

TO: New York State Senate Standing Committee on Environmental Conservation

FROM: Khang Huynh

RE: **Mitigating Damage to Natural Resources in the Adirondack Park High Peaks Wilderness Area**

DATE: Monday, December 2, 2019

Executive Summary. The Adirondack Park is the largest publicly protected area in the contiguous United States, and whose status is enshrined in the state constitution to remain “forever wild”. Yet, exponential increases in foot traffic and outdated maintenance practices in the High Peaks region have led to erosion and pollution, putting the park’s fragile natural beauty and resources at risk for collapse. Conservation efforts need to be modernized and well-funded to ensure the continued preservation of one of the state’s most precious wildernesses.

Background and Issues

- Overuse on poorly designed trails causes erosion and damages vegetation. Most trails in the Adirondacks are essentially the same as when they were first cut 100 years ago, when principles of sustainable trail design were unknown. Combined with trail overcrowding, this leads to trail erosion and damages rare alpine vegetation.
- Current trail maintenance practices inadequately combat erosion. Most trail maintenance is being contracted by the state to advocacy and recreational groups. They supply seasonal workers and volunteers who lack training in trail design and are poorly funded. Consequently, crews resort to stopgap measures that retard, but do not prevent, erosion.
- Pollution of water supplies. Hikers are often unaware of the proper ways to dispose of trash and fecal matter in the wilderness. This results in unwanted runoff that pollutes the Adirondacks’ pristine waterways used for recreation and drinking.

Policy Options

- Introduce a hiking license program with fee. Hikers who use the park can apply for a monthly license, allowing the state to regulate trail access. Funds raised will be directed towards trail maintenance, environmental preservation, and educational efforts.
- Expand the Summit Steward program. Summit Stewards have interacted with 500,000 hikers since 1990, successfully educating them on the fragile alpine ecosystem and hiking best practices. However, they are stationed only on three or four of the most popular High Peaks. With the park growing ever more popular, and the presence of 42 additional High Peaks, stewards need to be stationed at the 10+ most populous peaks.
- Employ fulltime trail maintenance teams. The state needs to draw on the expertise of environmental scientists, civil engineers, geologists, and others to reroute and redesign trails. They should use current mapping and geological models to plan routes that minimally disturb the ecosystem and build trails using modern sustainable techniques.

Recommendations. The Adirondack Park is home to one of the state’s most vibrant natural resources. To ensure its pristine ecosystems are protected and preserved, the state must take a more modern, well-funded approach to regulating usage of the park, fostering in visitors a sense of responsibility for upkeep of these resources, and replacing outdated hiking trails using techniques that draw on the latest technologies and professional expertise.