

A SEARCH FOR WILDERNESS

By Chuck Schwerin #942

Much has been written about the hordes of hikers descending upon the Adirondack High Peaks. Some have suggested that a permit system is the only way to control continued deterioration of the precious wilderness. Others recommend that disbanding the 46ers, and with it the end of the finishing number designation, will knock the wind out of the sails of aspiring 46ers and return the Adirondack Park to its former pristine self.

What is it that we lament most? Is it the loss of pine needle beds lining trail beds devoid of rocks and roots? Or the ever-more prevalent “Charmin’ Blooms” dotting the landscape? The maze of muddy herdpaths that changed the meaning of a bushwhack? Or is it more fundamental—the disappearance of a wilderness experience that (older) hikers recall from days of yore?

In the August 2003 issue of the *International Journal of Wilderness* Laura Waterman (co-author with her late husband, Guy #670W of the seminal book *Wilderness Ethics*) wrote:

We began to realize what was most at risk wasn't necessarily the physical, but a spiritual quality as well. We began to call this elusive value the spirit of wildness.

Once on a bushwhack up a stream valley we came across a flattened clearing with a network of trampled paths. We saw the charred remains of numerous campfires. The woods appeared denuded of down trees, and the spruce and fir were stripped to head height of all their lower branches. Along the stream we saw evidence of heavy tramping, with some of the banks caved in. We later learned that this was the location for a wilderness course for a

nearby school. Every November for the past 24 years about 100 students, in groups of 10 with two adult leaders, went out backpacking for two weeks along a craggy and forested ridgeline. At the end of the course, each student was sent off into the woods to experience the solitude of a three-day solo. They were expected to keep a journal and take a close inward look at themselves, while keeping outwardly warm with a campfire. The twenty teacher/leaders were camped also, and also kept a campfire going. This was seen as a priceless experience for young people. On our hike we had stumbled across the results of its impact on the forest.

With a few friends we had climbed to the summit of a remote New Hampshire four thousand-foot peak by a steep, trailless route. The hike had proved harder and longer than expected, and we arrived on top late in the afternoon. The plan was to take the trail down, but we'd have to move fast to avoid being benighted. We all felt the thrill of climbing this isolated peak by a route that took all our skill with map and compass, not another party in sight all day. The view before us showed only mountains. So we were a bit taken aback when a member of the group pulled out his cell phone. “Hi honey, just calling to let you know I'm safe. We're on the summit and are about to take the trail down. Guess I'll be late for dinner though.” That's not putting it strong enough. We were aghast! That single call smashed through the fragile fabric of wildness.

Overcrowding is not the only culprit that has been fingered to explain the

deterioration of the wilderness. Forty years ago, during an earlier boom in hiking and camping, the shoes we wore were the focus of criticism. Vibram became the new standard in hiking boot soles but the lugs they introduced became a source of much debate. As William Schmidt wrote in the *New York Times* on May 18, 1981, rangers in Grand Teton National Park were discarding their hiking boots for running shoes:

Mr. Atchison (chief ranger) and his ranger crew did not change shoes just for comfort. Indeed, their decision reflects a growing belief among many naturalists and outdoorsmen that when people wear those heavy, lugsoled boots into the wilderness, they are leaving behind more than just footprints.

An article published in 1977 in Backpacker magazine, titled “Stop Walking Away the Wilderness,” asserted that the boots were the single greatest cause of trail erosion and urged hikers to give them up in favor of lighter footwear.

From a geological standpoint, the Adirondacks are particularly vulnerable to erosive forces. Phil Corell #224W, Treasurer of the 46ers, explains the cause of this vulnerability is, “the presence of a thick layer of loose soil over bedrock with no gravel to pack and form a hardened track. Our trails wash out terribly without artificial hardening... and our trails were all designed to go straight up without switchbacks thus promoting erosion over time. Go out west or even to New Hampshire and you will find soils that withstand heavy use unlike ours. And once started, nature takes care of the rest.”

Few are worrying about lug soles these days; the sheer number of “feet on the street” is the only topic receiving discussion now.

THE ADIRONDACKS —A COMMON POOL RESOURCE—

In 1968, Garrett Hardin, Professor of Human Ecology and a microbiologist by training, published a seminal work that first popularized the term, “Tragedy of the Commons.” He theorized that unregulated use of common resources was inherently unsustainable. This work expanded upon a pamphlet published in 1833 by the English economist William Forster Lloyd who argued that farmers grazing their sheep on public land had an incentive to allocate as many of their own sheep as possible to this

RATIONING THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

The Adirondacks are not the only wilderness area confronting overuse. Other wilderness preserves have been subject to usage controls for many years and it may be instructive to see how they are managed and where we could be headed.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act was passed in 2004, authorizing fees to be imposed at some federal recreation sites. Those fees were to be used for maintenance and education. Many regions, including the Sierra National

home of Mt. Katahdin, northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail (AT).

Strict control of overnight camping within Baxter has been in place for decades. Sites are limited and advance registration is needed to ensure space will be available. Further, one must determine ahead of time how many nights will be reserved. That obviously impacts impulsive last-minute plans to climb Katahdin. Limiting parking spots is the mechanism Baxter State Park authorities use to manage day use. Maine residents are treated more favorably; they can reserve spots well in advance while non-residents have only a two-week limit.

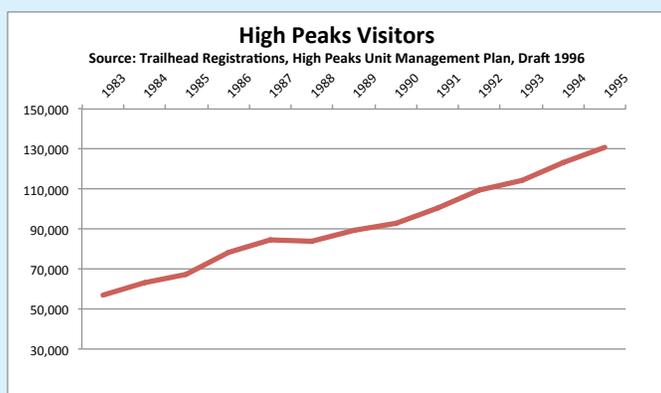


Figure 1

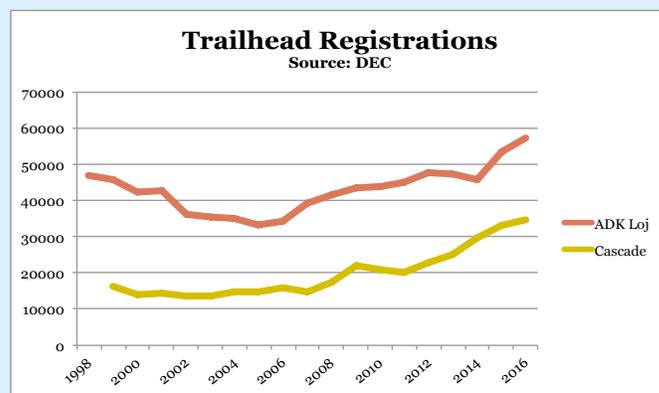


Figure 2

Note: Figure 1 represents all trailheads collected during those years while Figure 2 only reflects registrants at two of the most popular trailheads during more recent years. Registrations at the Garden are not included because the data has not yet been tabulated for the most recent years.

free resource, resulting however in the inevitable destruction of that resource for everyone.

The Nobel-winning economist Elinor Ostrom looked at this phenomenon and developed a set of eight principles that enabled stakeholders (the farmers) to optimize (not maximize) their sheep-grazing at a level that permitted the land to continue to produce grass and sustain the sheep.

The Adirondacks are such a common pool resource and it is surely under attack from the proliferation of hikers visiting in ever-increasing numbers. Perhaps implementation of Ostrom’s principles could alter the course of what appears to be a path to destruction of this precious wilderness. Those rules essentially lay out a framework under which the users of the resource agree to be regulated and agree to increasing penalties if individual behavior exceeds collectively accepted limits.

Ostrom’s article can be accessed here:
http://wtf.tw/ref/ostrom_1990.pdf

Forest, require wilderness permits year-round for all overnight trips. Day-use wilderness permits are not required but there are trailhead quotas.

While there are no day-use permits needed for access to the White Mountains, which are also managed by the Forest Service, that option remains possible “when extra measures are needed to protect natural or cultural resource.”

National parks are also regulated. For example, from May 1 through October 31 a \$26 wilderness administrative fee for backcountry camping is imposed for each trip into the Rocky Mountain National Park. But the Adirondack High Peaks area is part of a state park, not regulated by the Forest Service, nor the National Park Service. A better analogy for the lands within the Blue Line might be Baxter State Park in Maine,

Baxter is admittedly a unique situation since usage is more easily controlled via a single access road leading into the park.

By contrast, The High Peaks Wilderness Complex (HPWC) provides trailhead access at 20 locations, of which eight are privately held. While parking fees have been imposed on the most heavily-used trailheads in the Adirondacks (Adirondack Loj and the Garden), more remote trailheads are not monitored at all. Some, like Tahawus, typically draw few visitors but overflow parking on Route 73 (giving access to Cascade, Dix, and Giant) is out of control, an accident waiting to happen.

BALANCING PROMOTION VERSUS PROTECTION

Marketing efforts by the State of New York certainly appear to be paying off. Between the “I Love NY” TV ads, and road signs touting the attributes of the region, tourists are flocking in record numbers,

which is reflected in visitor sign-ins at trailhead registers.

In an Albany *Times Union* editorial on September 15th, 2015, Benjamin Laabs, associate professor and chair of SUNY Geneseo's Geological Sciences department, reported that in 2014 \$1.29 billion was spent in the Adirondack region, resulting in \$159 million in state and local taxes being poured back into state and local coffers. But an insufficient number of those dollars are being allocated to maintain the "physical plant."

The \$50 million "I Love NY" campaign includes significant investment in the Ontario/Quebec markets, which could be one reason so many Canadians visit the High Peaks now. If tourists discover there are insufficient rooms to be had in Lake Placid you can be certain developers will apply to the Adirondack Park Agency for expanded hotel accommodations to meet that demand. If a sinkhole appears on Route 73 DOT will rush in to fix the problem as quickly as possible. But when it comes to investing in preservation of the natural resource everyone comes to see, "the market" is not functioning properly.

It ought to be easier than it is to determine the level of resources allocated to protect and rehabilitate the High Peaks and the levels vary according to whom you ask. Neil Woodworth #2036, Executive Director of the Adirondack Mountain Club, told me the DEC has been appropriated about \$350K for Region 5 to manage the High Peaks. Given the growing responsibilities of the Department to manage lands that continue to grow due to acquisition, this is an inadequate budget to accomplish the task.

Assemblyman Dan Stec #7348 (R-Assembly District 114), whose district includes Essex County, asked his staff to research the topic on behalf of PEEKS. In each of the past three years Region 5 (a large portion of the Adirondacks including the High Peaks) spent roughly a half-million dollars on maintenance of assets like trails, parking lots, roads, boat launches, etc.

Older data was not readily available. Stec was told that current DEC staffing in Region 5 comprises 60 operations staff, 16 forestry staff, 40 forest rangers, and 15 seasonal workers (including 10 assistant forest rangers). This staffing level is 20% less than what it was ten years ago.

As a measure of comparison, according to the Adirondack Council, the Adirondack Park Agency back in 1998 also had a staff of about 60 and a total budget of nearly three

Winchell acknowledged that staffing levels have remained flat (his word: consistent) the past few years. Given the increased pressure from visitors, it is no wonder that more responsibilities have fallen to part-time employees and not-for-profit organizations.

Neil Woodworth said, "Rangers are now so stretched answering distress calls that educating hikers at trailheads has inevitably suffered. Too many folks are showing up ill-equipped to handle the weather and

ruggedness of the hikes they plan. It is not uncommon to see visitors in shorts and flip-flops announce their intention to climb the Trap Dike on Colden. Everybody has a cell phone but no map or compass or flashlight. It's a wonder more tragedies have not been the result."

Increasingly, the task of educating the public and maintaining infrastructure is falling to volunteer organizations like the

Adirondack 46ers and the Adirondack Mountain Club. This includes educating hikers at trailheads, summits, and places in between, moving decrepit lean-tos, repairing deteriorating trails, and adopting trailless herd paths. Other than the dollars earmarked to publish this magazine twice a year, virtually every dollar donated to the 46ers is poured right back into protection of the High Peaks.

According to Brian Hoody #4410W, President of the 46ers, a new Trailhead Steward program has just been approved by DEC. Starting this summer 46er volunteers will be greeting hikers at the Cascade trailhead, conveying guidance and distributing litter bags. "I am hopeful that people will use the bags and not leave them in the woods," Hoody said.

One cannot lay this most recent flood of hikers to the mountains totally at the feet of marketing campaigns. The advent of social media has made it so much easier for hikers to connect with friends, organize group outings, advertise their exploits and issue challenges to perform increasingly creative (and outlandish) ways to climb mountains.

In a Nov 3, 2016 article on the website

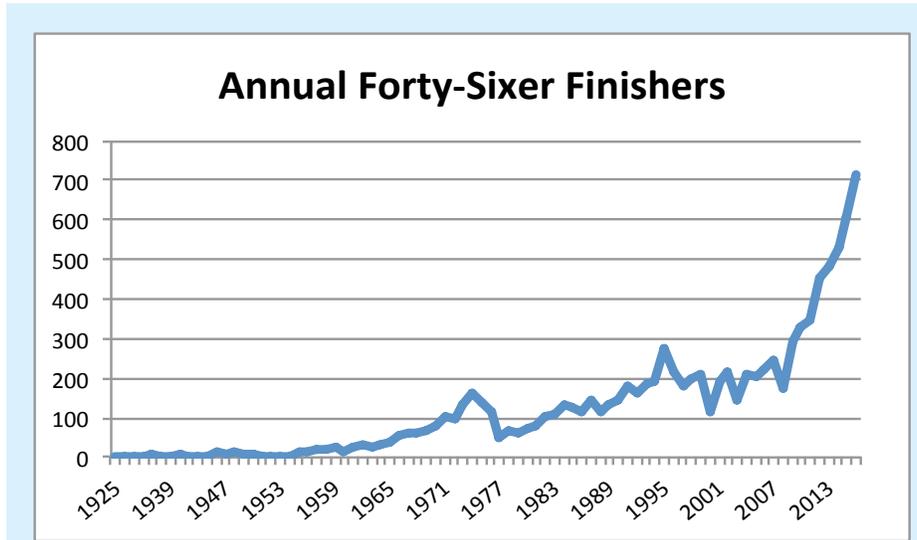


Figure 3

-and-a-half million dollars. There appears to be a significant imbalance.

I contacted the DEC in Ray Brook, requesting insight into the budget for the department. Without providing the requested statistics, David Winchell, Director of Communications, wrote:

The Governor's 2017 budget proposal includes \$50 million to launch Adventure NY, a multi-year outdoor recreation campaign. Adventure NY will improve access to state lands, DEC campgrounds, and facilities, enhancing our efforts to promote outdoor recreation in New York State, which is vital to the local economies of many Adirondack communities. As a part of Adventure NY, DEC will also be implementing strategies to promote a positive outdoor experience for all New Yorkers and visitors to DEC lands in the Adirondacks and across the state and to protect and enhance the natural resources that they are coming to enjoy.

Whether this initiative survives the budget debate in the State legislature, and to what extent it will provide additional resources to the DEC remains to be seen.

The Ringer entitled “Loved to Death: How Instagram Is Destroying Our Natural Wonders” Molly McHugh wrote:

Social media and Instagram did not invent discovery of beautiful outdoor spaces—but they have become a curator-friendly guide to collecting them. It’s like bingo: You’ve got your picture at Yosemite with Half Dome in the background, but wait—Crater Lake has popped up in the Explore tab five times in the past few weeks. You must go, and you must document it. America’s most gorgeous natural wonders: Collect them all!

Instagram is indeed a stunning way to attract new friends, build a community and promote your favorite pastime via pretty pictures. There are more than 400,000 posts using the hashtag #adirondacks. I selected one of the “top posts” and clicked on the picture. The text read:

Yesterday’s hike of Phelps Mountain elevation 4,160 ft. Another High Peak off the list!

One prolific poster is Cait Bourgault, who has posted more than 3,000 pictures of the Adirondacks and the Whites, has nearly 11,000 followers, and organizes mountain outings via the web app Eventbrite, which is typically used to sell tickets to concerts and seminars. There is also a link to Facebook so one could see who else was scheduled to participate. It is community building on steroids.

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE 46ERS

This is not the first time debate has raged about what to do with overcrowding in the Adirondacks. Nor is it the first time that predicament has been blamed on the Adirondack 46ers. The club is but one of many organizations that were formed to celebrate the joys of visiting a collection of mountain summits, whose inclusion was arbitrarily decided by a group of intrepid travelers many years ago. While other groups issue patches for climbing the highest in the White Mountains, the Colorado Rockies, and the 11ers, to name but three, the 46ers went one step further by securing metal canisters atop the summits and issuing finisher numbers as well as those patches. Were we the problem? Part of the problem?

As the High Peaks Unit Management Plan (UMP) of 1996 stated:

Heightened recreation use and the popularity of being an aspiring Adirondack 46'er has increased visitations to the summits and led to a proliferation of "herd paths" up and down the mountains.

The UMP stipulated that the placement of canisters by the 46ers was illegal and ordered their removal. The Plan also recommended that the State should work collaboratively with the 46ers to:

...designate the most environmentally durable route up each peak and close all others to public use.

While the rate of finishers claiming patches and numbers has climbed inexorably, one would be hard-pressed to say that pursuit of a 46er patch is the driving factor in the explosive growth of visitation. In the 91 years since Herbert Clark became the first 46er 10,136 numbers have been issued, an average of 111 per year. As Summit Steward Wade Bastian states elsewhere in this magazine, there were 665 people on one mountain on one day (the Friday before Labor Day) last year. Neil Woodworth told me there were nearly 5,000 people on the ADK property that weekend. The vast majority of these people will never become 46ers. For a quick fix to satisfy their wilderness habit they seek out the closest High Peak with the shortest access trail.

The DEC tried to get out ahead of the anticipated problems for Columbus Day weekend. Efforts were made to put personnel at Northway rest stops, interns were stationed at the Holt House at Marcy Field, and the DOT used their electronic signboards to alert visitors of the parking problems at the trailheads. But this stopgap, emergency measure is not sustainable under current staffing levels.

It can't be denied that the existence of a collection of 46 mountains over 4,000 feet does motivate people. Traditional websites, like the 46ers', receive very few hits in comparison to social media sites where personal exploits are shared.

In an Albany *Times Union* article on May 2, 2011 Paul Grondahl described some of the tactics the 46ers tried in addressing the overcrowding issue at that time.

The club responded by removing pamphlets about membership from

trailheads. They stress the need for hiker responsibility, stewardship skills, trail preservation and a campaign called "Walk Softly Wilderness Ethics."

In addition, club members donate hundreds of hours of volunteer labor each year to repair and maintain trails.

"People can say we're destroying the Adirondacks landscape, but if it wasn't for our members' efforts, the trails would be in much worse shape," he quoted Suzanne Lance #1802W, who was a member of the 46er Book Committee and "production editor" for the 46er book Heaven Up-hist'd-ness!

Later that week, referencing the Grondahl article, *Times Union* outdoor columnist Gillian Scott #6134 posted a blog on the paper's website asking readers if they thought the 46ers were exacerbating the problem. The comments were consistent in their praise for the efforts of the club. One wrote:

I climbed my 46'th peak (Cliff) in September of last year. Until that day I had no intention of joining the 46ers. I wasn't interested in the recognition, only to know myself that I had completed something I set out to do. What changed my mind was looking back on the hikes I had done, some of them several times. In my memories, the trails that were stewarded by only the 46ers and the members of the ADK (and other similar groups) seemed better cared for and more in line with my view of what wilderness SHOULD be, then the official marked DEC trails. Not a fault of the DEC, more the fault of the underfunding characteristic of the economy we live in.

I firmly believe that if it weren't for the 46ers, the trail erosion and damage to the wilderness would be nearly irreparable. Groups like the 46ers and others that promote the principals of Leave No Trace and work to organize repairs and trail maintenance, are what has kept the High Peaks as beautiful as they are.

Another commented:

Groups like the 46ers promote good stewardship and negate the "harm" they cause using the trails by maintaining them and picking up after others.

There were no dissenting comments but

those views are not universally held. In his Adirondoc.com blog Dr. Thomas Welch offered an alternative perspective:

The passage of time has clearly altered the experience of becoming a 46er. Becoming the umpteenth thousandth person to re-create an experience whose difficulty has decreased exponentially may still be a source of great personal satisfaction. Yet it hardly seems any longer to call for public celebration or recognition.

By continuing to recognize the attainment of the 46 peaks today, we are trivializing the accomplishment of three wilderness pioneers. We are implicitly encouraging a "do-it-check-it-off" mentality more suited for Junior League initiation than for teaching appreciation of the wilderness. We are encouraging people to push into fragile environments for no real reason other than to say that they were there. As I learned from my two friends years ago at Flowed Lands, climbing the 46 peaks today in no way ensures that one has learned anything meaningful about Adirondack lore, its natural history or its heroes.

The members of the Adirondack Forty-Sixers have made a number of great contributions over the years. These surely will live on. For the new century, their next great contribution should be to close the books to further membership and to disband. Bob, George and Herb would be grateful!

Nearly fifty years ago the 46ers did some serious introspective thinking about the club's responsibilities. In 1970 the late Dr. Edwin Ketchledge #507, former president of the 46ers and a professor of forestry at Syracuse University, addressed the issue head-on in a 1970 issue of *The Conservationist*, a DEC publication:

The 46ers in particular have responded to the impact problem with soul-searching self-analysis. Their more active members have come to perceive that they in truth bear a major share of responsibility, both because of their club's climbing activities and also because of the way they have oversold "peak collecting" as an exciting sport. Because their organizational conscience has been stirring separate from our proddings, they seemed ripe, so to speak, for Ray (colleague R.E. Leonard) and me to

convert to a new, invigorated rationale, a new mission of TRAILSMANSHIP, to justify their continued existence. Instead of disbanding as some had suggested, the leaders have persuaded the membership to help begin countering the damage by becoming examples of good trail stewards, of taking time off from their pleasure climbs to work constructively on trail improvements, thereby setting the standard for other forest recreationists.

That introspection resulted in a number of actions taken by the club to support hiker education, including removing the trailless peak canisters (in compliance with DEC edict) and purchasing thousands of trowels which were distributed at trailheads along with useful guidance.

The ADK's Woodworth says, "The 46ers do a helluva lot of good and they help us take care of the High Peaks. The club doesn't promote or reward gridders (those who seek to climb all 46ers in every month). The answer is not to stop assigning climbing numbers."

This year marks the 46th annual Outdoor Skills Workshop, to be delivered by Club members again this May at the ADK Loj. It has been a primary educational tool and has seen thousands of participants over its lifespan.

NEXT STEPS

The 500-pound gorilla in the room that stakeholders whisper about is the prospect of implementing a permit system to finally regain control of usage. All agree the current situation is unsustainable. The parking problem, especially at trailheads on heavily-trafficked roads like Route 73, is a public safety concern. DEC knows it. Community leaders know it. The DOT knows it. Stakeholders are quietly meeting to discuss options. Not surprisingly, politics and turf wars play a role in getting to consensus on next steps.

The parking issue did not crop up overnight. The UMP noted nearly twenty years ago that parking at congested trailheads was a problem that needed addressing:

When parking lots reach capacity, visitors take to roadsides, trespass on private lands, restrict rights-of-ways, and cause traffic jams and hazards. Illegal, improper and unsafe parking is a

problem shared by DEC, the Department of Transportation (DOT), town governments, State Police, and adjoining landowners. Proper parking and road control is essential to assure access for emergency vehicles...(I)ncreased visitation and the absence of any parking controls on many trailhead access roads, has contributed to undesirable user concentrations at many entry points. This has happened on the highways leading to Adirondack Loj, Ausable Club, the Cascades, The Garden, and South Meadows. These trailheads serve about 70% of all HPWC users and by their geographic location direct many users to the same interior locations. It has become necessary to begin making adjustments and/or restrict entry through some trailheads due to present overcrowding.

Woodworth reported that the number of vehicles filling the Adirondack Loj lot and lining the road often numbers more than 600, double the carrying capacity as determined by the UMP (including 200 in the Loj parking lot itself plus 100 in an adjacent lot that was to be developed). When No Parking signs are present along the Loj road, visitors tend to respect them. But the UMP has no authority to control a town road. Last spring, declaring the signs had reached an unacceptable level of deterioration, the Town of North Elba, removed the No Parking signs. Only the west side of the Loj road has since been re-signed.

One of the first planned action items is to install more guard rails along the Loj Road, which should discourage parking. According to Tate Connor #3986, DEC Land Manager, there have been discussions regarding the Town of North Elba ceding responsibility for the Loj Road to the DOT in exchange for the Town assuming maintenance of the road leading to John Brown's Farm. Were this to occur, with DOT now in control of that heavily used access road, more rigorous control of parking access (and ticketing) could result.

"If we don't get cooperation from the public to self-regulate," Woodworth said, "I think that we are inevitably going to a permit system." Most of the stakeholders I spoke to privately agree.

The consensus seems to be to pursue two options before resorting to the "nuclear" option of permits: More vigorously educate



Negotiating Gothics. Photo credit: Chris Lang #7326W

hikers as to proper use and behavior and more aggressively address parking access. Social media and informative websites can also be used to head hikers off at the pass, so to speak. Lake Placid's Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism has a website (adkalert.com) that purportedly will soon include advisories about parking availability at popular trailheads. A mobile application that tracked available permits at each trailhead, as well as the existing open spaces, could help reduce the last-minute decision to plan a hike.

Tate Connor believes alerting visitors that the Loj is full via an app is of no help to the overcrowding problem if those visitors are willing to park along the Loj road and hike the additional distance rather than

cancel the trip. Tate added, "Whatever we decide to do on parking, its primary purpose will be public safety. Driving through the Cascade Lakes, and near Roaring Brook, coming down that hill, you have extreme safety issues. Regardless of the overuse impacts, nobody wants to see anybody get killed. But to my knowledge there has been no official development of a plan."

Would the 46ers' folding their tent solve the problem? Despite the social media chatter among hikers intent on climbing the 46 from every conceivable angle, in every month, barefoot and blindfolded, those numbers pale in comparison to the casual (and often ill-prepared) visitors who put themselves at risk, add pressure to the carrying capacity of the land, and exhaust the resources of

those charged with maintaining order and environmental quality. Those folks are not often seen on Skylight Brook or Calkins Creek. They will never become 46ers. They will, however, clog the highways, climb the same easily-accessed peaks, and leave their Charmin' Blooms in pursuit of a day in the mountains, enjoying the "wilderness."

Disbanding the 46ers will eliminate one important source of funding to those volunteers who take on the heroic task of dispensing wisdom at the busiest trailheads, advising hikers on the most crowded summits, and to those who devote countless hours maintaining trails, adopting herd paths, and moving deteriorating lean-tos. To those who seek and cherish wilderness, the 46ers remain a keeper of the flame. ■