

HIGH PEAKS BACK-COUNTRY TRAILS PLAN, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



INTRODUCTION

The High Peaks Region hosts a wonderful collection of back-country trail systems, each providing a unique selection of “Big Mountain” experiences for Appalachian Trail thru-hikers, day hikers, ATV and snowmobile riders, paddlers, mountain bikers, and cross-country skiers. Existing trail systems are possible through hard work by dedicated volunteers who plan, build and organize. The net result is a world class destination for trails-based recreation which is well worth celebrating.

PURPOSE

The High Peaks Trails Plan is a regional vision for back-country trails in Maine’s High Peaks region. The plan identifies challenges and opportunities which face the trails community, and outlines several strategies for trails groups to move forward together to overcome mutual challenges.

TRAILS REPORT

Each back-country trail system offers “Big Mountain” experiences to the trail user. Whether touring cross-country on ATV or snowmobile, pedaling through the woods on flowing single track, paddling on a lazy river, or thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail; high mountain peaks, broad valleys, and rural mountain villages frame the experience. These back-country trail systems appeal to the adventurous. They create a feeling of remoteness. Trail users enjoy back-country trails because they impart a sense of solitude as one travels through seemingly wild, open spaces. Experiences in rural mountain villages bordering the High Peaks region are part of any back-country adventure. The “Big Mountain” experience is a lifestyle for local residents, and an attraction to visitors.

There are many different kinds of trails in the High Peaks including:

- Existing, longstanding trail systems such as the Appalachian National Scenic Trail; alpine skiing on trails at Sugarloaf and Saddleback; cross-country ski trails at the Outdoor Center in Carrabassett Valley, Maine Huts & Trails, and the Rangeley Trails Center in Sandy River PLT; local access, Interconnected Trail System, and Black Fly Loop snowmobile trails; and numerous day hiking trails, as well as “herd paths,” or off-trail hiking experiences.
- New single purpose back-country trails such as local access, and Moose Loop ATV trails; and mountain biking single-track, woods road and shared-use trails, in Carrabassett Valley and at the Rangeley Trails Center.

¹ Picture Courtesy of Scott Landry

HIGH PEAKS BACK-COUNTRY TRAILS PLAN, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- New multi-purpose back-country trail systems such as Maine Huts and Trails, a new initiative to connect Moose Head Lake to the Mahoosuc Mountains, with a system featuring back-country hut stays interconnected by shared-use, non-motorized trails.
- New Community back-country trail systems such as the Northern Forest Canoe Trail; and the Fly Rod Crosby Trail.

Existing regional trail infrastructure includes bridges, multi-use trail corridors, trail heads, parking areas, downtown-access trails, rescue zones, landing zones, gates, and online mapping resources (e.g. Maine Trail Finder). The existing land base for the most part remains privately owned.

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Back-country trail systems in the High Peaks face significant challenges in the future including changing property ownership patterns, and the reduced capacity of volunteer-based trail groups due to demographic and socio-economic changes in the High Peaks and across the Maine Woods. In the future there will be more public and private land owners with diverse interests which do not necessarily include traditional public access to land for recreation. The population will increase but grow older, and the regional economy will continue to morph into a balanced mix of recreation services, natural resources extraction, and manufacturing. Trail organizations will have to adapt in order to maintain extensive back-country systems in the future.

The High Peaks are well placed to take advantage of opportunities to transition into a brighter future. The High Peaks are home to world class terrain for a variety of different, complimentary recreational uses. The physical region is unique in Maine and has the largest contiguous area above 2,700 feet (MNAP, Beginning with Habitat, 2010); eight of Maine's fourteen 4,000 foot mountains; and is adjacent to some of Maine's finest public lands like the Mount Abraham Ecological Reserve, Rangeley Lakes State Park, Chain of Ponds, and the Bigelow Preserve.

STRATEGIES

Strategy #1: Enhance regional connectivity for all back-country trail systems by working together. A successful regional system of back-country trails would emphasize a balance of uses, with optimal system connectivity, and trails stewarded by resilient organizations. The regional system would feature greater trail density and complexity, where it makes sense to do so, and create a diversity of back-country trail experiences for residents and visitors. Stacked loop summer and winter systems interconnected by linear trails would create a regional system accessible from any High Peaks community.

HIGH PEAKS BACK-COUNTRY TRAILS PLAN, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strategy #2: Enhance the capacity of all trail groups managing back-country trail systems through a shared investment in the regional system. Trails organizations can increase capacity to maintain and develop trail systems in the High Peaks by working together to: share investment in sustainable regional infrastructure such as bridges and permanent connecting trails; facilitate efficient emergency response; maintain shared trail corridors; and support rural economic development by better connecting back-country trail systems to communities.

Strategy #3: Increase youth engagement. Existing youth engagement efforts offer a base on which to develop future approaches to develop new, positive, outdoor experiences for local and visiting youth, and to create meaningful summer jobs for youth working on back-country trail projects. Increased youth engagement in back-country trails and outdoor recreation in general can be obtained by: improving communication between trail groups and youth engagement organizations; development of youth events, or youth specific components of existing events; and development of a High Peaks Youth Conservation Corps, which would employ local youth to work on back-country trails in the region.

Strategy #4: Creation of a Trails Council or Network to collaboratively continue development of the regional vision. The High Peaks trails community can and should work together to overcome regional challenges and take advantage of every opportunity to improve the regional trail network, not just the fortunes of each individual trail system. The proposed network would not be a new organization, but rather a way for existing trail groups to work together to meet common challenges. Shared investment in infrastructure, improving relationships with landowners (and between user groups) through clear efficient communication, and collaboration to meet common goals will strengthen back-country trail groups in the region.

CONCLUSION

The High Peaks Trails Plan is based on the assumption that all trail users and maintainers share a passion for back-country recreation and the natural landscape of Maine's High Peaks. Put in other words, if we can agree on 80% of what we have in common, then the 20% which divides us can be overcome. Together we can ensure future generations of residents and visitors will be able to enjoy traditional access to the outdoors, which makes western Maine such a special place to live and play.