

Conservation Matters

Title: Hope for 2021's hiking season to be better than the last.

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For many years, the numbers of hikers on the more popular trails have been increasing. Franconia Ridge, Welch and Dickey, West Rattlesnake and Mt. Major often have many cars overflowing from the trailhead parking and onto the roads, despite local and state 'no parking' signs outside the parking areas. Local hikers know to start hikes earlier, or later, and even shift hiking days to weekdays to find a parking place.

This year has been very different. The pandemic arrived, people were working from home, and hundreds of families with second homes in the area moved north to work and study remotely. This was in the spring, during mud season. The trails became busy all week long. Squam Lakes Association usually closes the more popular trails during mud season, at the owners' requests, to protect the trails and the surrounding biota. This year, with the owners' permission they kept the trails open, and like many other popular trails they were well used. With 'stay at home' mandates in many states New Hampshire experienced an early and substantial greater number of people coming up to enjoy the lakes and mountains. In March, the Forest Service shut down many trailheads and shelters to keep people away. Increased illegal parking, sometimes blocking peoples' driveways, and camping in closed areas forced reopening trailheads and shelters about a month later.

On Saturday of Indigenous Peoples weekend I accompanied a couple of friends who were going to hike the entire Squam Range (Crawford-Ridgepole Trail). My plan was to hike up to Mt. Doublehead with the group and descend on the Doublehead Trail. We encountered one person coming down the trail. No one else was on Doublehead. I headed down to enjoy the view from the ledges below the summit and the rest of my party continued on the trail that would take them over Mt. Squam, Mt. Percival, Mt. Morgan, Mt. Livermore and Mt. Cotton. It was a great day for a hike. On the way down I passed a couple I knew. After passing a couple more parties, I met a woman with three boys and she commented that the Morgan/Percival parking was a circus! When I reached the Doublehead parking lot it was just about full with many people getting ready to begin the hike. It was about 11 AM. To get home I had to drive down route 113 and it wasn't very far before I saw cars parked on both sides of the road and hikers walking down the road, some oblivious to the traffic trying to navigate around them and the parked cars. After the Sandwich/ Holderness town line there were no cars and temporary 'No Parking' signs, all the way to the trailheads (.6 mile). Cars were trying to get in and out of the parking areas and the Holderness Police were there. It was truly a circus.

When the opportunity to write our contribution to Conservation Matters came about, I knew I wanted to write it about the problem we have had since March 2020: too many people on SOME of the trails.

With increasing numbers of hikers come an increase number of calls for help and increased impact on the natural area around the trails. One of our local conservation commission members was hiking a 4000' peak and had stopped at an outlook at the end of a spur trail. A young woman came along thinking she was on the hiking trail. She had no map or description of the trail she was supposed

to be on. Our CC member hiked to the summit with her and gave her a good education about preparedness and safety in the mountains. NH Fish and Game was busy with calls all through the last summer and fall hiking season, from hikers who had lost the trail, were not prepared for the change in weather or ran out of daylight. There have been serious accidents as well.

For information on how hikers have impacted the trails this past year, I contacted the Director of Trails and Access at SLA. In addition to the more popular West Rattlesnake and the Morgan-Percival loop Cotton Mt., Brooks Fisher and Eagle Cliff Trails have been heavily impacted. People concerned about social distancing formed new 'social trails' on each side of the regular trails. I wanted to see what the trails looked like. At three o'clock on a Friday afternoon, there were eight cars in the West Rattlesnake lot. From the beginning, the trail looked as if hikers had moved off trail on both sides, impacting the ground and vegetation. When hikers walk off the trail, to the degree they did this year, the ground is compacted. This affects plant life and the ability of the soil to absorb water. The muddy areas were larger because hikers keep going around the wet areas, impacting the vegetation.

West Rattlesnake is an easy hike and often people will take their dogs. The most appalling bit of information I learned about the trail maintenance was the number of 'dog poop bags' that thoughtless people have been leaving along the trail. One day the volunteers picked up 25!!

There are more than 2000 miles of hiking trails in NH. Many trails do not get a fraction of what the popular trails get. Most local towns have maintained trails that most hikers will find enjoyable. Have you been to Plymouth Mt. or the Walter Newton/Fauver East Trails in Plymouth, Pilote Forest in Holderness, Quincy Pasture Forest in Rumney, Whitten Woods in Ashland, or Blair Woodland Natural Area in Campton? I encourage you to explore the less trafficked trails in the area, which are sure to provide you with a wonderful outdoors experience.