

Conservation Matters

A monthly column focused on conservation education, as the result of collaboration among several area conservation commissions and organizations. If your town's commission or conservation organization would like to contribute articles, please contact Jessica Tabolt Halm jesshalm78@gmail.com

Title: The Balancing Act between Access and Conservation

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New Hampshire provides the summer playground for not only New England residents, but tourists from around the world. Adventure seekers, nature lovers, and those looking for pure relaxation often travel for miles to hike the multiple mountain ranges or enjoy a sunny day of fishing and boating. These places are important to us -- so important that we do everything we can to keep them healthy for the enjoyment of future generations. But what happens when our enjoyment becomes part of the problem? Low impact activities such as hiking and kayaking may seem harmless, but can still leave a negative mark on the environment.

West Rattlesnake is one of the most trafficked trails maintained by the Squam Lakes Association (SLA). Known for its short hiking time and breathtaking view of Squam Lake, West Rattlesnake is well-loved by locals and tourists alike. It's also terribly eroded. Every foot that steps onto Rattlesnake wears down the soil, loosens rocks, and tramples roots. The trail can become heavily compacted which prevents the rain from penetrating the soil, instead making it flow over the trail and further increase erosion. The very existence of the trail is considered a disturbance as it exposes previously untouched habitat and alters animal behavior. The SLA and the University of New Hampshire, with the help of volunteers, have put numerous hours into finding ways to reduce the impact of hikers. These initiatives include hardening the trail with rock stairwells and pathways, brushing in overused trails, and trail hosting on the weekends to educate and track the number of visitors.

A love of Squam Lake is not limited to observing its beauty from mountaintops. The summer sun brings with it many boaters, kayakers, canoeists, swimmers, and anglers who have been waiting patiently for the ice to melt. It also brings migratory birds like loons who summer here looking to produce a healthy chick or two. Much of the land surrounding Squam Lake is privately owned, but public access areas allow everyone to enjoy the wonders of the lake. With increased boat traffic comes the inevitable decrease of space, which is being seen on multiple lakes across the state. The Lake Host program managed by NH Lakes uses volunteers to monitor boat launch sites to track this traffic and to educate boaters about the invasive species that lurk in the waters. The SLA also hosts Weed Watcher programs to arm the public with the knowledge to recognize and report invasive plants such as the dreaded variable milfoil. These conversations are usually met with a positive response, as people are enthusiastic about keeping the lakes as pristine as possible. Locals and visitors alike keep a watchful eye on the health of the lake and this camaraderie ensures local conservation organizations like the SLA are kept aware of any emerging issues.

When we visit natural places, we often do so to marvel in their wonder, which inspires a deep feeling of connectivity to our surroundings. We care about the future of our environment. We also want to be able to enjoy nature, to maintain that connectivity, to

inspire others by allowing them to have those same experiences. However, with factors such as climate change, an expanding population, and the spread of invasive species, it becomes a special challenge. We want our local animals to thrive, but how can we inspire people to care if they can never see them in their natural habitat? We want to raise children with a love for the environment, but how can they if they're not allowed to hike or swim? How do we love our natural places without loving them to death? There's no easy answer to this question. It's a constant struggle of walking the swaying tightrope between accessibility and conservation.

As individuals, it's the little things that count. The SLA relies on volunteers year round to assist with tasks such as maintaining trails and water quality monitoring. Volunteering time to conservation programs, remaining educated about local environmental issues, even something as simple as sticking to marked trails helps reduce our impact.



Photo caption: The easy hike to this view from atop West Rattlesnake in Holderness is one of the most frequently traveled routes by locals and tourists alike. Striking a balance between providing access to special places like this and the pressure of overuse on the landscape is something that conservationists must seriously consider. Photo credit: www.outdoorproject.com