

NY State Conservation Council
Spring Meeting
Middleburgh
April 6, 2024

Good Morning,

My name is Shannon Ryan, I am currently a director for the Federated Sportsmen Clubs of Ulster County. I also hold a stakeholder seat as a representative for New York State sportsmen for the Kaaterskill Clove Visitor Use Management project. All the information I am providing in this presentation has been sourced from the documents named or from the Department of Environmental Conservation website or from non government organization websites.

Many factors have lead to 12 million visitors coming to the Catskill park annually including 9/11, Covid and 150 years of tourism. Additionally Technology has had its own profound impact. Internet Images of scenic views and popular swimming holes have created overuse issues in the entire four county region. The Catskill Park encompasses 700,000 thousand acres of private and state land spanning Ulster, Delaware, Sullivan and Greene counties. 290,000 acres are controlled by the Department of Environmental Conservation as the Catskill Forest Preserve. Forest Preserve lands are protected by the creation of Article 14 of the New York State Constitution as "Forever Wild."

Starting in January 2020 a formal plan for long term economic development was announced with the release of the Greater Catskill Region Comprehensive Recreational Plan. This document was a product of the Catskill Park Coalition, a collaborative of the Department of Environmental Conservation, Department of Environmental Protection, Catskill Watershed Corporation and The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development to outline specific

economic development projects, strategies and funding sources. The plan aims to increase public recreational access in the Catskill park by making improvements to the natural resources, infrastructure and management of the Catskill Park by utilizing the principles of “sustainable recreation.” At the same time the Department of Environmental Conservation announced the creation of the Catskill Strategic Planning Advisory Group or (CAG) with the goal of balancing critical issues associated with increased public use of the Catskill Park in order to protect the regions natural resources. The Catskill Advisory Group produced a recommendations report to the Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner and the Governors office. Some of the recommendations include:

- Creation of the Catskill Coordinator position by the Department of Environmental Conservation to manage the region as a whole instead of separate areas.

- pairing “leave no trace” with promotion of the region through advertising and social media.

- continued marketing to attract visitors to the Catskill Park through the I Love New York campaign, Department of Environmental Conservation, New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and county tourism promotion agencies.

- CAG recommends state and local governments should ensure these campaigns are appropriately funded stating the continued flow of visitors through the region supports business, communities and families throughout the creation of jobs and the generation of tax revenue. While much of this report focuses on the challenges of increased visitation we cannot ignore the economic opportunities and pride of place created by tourism. All stakeholders in the Catskills must understand the balance between destination marketing and destination management. Other recommendations include:

- creation of trail towns, development of new trails to connect outdoor recreation opportunities and communities.

- Promotion of street festivals.

- Improved signage on roadways, trails, trailheads and parking lots.

- Improve cell service coverage.

- Immediate adoption of Visitor Use framework as its core management tool. Visitor use management focuses on improving visitor experience on public lands and creating desired conditions at overused areas through extensive onsite surveys and data collection. It acts as a transparent and legally defensible model for park management and has been adopted by all five of the federal land management agencies in the United States.

Visitor use management is being used in Kaaterskill Clove in the Catskills and the Adirondack High Peaks. OTAK, a research, planning and design firm headquartered in Portland, Oregon was awarded the Visitor Use Management contract funded by the State's Environmental Protection Fund. The two year contract extends through the end of 2024. The first part of the project consisted of on site data collection. Traffic flows, parking capacities, illegal parking on roadways, trail capacities and water feature uses such as swimming were all monitored. Surveys were conducted where only visitors were surveyed on their expectations and satisfaction with the accessibility and social experience of the Kaaterskill Clove area. Data having been analyzed and presented to the stakeholder group is currently being used by the stakeholder group to prepare a desired conditions statement. Having a stakeholders seat representing New York State sportsmen during this process I have tried to present responses within the guidelines of the project. Overall I feel the process falls short on fair representation of the diversity of users for the public forest preserve lands in the study area. Survey responses from the visitors who are solely responsible for the trash at swimming holes and the erosion of trails does not represent sportsmen who have been

shut out of access on state route 23A which has been closed due to overuse and parking issues for almost a year. Three miles of public fishing stream and forest preserve access has been inaccessible to sportsmen while remaining open to visitors. The Visitor Use Management process uses three guiding principles:

1. Article 14 of the NYS Constitution Section.484
2. Catskill Park State Land Master Plan.
3. Catskill Advisory Group final report.

When put into context the Catskill Advisory Group's final report is a mirror image of the greater Catskill region comprehensive recreational plan. Both documents support developing forest preserve to promote the tourism industry. The Catskill Park State Land Master Plan also acknowledges the Catskill Park as a powerful attraction to tourists and a positive influence on private land values and directly in terms of property tax payments to local governments. At this point one begins to see the highly organized push for development. In order to create a more marketable region, an amendment was made to the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan in 2014 to include a new land classification the "Primitive Bicycle Corridor." New additions to the Forest Preserve will be classified in accordance to this classification. According to the Catskill Watershed Corporation a non government organization who helped create the Greater Catskill Region Comprehensive Recreational Plan, "The goal is to create a destination-quality trail system designed to attract more users to this part of the Catskill Mountains and to increase economic activity through enhanced year round recreational opportunities." The Department of Environmental Conservation currently has a contractor creating trails on a new addition to the Shandaken wild forest unit adjacent to Belleayre ski mountain. Through conversations with a high ranking Department of Environmental Conservation official I am told bicycle trails can be built on any land classified as Wild Forest Preserve. By developing bicycle trails on forest preserve lands those lands become single use areas. Due to overuse of these areas - responsible hunting and trapping becomes an ethical impossibility. The overall goal of state government and a host of hiking,

biking and tourism related non government organizations is to connect rail trails, bicycle trails and hiking trails throughout the Catskill Park by creating new trails where they don't exist. These areas slated for development saw senatorial district reconfiguration recently. Senator Oberackers district saw a shift of a significant portion to Senator Hinchey. Hinchey's new area is seeing development of bicycle trails. Hinchey has secured \$8 million annually for Adirondack and Catskills development for the last 2 years. This has been accomplished by adding a stewardship line to the environmental protection fund.

Current overuse issues in the Catskill park have created challenges for sportsmen access and in some cases closed areas completely to sportsmen while remaining open to other user groups.

Examples of this are:

- Route 23A closures to parking resulted in fishing, hunting and trapping access being closed in Kaaterskill Clove
- Bluestone wild forest was developed for mountain bike trails creating use issues for hunting and trapping.
- Blue Hole a swimming spot on upper Rondout Creek allowed by The Department of Environmental Conservation to be promoted as a tourist attraction creating overuse issues has severely impacted sportsmen access.

Non government organizations such as Catskill Center for Conservation and Development, Catskill Mountain Keeper, and New York-New Jersey Trail Conference have all contracted with The Department of Environmental Conservation in stewardship roles in the Catskills. While educating "leave no trace" to visitors at trailheads they have also extensively promoted fire tower hikes, hikes to trail-less peaks, guided hikes as well as group hikes. The Department of Environmental

Conservation has recognized extensive damage to the resource and has initiated a Visitor Use Management study of Trail-Less Peaks over 3500 feet in the Catskills. This study was undertaken to assess the condition of visitor created informal trails on 17 trail-less peaks over 3500 feet. Technology is also being pointed to as a factor in the creation of informal trails. Advancements in navigational technology have made crowd sourced apps available to the general public. The Department of Environmental Conservation will not use a stakeholder group during the Trail-Less Peaks Visitor Use Management Project. New York-New Jersey Trail Conference has already concluded a survey of visitors at trailheads associated with the peaks being studied. The public review of the process is scheduled for late spring/early summer 2024. There are currently rare bird nesting cycles being impacted on the peaks being studied and elevations above 3500 feet also have the only Varying Hare population in the Catskills. Erosion and destruction of sensitive vegetation is also occurring. The Department of Environmental Conservation is contemplating, under recommendation of the various non government organizations contracted in stewardship roles, to create formal registered trails to peaks with informal trails.

With overwhelming evidence pointing to large scale development of an “environmental economy” it seems inevitable that permanent trails will be developed.

Overuse has already forced sportsmen out of areas traditionally used for hunting, fishing and trapping. With changing social opinion regarding land use in the Catskill park, The Department of Environmental Conservation needs to broaden its definition of “protection of the resource” to include “fpprom exploitation of the resource for benefit of economic development.”

The Catskill park was originally formed to protect the region from environmental damage by logging and quarrying. There is substantial evidence to suggest that the recreational industry is not solely responsible for damage to the resource. The Department of Environmental Conservation has strained protections while cutting trees and creating

trails and parking lots to accommodate access for the recreation industry. County and town governments within the Catskill park are largely unaware of these pending plans and developments. No thought from the planners has been given to understaffed and underfunded emergency services that cannot support a massive push for development. Rising taxes, congested highways, excessive litter, and more signage all impact the quality of life for communities involved. Sportsmen are not the only people effected by the exclusionary policy the Department of Environmental Conservation refers to as “sustainable recreation.”

How can Sportsmen help?

1. By raising awareness.
2. By securing legal counsel to interpret constitutional protections outlined in Article 14 Section 1 of the NYS constitution and the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan section 3.
3. 47% of the Catskills are classified as Wild Forest...ensure Wild Forest Preserve Lands cannot be developed into trail systems by lobbying for reclassification to Wilderness areas for stronger protections.
4. Taking part in public comments periods.
5. Urging DEC to lengthen lead times pertaining to public comment periods and seek better outreach methods.
6. Oppose single use areas that exclude traditional uses such as hunting and trapping (bicycle trails)
7. Encourage DEC to adopt mandatory safety orange laws for all users of the Catskill Park to ensure maximum safety during open big game season.
8. Pressure DEC to manage Forest Preserve resources independent of private management contractors and Non Government Organizations.
9. By further developing a comprehensive email alert system.
10. Increasing financial support
11. Increasing voter registration and turnout.

12. Having a New York State Conservation Council presence in the Catskill Park Advisory committee an urging Sullivan, Delaware and Greene counties to attend.
13. Create a ballot initiative to increase protections against further degradation of the Catskill Forest Preserve. Possible amendment to Article 14 to include “protection from exploitation of the resource from economic development and the recreation industry.”
14. Help appoint a Region 3 Conservation Fund Advisory Board Representative.

Sportsmens Desired Conditions Respones for Kaaterskill Clove VUM Project

Desired Conditions Response for Escarpment Subregion

Understanding Kaaterskill Falls offers unique challenges for DEC to manage the volume of visitors safely, the subregion idea makes sense. 23a will always be connected to the issues presented by over visitation to the falls and also has unique safety factors involving management. The Escarpment subregion, being a quieter more remote area from the high traffic of 23a and the heavily visited falls area is also heavily forested. This area should be reclassified from Wild Forest Preserve status to Wilderness status. The Wilderness classification will insure stricter management allowing the wild character to remain intact without encroachment from the overuse at the falls. This serves multiple purposes.

1: protecting the trees and landscape from development of new trails/parking lots/ facilities

2: protecting the watershed from future erosion issues caused by managing the area in an intensive fashion like Kaaterskill Falls or North South Lake

3: protect the poetic scenery from the top of the Clove because the Escarpment area makes up a large portion of what is seen from above

4: by managing the Escarpment subregion under a stricter Land Classification it ensures access to a more diverse group of users. Trail systems allowed under the less strict land classification Wild Forest lead to overuse of an area become a safety issue for responsible hunters and trappers ultimately excluding them from access.

By separating the Escarpment area from the more intense use Falls and highway corridor and changing the Land Classification to further protect the area from development shows the DEC recognizes their need to increase protections of the resource from the recreation industry and create a desired condition where the Escarpment remains open to a more diverse group of users.

Desired Conditions Response for Route 23A

Ideally the route 23a subregion would be a safe travel corridor with a moderate speed limit for commercial traffic and sight seeing. Several safe access points for anglers. A DEC law enforcement presence here may be necessary to ensure swimmers aren't fouling the stream banks with waste. If swimming activities

become overwhelming to angler use , restricted use or closure to swimming may be necessary. A relaxed mixed use area for enjoyment of all would be the most desirable condition for this area.

Desired Conditions Response for Kaaterskill Falls Subregion

In order to preserve the historic character and scenic beauty of this one of a kind landmark, creating strong protection around the Kaaterskill Falls subregion is by far the most important desired condition of this study. Ideally the area would see fewer visitors. In order to accomplish this desired condition New York State Department of Environmental Conservation needs to establish itself as the sole independent managing organization responsible for care of the Falls area. This subregion has been allowed by New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to be exploited for the tourism industry for decades. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation needs to remove itself from the " economic development " policies that promote overuse causing degradation to the resource if they are to be viewed as a responsible steward. Strict management and education of far fewer visitors would create an atmosphere of respect. By reducing visitor access to a level the resource can sustain and even revert to its original wild state visitors would feel a greater bond and reverence towards the area. Swimming should not be allowed as the attire is not appropriate for the dangerous level of access. Swimmers should instead be directed to North South Lake where intensive use management policies and facilities exist. Some sort of land classification should be formed in the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan specifically to protect Kaaterskill Falls in its original natural state. A "Sensitive Historical" designation with access requiring an educational process would control damage to the resource. Visitors entering only with DEC staff members acting as guides / stewards would alleviate damage to the resource and increase the safety of visitors on the steep and slippery terrain by using the safest approved routes to view the falls.