

W O N A L A N C E T O U T D O O R C L U B

To: All WODC Members and Friends of the Sandwich Range Wilderness

From: George E. Zink, Forest Coordinator, WODC

Topic: Draft: Sandwich Range Wilderness Plan

Introduction:

Every few years some issue concerning the future of the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF) or the Sandwich Range requires the Wonalancet Outdoor Club to express its views strongly and with conviction. Opinions are taken most seriously by WMNF when letters are received from individuals who have a close association with the Forest, and who give reasoned arguments. The issue of managing the Sandwich Range Wilderness is a concern about which every member is urged to respond; decisions made now will affect the future of the Range.

Send your letters to: Michael B. Hathaway, Forest Supervisor
White Mountain National Forest
PO Box 638
Laconia, NH 03247 (tel. 603-524-6450)

Comments are due by June 17th, though they will be accepted after that date. If possible, please send a copy to WODC, c/o G.E. Zink, Box 21, Wonalancet, NH 03897. I would like to monitor Club response.

Since the Draft: Sandwich Range Wilderness Plan is 26 pages long, and fraught with Forest Service jargon, an outline is provided which I believe summarizes fairly the concerns of greatest interest to WODC. Should you wish the full text, make the request of the Supervisor.

Issue I Motorized Access to Flat Mountain Pond

Situation: Flat Mountain Pond (FMP) is an extraordinarily beautiful, remote pond about 6 miles from the Sandwich Notch Road, and is surrounded by the Wilderness Area except for the dam at the outlet which enables the existence of the pond. Though FMP can be reached by snowmobiles (FS lingo--"winter DRV's") which are permitted in many areas of the Forest, no motors are allowed in Wilderness. FMP has been stocked with native Brook Trout, and is a favorite fishing area to fishermen willing and able to hike the distance.

The Sandwich Range Wilderness Plan (SRWP) notes that the area in which FMP is situated "provides the best opportunity to experience isolation within the Wilderness". In addition the Forest Service recommends that the area be managed to "provide 'near primitive' recreation opportunities, minimize interaction between users, and maintain habitat for wildlife requiring solitude and large undisturbed tracts".

A prominent local citizen has expressed interest in making FMP available to handicapped people in 4-wheel drive vehicles. He argues the present abandoned railroad bed from Sandwich Notch to FMP is adequate. Forest Service personnel have looked at the "road" and state there would have to be major construction before the Forest Service could allow handicapped people on it. It is clear that such construction would be at variance with the management objectives for the zone. The entire Wilderness concept, indeed the very nature of the area itself would be threatened by such changes. WODC is very concerned.

That there is an issue here is recognized in the Plan. In Appendix B appears the following statement:

Certain activities outside and/or adjacent to the Wilderness impact this resource. Motorized vehicle use on Flat Mt. Pond Trail closely parallels the Wilderness and impact solitude in Zone B. Further (sic) snowmobile intrusions on Flat Mountain Pond and Pond Trail violate wilderness regulations and are administratively difficult to prevent.

The Flat Mountain Pond area offers outstanding opportunities for solitude, camping, hiking, wildlife viewing and trout fishing in a remote setting. The long, difficult hike into the pond enhances this experience for many visitors, particularly anglers. The FMP area in conjunction with the Lost Pass region offer the only opportunity in the Sandwich Range to provide a near-primitive ROS class recreation experience. Occasional intrusions into the area by snowmobiles and off-road vehicles violate regulations and adversely affect wilderness values.

Management Direction Although the SRWP describes the situation in detail (in scattered portions of the text), no specific recommendations are made to address the problem, and a decision has been postponed (FS lingo, "remanded"). The decision has been made to make no decision.

WODC Recommendation WODC recommends the issue be considered in the current SRWP. There is need for WMNF to consider the legitimate concerns of the handicapped, but FMP is only one of many ponds on the Forest, and its location in Wilderness makes it a poor candidate. The need exists for a full study of handicapped access to all resources on the forest: campgrounds, toilet facilities, streams, picnic areas, etc. WODC recommends that a full study of the issue be made, and that handicapped access to FMP not be addressed "during analysis of adjacent Opportunity Areas" as recommended by WMNF in Appendix B. (Opportunity Area is a catch-all expression. An Opportunity Area study might be conducted as part of a timber sale, or as part of a study to determine the need for a new picnic site.)

The SRWP does not deal with the issue of access to the pond by ORV's, either legally or illegally. On this issue you are urged to:

1. Recommend that the long-range objective is to protect FMP and the Wilderness Area from motorized vehicles. This requires that no ORVs be allowed to reach the shores of the Pond, nor travel close enough to the pond to be heard.
2. Recommend that ORV use not be permitted on the Flat Mountain Pond Trail. This latter action would prevent access within approximately two miles of the Pond.
3. Winter ORV (emphasis upon winter) use is considered a legitimate activity on the Forest, and WODC does not attempt to exclude such use in areas not assigned to Wilderness. To indicate the strength of this position, recommend that a loop trail for winter ORV use be constructed by local users to Guinea Pond along the existing Guinea Pond Trail and the recently acquired right of way near Teacup Lake. This recommendation would only be made pending implementation of #2. above.
4. Recommend that WMNF face the issue of motorized access to the boundaries of Wilderness, and into Wilderness, NOW. It is a Wilderness issue and should be faced in this Plan.
5. Recommend that WMNF patrol the FMP area during each weekend of the winter season to enforce the law excluding motorized equipment from Wilderness. WMNF has the responsibility of preventing violations of law.

Issues II Shelters in Wilderness

Situation: There are four shelters located in the Wilderness, Black Mountain Pond shelter (maintained by Squam Lakes Association), Camps Heermance and Shehadi on Mt. Whiteface (maintained by WODC), and Camp Rich on Mt. Passaconaway (maintained by WODC). Shehadi is beyond repair, and has not been maintained by WODC for many years. There is no toilet at the site. The other shelters are in fair to good condition.

Management Direction: The SRWP recommends the removal of Camp Shehadi sometime during the next 5 years. The decision for the other three is to remove them within the next ten years (or sooner if major repairs are needed or their use results in significant resource damage).

Discussion: The basic problem is that the Forest Service, not only locally but regionally and nationally, has decided to deal with the issue by selecting parts of the Wilderness Act to enforce, and parts to neglect. One section of the Act reads "there shall be...no structure or installation within any such area". Another section reads "A Wilderness ...may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical (underlining mine) value". WMNF uses this last statement to justify its decisions not to remove cellar holes, stone walls, railroad ties, logging camp sites, blacksmith piles, and a memorial plaque.

The Preamble to the SRWP describes "A need for flexibility (which)...derives from the uniqueness of these areas ...and their historical uses". Also, " A respect for history evolves from backcountry use patterns developed over the last century as well as Cooperator/Agency partnerships evolved over 75 years which must be respected insofar as they do not violate the spirit of National and Regional Legislation and administrative direction. Ability to make justified exceptions to quantitative standards in individual Wilderness Action Plans addresses this historic concept."

WODC has declared several times the intention to retain our shelters, and to maintain them at primitive, "rustic", levels. For historical reasons, for traditional use pattern reasons, and for emotional and philosophical reasons, we oppose removal of Heermance and Camp Rich. On the emotional reasons, consider this passage by Sigurd Olson describing his experiences in a wilderness cabin:

It satisfied a longing for closeness to a primitive environment, the hunger to return for a little while to the wilderness. Centuries of caves, of shelters under the trees, of dry spots beneath ledges and waterfalls, of listening to the sounds of the night have left their mark. The cabin was part of all that.

WODC Recommendation: We urge you to make both!

1. Urge WMNF to reconsider the decision to remove Camps Heermance, Black Mountain, and Rich. Present your own reasons for your conviction.
2. Remove all references to time, so that a decision to remove shelters has not been made final. This action is consistent with the Preamble statement concerning quantitative standards.

The preceding two issues are considered of great significance to the future of the Sandwich Range Wilderness. Although important, the following issues will seem very significant to some members and not to others. Please respond to WMNF on any of these about which you feel strongly.

Issue III FMP Dam Support maintenance of the dam at the outlet of FMP. Were this not done, the level of water in the pond would drop by several feet resulting in two small ponds separated by a brook. Fish stocking is dependent upon the present pond size. Recommend that in any maintenance the construction be done with native materials.

Issue IV Fish Stocking Support stocking of fish in Black Mt. Pond and FMP. Sport fishing for anglers who have the will to walk several miles --8 miles round trip-- is a legitimate use of Wilderness. Will it be necessary to stock by helicopter?

Issue V Trails WODC supports the opening of a high elevation trail connecting Sandwich Mountain to the South Slide on South Tripyramid. Without this trail hikers must leave Wilderness, hike several miles along the Mad River Rd., and then reenter Wilderness from the town of Waterville Valley. A low elevation trail would pass through fragile wetlands.

Other trail recommendations: support the reopening of the Pond and Woodbury Trails for cross-country skiers only. These trails have been essentially unused for several decades, but now provide challenges for venturesome skiers. The terrain is wet and fragile, but does not suffer damage under winter conditions. The Pond Trail connects the Lost Pass area near Waterville Valley to Flat Mt. Pond. The Woodbury Trail leads from Lost Pass to the Sleeper Trail near the Downes Brook Trail junction.

WODC also supports the management decision of the Plan which directs WMNF to seek an agreement with the Waterville Company to allow free passage of cross-country skiers over its fee trails to enter the Wilderness.

Issue VI Group Size in Wilderness Support the recommendation that the size of a group (scout troop, day camp, etc) entering Wilderness be limited to ten individuals.

Issue VII Boat storage Support elimination of boat storage at FMP and Black Mt. Pond. Fishermen sometimes leave boats at these ponds for their convenience. Suggest WMNF confiscate the boats and remove them from Wilderness.

Issue VIII Relocation of Blueberry Ledge Trail The Plan proposes to relocate the Blueberry Ledge Trail (WODC) where there are wooden steps (formerly ladders). Time and experience have demonstrated that the present location is the shortest, easiest route, and provides hikers great views to the South. Oppose the relocation.

Issue IX Signing in Wilderness The Plan proposes to replace all signs placed and maintained by Cooperator groups (read WODC, AMC, Chocorua Mt. Club, etc) with standard Forest Service signs. This will bring a uniformity to signing throughout the WMNF, and indeed throughout the Wilderness Preservation System. Signs on WODC maintained trails will have our initials. In our opinion this is a bureaucratic decision; it will add nothing to the Wilderness experience, and will eliminate some of the uniqueness of WMNF where there is a long history of amicable Forest/Cooperator relations.

Members of the Executive Committee are distressed by this decision to replace Club signs in Wilderness, and by the decision to have no indication of mileage on signs. This is seen as the epitome of bureaucracy. Traditional Club signs have no negative effect upon the Wilderness experience, there is no legal basis for the decision in the Wilderness Act. Most puzzling, this decision comes at a time the current Administration in Washington is attempting to reduce costs of government, and is encouraging private groups to participate more fully in managing Federal lands.

Issue X Louis Taintor Plaque There is a memorial plaque on the ledge at the top of Mt. Whiteface. The Forest Service has no record of the placing of the plaque, nor of Louis Taintor's contribution to the Forest. Does anyone know? The Plan recommends retaining the plaque. We question the appropriateness of the plaque, and think it should be removed unless there is some evidence of a purpose to its retention.

Issue XI Close Bolles Trail to Access by 4-wheel drive vehicles. Support the decision to block entrance of 4-wheel drive vehicles to the Bolles Trail. This trail has been established as a winter ORV connector from Tamworth to the Kancamagus Highway; WODC supports that use. Regulations are being violated by truck and 4 wheel-drive users during snowfree seasons. Support the construction of a barrier at the Forest boundary which will prevent illegal access.

Thank you on behalf of WODC and the Sandwich Range Wilderness for the time and energy required of you to respond to these important issues.

Prepared by George E. Zink, WODC Forest Service Coordinator

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