park Preserve master plan, and we now welcome the opportunity to assist with the development of a new master plan for the Minnewaska SPP.

At this early stage in the planning process, our most important objective is to highlight the major issues we believe need attention. Rather than dwell on the issues raised by many others (including our strong support for park preserve status), we will focus our comments on recreational management issues, including the provision of expanded access to Minnewaska SPP for those who wish to explore the area on foot. In our view, the new master plan should include the following:

1. A cooperative management and stewardship approach
2. A comprehensive information system
3. Improved access to the park via designated trails and trailheads

The suggestions we offer below are derived from the long and practical experience of many people who love the lands of Minnewaska and have spent many thousands of hours making it a better place for all to enjoy and protect.

A cooperative management and stewardship approach

The first General Manager of PIPC, Major William Welch, was a great proponent of what he called “cooperative management,” whereby park professionals and volunteers worked together to monitor and manage park resources. The Trail Conference was founded on this concept, and we would like to suggest that “cooperative management” is an integral part of the solution to managing Minnewaska SPP, which is growing in size and popularity. The master plan should not only call for the involvement of volunteers in trail construction, but also seek to engage volunteers and visitors in protecting natural resources and improving the environmental literacy of its user groups. The Trail Conference has extensive experience in this area, and we would be glad to comment in more detail as the master planning process advances.

Moreover, the master plan must recognize that conditions within the park and surrounding areas will continue to change over time, and it should formally articulate a flexible approach to management and stewardship. Such an approach would recognize that the park and the larger landscape of which it is a part are dynamic natural and cultural environments that require ongoing policy reviews to allow management to adapt to changing circumstances.

A comprehensive information system

We believe that there is no management tool more powerful than ensuring that a significant percentage of park users are well informed and environmentally literate. These users can serve as the “eyes and ears” of the park, and as the interpreters of park rules and common sense to other users. Too often, we find over-strapped and under-budgeted park management implementing broad restrictions on use of available resources, when a pro-active education campaign would do far more to achieve the desired outcomes, and engender far more public support.

A comprehensive information system should start with informed park staff and an integrated signage system, and it should include the use of volunteer “ridgerunners” or “summit stewards” who are empowered to dispense backcountry advice and policies to park users. A carefully designed and regularly maintained system of signage that can adapt to changing conditions is possibly the most cost-effective component of a park management plan. The signage must clearly communicate the “what and why” of park policies, provide trip-planning and way-finding information, and educate users to the park experience. The Trail Conference believes that the master plan should call for the establishment of an information committee composed of park staff and user group representatives, who would analyze park information needs, develop messages and methods of communicating them to park users, and oversee the maintenance and updating of the system.

Improved access to the park via designated trails and trailheads

Minnewaska SPP has nearly doubled in acreage since the last master plan was completed, yet formal access to the Preserve (with parking provided) is still limited to the same three locations along Routes 44/55 (at the Preserve's main entrance, at the parking area for the Lower Awosting Carriageway, and at the Preserve's office at the High Peters Kill area). Parking is also available at The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Center in the Sam's Point area (but reduced from that available when the former commercial ice caves were in operation). All four of these parking areas have a parking fee and have limited space available. Moreover, all four areas are far removed from the interior area of the Preserve and from recent acquisitions. Additional formal access points need to be developed in order provide improved access to the lands recently added to the park and to relieve the pressure on the existing overcrowded access points. As a reaction to the inadequate access currently provided, a number of informal access points have developed spontaneously. These informal access points should be considered as sites for officially recognized access to the park, with parking provided.

Regarding multiuse trails, we appreciate and accept the access needs of other non-motorized users and feel the current network of multiuse carriageways and volunteer maintained hiking trails is functioning well. (See exception involving the Hamilton Point Carraigeway below.) However, we note that other user groups may request that existing single-track hiking trails be open to mountain biking and other users. We feel strongly that the existing hiking trails are not built or maintained to a standard that would safely accommodate multiuse but we are not adverse to the Park approving new, multiuse single-track trails.

Specific Access Point Proposals:

1. The Stony Kill area at the former Napanoch quarry should be improved and made an official parking and access point. In 2001, through the efforts of the Open Space Institute and the Trail Conference—and with the express approval of PIPC—land in this area was acquired for the specific purpose of providing access to Stony Kill Falls. However, this area has not yet been formally designated as an access point to Minnewaska SPP. Since this parking area is situated in a remote area and would serve primarily for those hikers wanting to access the falls, as well as those who wish to visit backcountry areas of Minnewaska SPP, it is not likely to attract a large number of visitors.
2. An official parking area should be established on Aumick Road, at the southern end of the Awosting Preserve area, thus providing improved access to this area, which was recently added to Minnewaska SPP.
3. Berme Road Park in the Village of Ellenville should be designated as an official parking and access point, thus providing access to Minnewaska SPP from the northwest and enabling the village's residents and visitors to benefit from the Preserve without having to travel a long distance to another access point.
4. Another official parking and access point should be established near the intersection of Mine Hollow Road and Foordmore Road in Kerhonkson, thus facilitating access to the Shevchenko parcel, added to Minnewaska SPP in 2005.
5. The official parking areas currently do not open until 9:00 A.M. This is a late start for many visitors and trail maintainers, who would like to begin their activities earlier. This problem has been brought to our attention a number of times by our volunteers and other Preserve visitors. One or more of the parking areas should be opened as early as 7:00 A.M.

6. The Jenny Lane parking area off of Route 44/55 should be reopened as a free parking facility. Alternatively, expanded parking should be made available at the intersection of Jenny Lane with Route 44/55. Currently, parking is limited to a very small area between the gate and the highway. This area is inadequate to accommodate groups that hike and maintain the trails in this area. Expanded parking in the Jenny Lake area would also serve as an overflow parking facility when the main parking areas are full on busy weekends.

Specific Trail Proposals:

1. Although many of the woods roads and carriageways in the park are currently blazed and extensively used by hikers, bikers and skiers, others are not maintained. We believe that additional routes should be properly maintained and blazed for the safety of the users, as well as to facilitate access to the backcountry by emergency services and maintenance personnel. Thus, we recommend that the following woods roads and carriageways be officially designated as trails:
 - a. The Smiley Carriageway, which is the only road that traverses the recently-acquired western portion of Minnewaska SPP (extending from Lake Awosting to the Village of Ellenville), is the key east-west corridor that provides access to this area. It should be designated as an official trail.
 - b. The Stony Kill Carriageway and the partially completed trail to Stony Kill Falls should be designated as an official trail connecting the Smiley Carriageway with Shaft 2A Road. The proposed trail route near Stony Kill Falls has already been approved, with a modification to avoid an environmentally sensitive area near the falls, but it has not yet been constructed. The remainder of the route already exists on the ground.
 - c. High Point Carriageway, from the Lake Maratanza loop road to the intersection of the old Red Trail in the vicinity of High Point, should be designated as an official trail. (Beyond this point, this carriageway is so eroded and wet that it would require massive reconstruction and relocation to reestablish, so we do not recommend that the remainder of this carriageway be designated as an official trail at this time.)
2. The old Red Trail, between Berme Road Park in the Village of Ellenville and High Point Carriageway, should be designated as an official trail. It is the only footpath (as distinguished from carriageway) that leads into Minnewaska SPP from the Village of Ellenville and, in combination with the Smiley Carriageway, would make it possible to take a loop hike into the Preserve from Berme Road Park. At present, a permit is formally required to hike this historic trail, but the permit requirement is routinely ignored by most users, and the absence of a clearly defined trail results in a braided network of informal trails. A properly blazed, signed and managed trail would do far more to protect the sensitive sites in this area than the current permit system that, in practice, results in uncontrolled access to the area.
3. Pending DEC's completion of the Sundown State Forest Unit Management Plan, the Long Path will be officially rerouted from Verkeerderkill Falls to Berme Road, by way of High Point, Four Mile Camp, and Jacob's Ladder. (See 4.a. below.)
4. Several trails should be officially designated in the recently acquired Shevchenko area, including the following:
 - a. The new route for the Long Path from Smiley Carriageway at Four-Mile Camp to Berme Road, via the upper portion of Mine Hollow Road and Jacob's Ladder,

- officially proposed in 2004, should be officially approved as the route of this important long-distance trail.
- b. The Tombstone Trail, which leads from Four Mile Camp on the Smiley Carriageway to Little Stony Kill Falls, should be designated as an official trail.
 - c. Mine Hollow Road, from the Smiley Carriageway to Foordemore Road, should also be designated as an official trail.
 - d. The trail from the lower Mine Hollow Road to Berme Road, first proposed in 2004, should be approved. This trail would allow for loop hikes on the trails proposed above, and in addition it would tie in with hikes along the D&H Canal towpath.
5. Trails in the recently-acquired Awosting Reserve property should be included in the master plan. The designated trails in this area should include some existing woods roads, with new footpaths to points of interest. Specifically, we suggest the following:
 - a. A trail should be established to link Lake Minnewaska with Awosting Reserve.
 - b. A trail should be established to link Awosting Reserve with Lake Awosting via Spruce Glen.
 - c. A trail should be established to link Awosting Reserve with the Long Path at Mud Pond. The Long Path (Scenic Trail) should be returned to its original route on the southeast side of Mud Pond (currently, the trail follows the northwest side of the pond). This will remove the trail from sensitive wetland areas and permit the removal of approximately 12 sections of bog bridges in the vicinity of the outlet of Mud Pond.
 - d. The historic trails to the Upper and Lower Palmaghatt Falls and Palmaghatt Ravine should be reopened.
 6. A firm timeline for reopening the Jenny Lane Trail/Long Path is needed. This trail has been closed due to recent fire damage, and it is alleged that the abundance of dead trees in the area may pose a hazard to hikers. Volunteer Trail Conference members who are USDA Forest Service-certified sawyers are prepared to clear all dead wood and are eager to assist the park in reopening this trail.
 7. The closing of the Hamilton Point Carriageway to bicycles should be made permanent, and the Hamilton Point Carriageway should be designated for foot traffic only, from its start at the Millbrook Mountain Carriageway to its end at the Castle Point Carriageway. The vast majority of pedestrians going to the Lake Awosting area use one of the four carriageways (Lower Awosting Carriageway, Upper Awosting Carriageway, Castle Point Carriageway, or Hamilton Point Carriageway). When the Hamilton Point Carriageway was open to bicycle riders, walkers had to contend with bicycles on each of these four routes. On busy days, this was at very least unpleasant, and it strongly impacted the pedestrian experience. During snow season, the Hamilton Point Carriageway should remain ungroomed and open to skiers on a one-way basis only (uphill, towards Hamilton Point).

We appreciate your consideration of these comments and recommendations in preparing the draft Master Plan for Minnewaska State Park Preserve, and we welcome the opportunity to provide additional assistance as needed.

Sincerely,



Edward K. Goodell
Executive Director

- c. Jim Hall, PIPC
Eric Humphrey, Minnewaska SPP
Jakob Franke, Trail Conference
Jim Gebardt, Trail Conference
Larry Wheelock, Trail Conference