



## Draft Desired Conditions for the High Peaks Project Area - Revised

**To:** Josh Clague and McCrea Burnham, NYSDEC  
**From:** Steve Lawson and Abbie Larkin, DJ&A  
**Date:** August 6, 2024  
**Re:** Revised Desired Conditions for the High Peaks Project Area  
**Project No.:** 7512

---

This memorandum presents draft desired conditions statements developed for the Forest Preserve in the High Peaks Project Area as part of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Visitor Use Management (NYSDEC VUM) project. Desired conditions are defined as statements of aspiration that describe resource conditions, visitor experiences and opportunities, and facilities and services that an agency strives to achieve and maintain in a particular area. Desired conditions statements differ from current conditions statements in that they describe what conditions, outcomes, and opportunities are to be achieved and maintained in the future, not necessarily what exists today. Desired conditions statements differ from management objectives statements in that they focus on what to achieve, rather than how to achieve it. Desired conditions statements serve as the anchor for long-term monitoring and adaptive visitor use management strategies and actions.

### Basis for Desired Conditions Statements

The draft desired conditions presented in this document focus on visitors' experiences and public safety in the High Peaks Project Area, and were developed using several sources as described in this section. Foundational legislation, agency policies, and management documents that establish the project area's purpose and management direction were used to form the basis for desired conditions. These include the New York State Constitution Article XIV Section 1, the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, the High Peaks Wilderness Complex Unit Management Plan and Amendments, the High Peaks Advisory Group (HPAG) Final Report, and the Draft Management Guidance Visitor-use Management and Wildlands Monitoring of Forest Preserve Lands in Adirondack Park<sup>1</sup>.

Internal planning workshops were conducted with the High Peaks Core Team<sup>2</sup> to expand on the desired conditions established in the project area's foundational legislation, agency policies, and management documents. The first High Peaks Core Team Workshop was held on February 27, 2023, and used a photo exercise to elicit themes from the Core Team members about desired conditions in the project area. During this workshop, Core Team members were asked to submit photos that represented what makes the project area special (i.e., the unique characteristics of the project area) and to describe the photos during the workshop. The second High Peaks Core Team Workshop was held on May 31, 2023, and used the following open-ended questions to further describe the desired future conditions for the High Peaks:

- A) What should visitors experience when they visit the High Peaks Project Area?
- B) How should people feel and what should they take away from their experiences in the High Peaks Project Area?

---

<sup>1</sup> These documents were summarized in the *Deliverables 1B-1D* document submitted July 5, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> The High Peaks Core Team includes staff from a range of NYSDEC divisions and programs and a representative from the Adirondack Park Agency that have specialized expertise in the project area and/or subject matter relevant to this project.

- C) What types of opportunities should the public have to experience the High Peaks Project Area?
- D) What benefits should people and local communities experience from recreation in the High Peaks Project Area?

Additional sources to develop the draft desired conditions statements presented in this document targeted the perspectives of stakeholders and the general public. A stakeholder conversation event<sup>3</sup> was conducted virtually on March 30, 2023, to elicit stakeholder perceptions about concerns, needs, and opportunities for visitor use management in the project area. The perceptions shared during these conversations were incorporated into the development of draft desired conditions for the project area. A public website was launched on May 2, 2023 and an in-person public meeting was held in Saranac Lake, NY on May 9, 2023 to elicit perspectives from the general public. A meeting with a formal Stakeholder Working Group was conducted in-person on October 4, 2023, to further elicit perspectives specific to the group. The public website, public meeting, and Stakeholder Working Group meeting used similar<sup>4</sup> open-ended questions to those used during the second High Peaks Core Team Workshop (listed above) to further describe the desired future conditions for the project area from multiple perspectives.

Information and insights from the sources listed above were used as the basis to develop the draft desired conditions statements included in this document. The draft desired conditions statements included in this document will be refined, finalized, and formalized throughout the NYSDEC-VUM Project.

### Draft Desired Conditions

Desired conditions may vary across the landscape depending on resource types, recreation opportunities, and desired experiences for visitors. The High Peaks Project Area consists of Forest Preserve lands (i.e., state-administered lands) in the Adirondack Park and is located in the High Peaks Wilderness Complex (Figure 1). As such, the draft desired conditions for the project area reflect the Forest Preserve status and Wilderness classification of the project area and apply to the Forest Preserve. In order to further reflect the spectrum of resource, visitor use, and management conditions that exist in the project area, this document presents preliminary draft subregions<sup>5</sup> for the High Peaks Project Area and includes draft desired conditions for the full project area as well as each of the preliminary draft subregions (Figure 1). The concept for these subregions emerged during Core Team Workshop discussions based on the resource types, recreation opportunities, and desired experiences for visitors that are unique to each subregion. In addition, the desired conditions reflect the fact that robust partnerships with adjacent communities and partner organizations, as well as ongoing coordination of management between the High Peaks Project Area and adjacent properties providing access, are critical to achieving desired conditions for the High Peaks Project Area.

---

<sup>3</sup> The stakeholder conversation event was summarized in a separate synthesis document delivered to NYSDEC and shared publicly on the project website.

<sup>4</sup> Question A was modified for the public website to read: *What would you like to experience when you visit this area?*

<sup>5</sup> The High Peaks Wilderness Complex Unit Management Plan provides the foundation for managing different subregions for different users and experiences, provided the Wilderness standards established in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan are still met in the subregions.

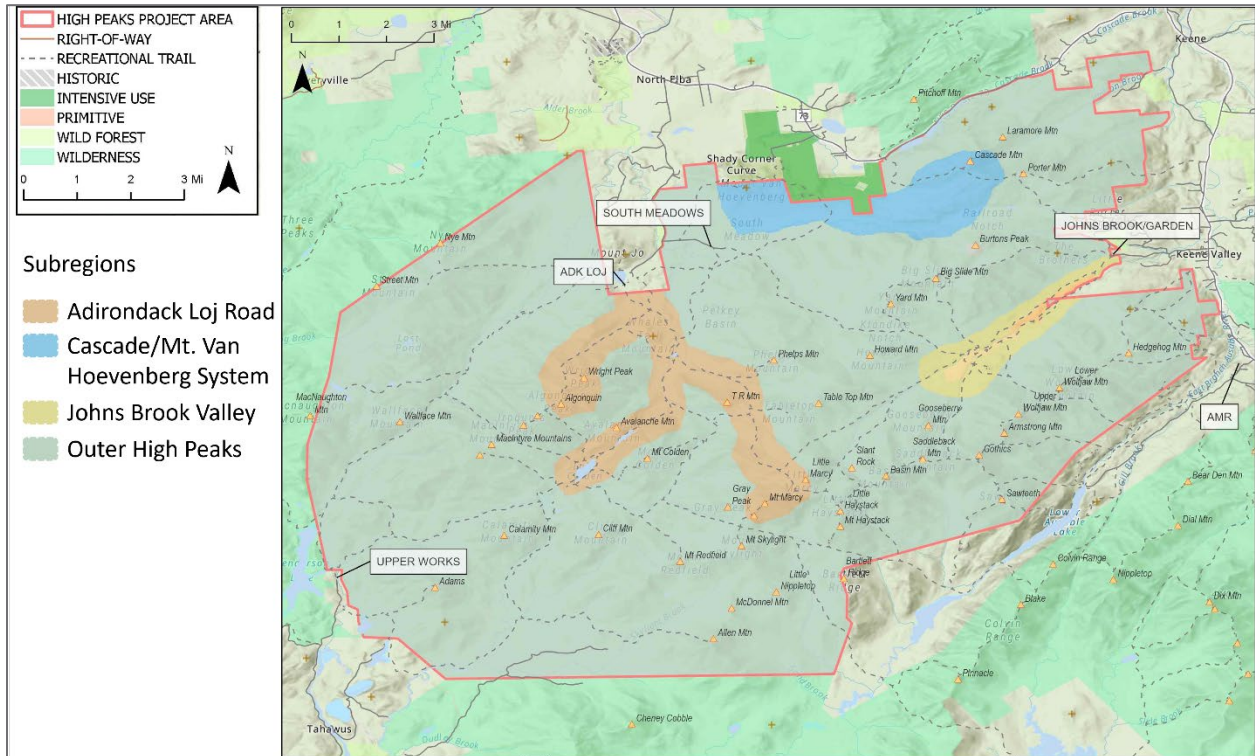


Figure 1. High Peaks project area and draft subregions.

## Overall High Peaks Project Area

The project area provides high-quality visitor experiences characterized by outstanding opportunities for solitude, physical challenge, quiet contemplation, self-reflection, and autonomy. Visitors have opportunities to experience awe, inspiration, and appreciation in this rugged Wilderness setting where nature predominates, and the protection of legally mandated Wilderness values and ecological integrity is paramount. Visitors have opportunities to realize physical and mental health benefits from spending time in nature. Visitors leave this area feeling rewarded, relaxed, and rejuvenated from their experiences. Visitors experience sensory, emotional, and spiritual connections to the plants, animals, water, and landscape in the area. The surroundings provide a space for people to appreciate the unique and natural wonders of the Wilderness landscape characterized by healthy ecosystems and minimal human impacts. The sights and sounds of nature that reflect the landscape's Wilderness character are prominent, from the vast ridgeline views to wind gusts and bird songs in the forests to star-filled night skies. Stewardship of the High Peaks area protects and restores Wilderness character for current and future generations. Visitor activities, facilities, and services are in harmony with the natural surroundings and with the enjoyment and safety of the visiting public. The opportunities, programming, and information the area offers for public use promote representation, inclusion, and access for all. All people feel welcome, which fosters in them a sense of place for the project area, a desire for making environmentally-sound recreation choices, and a deeper appreciation of and commitment to Wilderness stewardship for future generations.

The area provides a spectrum of Wilderness-oriented recreation opportunities. Visitors can enjoy high-quality experiences of the Wilderness setting for a few hours or for several days. Hiking opportunities are along sustainably aligned trails and range from challenging ascents to high-elevation summits, to shorter hikes at a slower pace with a focus on nature appreciation. While many visit this area to hike, other visitors enjoy climbing, hunting, paddling, picnicking, skiing, and similar

recreation opportunities. Visitors can expect to encounter others, but do not experience crowded conditions and can find solitude.

Visitors can find safe and convenient places to park their vehicles, whether that be directly onsite or offsite coupled with alternative modes of access to their destination in the project area. They can access the area without impacting the flow of traffic on local roads, causing congestion that restricts local residents' ability to go about their daily routines, or creating potential traffic safety hazards for themselves or others.

Information and services are available and promoted to help prepare visitors to make informed decisions about how to safely access and enjoy the area according to their own experience level and to assist in minimizing resource impacts. Education and information about access points, recreation opportunities, the popularity of the area, trail difficulty and general conditions, the area's unique history, the role of stewardship, low-impact recreation, resource protection, visitor safety, and the importance of planning ahead are provided by NYSDEC and partners. This information is made available for advanced trip planning and onsite and is designed to invite and prepare visitors for a challenging but safe and memorable Wilderness experience. Strong programs, initiatives, and a consortium of well-trained stewardship educators are also available to help visitors learn about opportunities to have positive impacts on the protection of the area and on the quality of life in the surrounding communities. These services are provided by NYSDEC and partners to support and promote inclusive access so that visitors to the project area want to and can safely return to the region.

Partner-provided facilities and services are available to visitors in select locations. These facilities and services are instrumental to helping visitors properly prepare for safe and rewarding trips into the Wilderness. They also provide visitors with a space to rest and reflect on their experiences when they return from the Wilderness. Infrastructure is otherwise purposefully minimal in the High Peaks area to align with the area's Wilderness designation and character. Signage at parking areas and trailheads is provided to encourage safe and sustainable visitor use through educational and interpretive displays. Facilities, trails, and signs are designed and purposely built to align with the primitive and natural character of the area. Administrative personnel are periodically present to support sustainable visitor use in this area. They are largely focused on the area's perimeter and at access points, but visitors may encounter them at interior locations as well.

Visitors are connected and engaged with partner organizations and local communities that work collaboratively with NYSDEC, NYS Department of Transportation, the Olympic Regional Development Authority, and other agencies. Strong and enduring partnerships between the state agencies and partner organizations are essential to support safe, memorable, and high-quality visitor experiences.

### **Adirondack Loj Road Subregion**

This area serves as the primary gateway for visitors to the High Peaks Wilderness. It includes the most traveled trail corridors and the highest summits in the project area, including New York State's tallest mountain – Mount Marcy. There are outstanding hiking opportunities in this area, including day-long pilgrimages to the most prominent summits in the High Peaks and adventures on lesser-traveled routes into the Wilderness landscape. The area offers opportunities for visitors to escape into the Wilderness on multi-day backpacking trips with overnight stays at lean-tos, primitive campsites, or dispersed backcountry campsites. Visitors can expect to encounter others, but do not experience crowded conditions and can find solitude. Visitors can move at their own pace while they are hiking and can find personal space along the way to and at their destinations. Partner-provided

facilities and services are available to visitors in walking distance from the trailhead and trailhead parking. These facilities and services are instrumental to helping visitors properly prepare for safe and rewarding trips into the Wilderness. They also provide visitors with a space to rest and reflect on their experiences when they return from the Wilderness. Beyond the trailhead, there are only minimal recreational facilities and the emphasis is on opportunities for solitude, challenge, autonomy, quiet contemplation, and primitive recreation. One strategically located caretaker station remains at Lake Colden to help inform visitors about appropriate Wilderness behavior and to support visitor safety.

### **Cascade/Mt. Van Hoevenberg System Subregion**

This area provides a spectrum of outstanding Wilderness hiking experiences where visitors build lasting memories that inspire future visits, stewardship, and Wilderness advocacy. The presence of administrative personnel is limited to allow visitors to practice self-reliance as they spend time in the area. The trail to Mt. Van Hoevenberg provides novice to advanced hikers with the opportunity to climb to a High Peaks Wilderness mountain summit and the reward of mountain top views. Visitors learn from the trail itself and supporting educational information about sustainable trail design as they make their way to Mt. Van Hoevenberg's open rocky summit. Visitors may have frequent encounters with others while hiking to and on the summit of Mt. Van Hoevenberg, but their interactions with others are positive. The route to Cascade's summit provides visitors with the opportunity for a challenging alpine hiking experience and a chance to summit one of the 46 traditionally recognized "High Peaks". Visitors experience the ruggedness and wonder of the Wilderness setting along their way to and on Cascade's summit. Visitors can expect to encounter others during their hike to and on Cascade's summit, but do not experience crowded conditions and can find solitude.

### **Johns Brook Valley Subregion**

This area provides access through the Johns Brook Valley to outstanding opportunities for extended day hikes and backpacking in the High Peaks Wilderness. This includes access to the Great Range and to other trails that extend deep into the remote and rugged Wilderness landscape. Backpacking in this area provides visitors with a sense of Wilderness immersion as they journey into and camp overnight in the Wilderness landscape. The partner-provided Johns Brook Lodge offers another type of opportunity for overnight stays in the High Peaks Wilderness. Here too visitors can experience primitive and unconfined recreation and a sense of connection to nature while camping or lodging in the remote and rugged Wilderness setting. Opportunities to experience solitude in the Johns Brook Lodge area itself are limited, but visitors are able to enjoy their personal space. Beyond the Johns Brook Valley, recreational facilities are limited to trails and minimal, primitive signage to encourage opportunities for challenge, autonomy, and rugged recreation.

### **Outer High Peaks subregion**

This area provides visitors with opportunities to venture further away from primary gateways and popular trail corridors. Visitors experience in this remote and wild landscape a deep sense of immersion in the Wilderness environment. Visitors have outstanding opportunities for extended experiences of solitude and to be surrounded by the sights and sounds of nature. Hiking and backpacking in this remote and rugged landscape provide visitors with a high degree of challenge, a strong sense of self-reliance, and feelings of respect and appreciation for the powers of nature. Signs are kept to a minimum to harmonize with the Wilderness setting and the presence of administrative personnel is limited to encourage self-reliance. Trail-less opportunities exist to further enhance opportunities for visitors to experience primitive and unconfined recreation. These trail-less opportunities are intentionally located where they minimize impacts to the ecological integrity of the High Peaks.

## Activities and Facilities

Table 1 lists activities and facilities that are appropriate in the project area.

**Table 1. Appropriate activities and facilities.**

Activities	Facilities
<p>Any Wilderness-dependent, non-motorized activity, including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Backpacking</li> <li>• Birding</li> <li>• Camping in designated campsites</li> <li>• Day hiking</li> <li>• Dispersed camping</li> <li>• Fishing</li> <li>• Horseback riding in select areas</li> <li>• Hunting</li> <li>• Ice climbing</li> <li>• Nature study</li> <li>• Photography</li> <li>• Rock climbing</li> <li>• Skiing</li> <li>• Swimming</li> <li>• Trapping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjacent parking lots</li> <li>• Barriers/gates</li> <li>• Bridges</li> <li>• Informational and directional signage</li> <li>• Interior ranger station</li> <li>• Kiosks with trail registers and signage</li> <li>• Lean-tos</li> <li>• Pit privies</li> <li>• Portable toilets (in adjacent parking lots)</li> <li>• Primitive tent sites</li> <li>• Trail network</li> </ul>