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## News and Notes

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# News and Notes

## **Trail Work Will Improve Heavily Used Franconia Ridge Trails**

A \$1.1 million federal budget appropriation will fund a project to repair and realign the heavily used hiking trails in the Franconia Ridge area of New Hampshire's White Mountains. The work on the 11.4-mile-long "Franconia loop," as hikers call it, is expected to take five years.

The route can see up to 1,000 hikers per day in peak season.

The appropriation was secured by Senator Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire and signed in mid-March 2022 by President Joe Biden. The Appalachian Mountain Club will oversee and lead the work under the direction of the United States Forest Service.

The trails that constitute this loop were built between 1826 and 1958—before the advent of current knowledge and practices of building trails for resiliency. The Appalachian National Scenic Trail has followed this portion of the Franconia Ridge Trail for nearly a century.

"The Franconia Ridge Trail loop has offered some of the best hiking in New England for more than a century, and this funding will ensure that these heavily traveled trails can be enjoyed safely by hikers for years to come," said Susan Arnold, interim CEO for AMC. "Beyond the positive impact on recreation, we know that well-maintained trails also serve as one of our most effective conservation tools, protecting fragile ecosystems by limiting foot traffic to a narrow area. This is a win-win for conservation and recreation."

The Franconia Ridge Trail loop is composed of four trails that are some of the busiest in the region: Franconia Ridge Trail, Falling Waters Trail, Greenleaf Trail, and Old Bridle Path, from which hikers can access AMC's Greenleaf Hut. Most of the loop, 8.6 miles' worth, goes through the White Mountain National Forest.

"Decades and centuries of use leave these trails in need of significant repair to ensure they can be enjoyed by future visitors and to protect the fragile environments they traverse," Arnold said.

The Franconia Ridge and Greenleaf Trails traverse fragile alpine habitat, and portions of the Falling Waters Trail with its numerous river crossings have been heavily damaged by recent storms. All of the trails need significant repair—and in some locations realignment—to ensure a resilient future for both the trail loop and the surrounding natural areas.

The trail loop spans both state and federal lands and is maintained by AMC, underscoring long-standing partnerships for the benefit of outdoor enthusiasts.

AMC's Trails Department—which will lead the work in close partnership with the White Mountain National Forest as public land manager—is nationally recognized for its expertise in trail management and supports land managers across the Northeast. For more than 100 years AMC has provided professional trail crews that maintain and construct trails. AMC's trail construction teams comprise professional trail crews, youth corps, and staff-led volunteers.

—Nina Paus-Weiler

## **Mount Washington Master Plan Emerges as Cog Railway Proposes Hotel**

*Editor's note: What follows is an excerpt from the July 2022 draft of the Mount Washington Master Plan, required by law every decade. This document is intended to guide development high on New Hampshire's Mount Washington, at 6,288 feet the highest peak in the Northeast. Much of the summit area is a New Hampshire state park.*

*The authors of the master plan represent the government, citizens, businesses including the Mount Washington Cog Railway and the Mount Washington Summit Road Company (operators of the Mount Washington Auto Road), the nonprofit Mount Washington Observatory, and the nonprofit Appalachian Mountain Club, which operates the Lakes of the Clouds Hut a mile below the summit by permit.*

*Mount Washington Cog Railway President Wayne Presby, one of the authors of this plan, previously sought to build a hotel building near the summit but withdrew the application in 2018. In 2022 Presby's Cog Railway proposed a seasonal hotel, to be called Lizzie's Station, near the summit on Cog Railway land, in the area where 23-year-old Lizzie Bourne died of exposure in 1855. Presby has signed a memorandum of understanding with the state of New Hampshire to create this hotel using eighteen railway cars in a fixed position, to be open from the spring to the fall. Opponents to the hotel, citing rare alpine vegetation and birds, have signed a petition at [change.org](https://change.org)—more than 30,000 had signed by late summer 2022.*

*The first section excerpted is from the master plan's opening, "Mission."*

The summit of Mount Washington is iconic and emblematic of the Granite State. Visitors to the summit should have the opportunity to observe and experience its unique environment. The purpose of this Master Plan is to provide for this experience while enabling the success of all Summit Partners by ensuring that the summit of Mount Washington, featuring the Mount Washington State Park, continues to be a must-see destination for visitors to the region while also ensuring that resource values are protected. This will be achieved by: maintaining a high quality mountain experience that respects

Mount Washington's uniqueness; recognizing the mountain's flora and fauna, its facilities, and its history; and, using a coordinated approach to address the capacities of the summit environment, buildings, sewage, waste, energy, and water systems, and transportation modes that must accommodate the full number of people expected or permitted to visit the summit each year.

*The next passage comes from section IV, "Operation and Maintenance."*

**Environment, Summit Assessment, and Aesthetics:** Summit management by N.H. State Parks in cooperation with summit partners should aspire to minimize harm by ensuring that human presence is consistent with the environmental goals and protections established in this master plan.

As an initial step, a summit assessment should be completed. The assessment should examine damage to and deterioration of the environment including, but not limited to, an analysis of contaminated groundwater and soils around the summit, the impact of climate change, and other environmental considerations. Assistance from the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services and the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department should be requested to help determine a scope of work. The assessment should also include a building survey and an infrastructure survey; however, such surveys shall not impinge on the confidentiality or privacy interests of state park tenants. . . .

With respect to structures, the Commission, through this Master Plan, hereby adopts a high standard for planning and performance aimed at avoiding unnecessary additional structures.

**Operation of the Summit Generally:** The summit should be managed to promote desirable experiences including the enjoyment of iconic views and unique visitor experiences. Operations should ensure a good experience for hikers, understanding that hikers appreciate the services offered at the summit because they know that they will soon return to the rugged above-tree-line experience of the Presidentials.

The Mount Washington Cog Railway and the Mount Washington Auto Road each bring well over 100,000 visitors to the summit each year. The number of hikers each year is currently unknown but likely rivals that of other transportation modes. Consideration must be given to management techniques and objectives for the summit that take into account the number of current and expected visitors.

In general, N.H. State Parks should evaluate limiting the number of visitors, using reservation systems, or changing operating hours with respect to

structures while recognizing the requirements of relevant deeds and the commission's charge [in state statutes] relative to the "[p]romotion of the use of the summit by the public as a recreational, historic or scientific attraction." Recognizing that there will always be a physical limit to the number of people on the summit at any given time, the Auto Road and the Cog Railway should investigate ways to limit their visitors in order to contribute to the long range success of the Mount Washington experience. Similarly, the AMC [Appalachian Mountain Club], N.H. State Parks, and the U.S. Forest Service should investigate ways to limit the number of hikers or associated impacts. The commission may update this recommendation as it deems necessary.

*This document does not just offer clues to how officials view the Lizzie's Station project, which will need permits to go forward. The master plan underscores the state of New Hampshire's long-standing approach to encouraging tourism while managing natural resources on Mount Washington. The New Hampshire Union Leader reported that on August 22, Governor Chris Sununu met with the Mount Washington Commission, making note of the large numbers of environmentalists opposed to the hotel. Although the commission seemed poised to vote its approval in October, when this journal was at the printer, it is an advisory commission. Barbara Tetreault of the Berlin Sun reported that the hotel would need approval from Coos County Zoning and Planning Boards and that state agencies must do field studies on plants and animals in the area. The U.S. Forest Service also must approve the project.*

### **More Visitors to New England National Forests Stress Landscape**

A lot more people have visited New England's national forests throughout the COVID-19 pandemic than in years past, and researchers at the University of New Hampshire say that's created issues for the trails and for the hikers.

Michael Ferguson, a professor of recreation management and policy at the University of New Hampshire, says visitors to New England's national forests increased by more than 60 percent throughout the summer of 2020. He's also seen a 400 percent increase in visitation to congressionally designated wilderness areas throughout the pandemic.

The increase in visitors has brought new stresses to such national forests as the White Mountain National Forest.

"Things like crowding, and visitors experiencing conflict," he said. "We see ecological impacts; for instance, impacts to the physical resource trail, resource degradation, trampling of the flora and fauna."

There have also been such impacts as more traffic, more litter, and more limited access to facilities.

The new stresses have disproportionately affected women and lower-income visitors, Ferguson's research shows. "When an individual visitor is confronted with an impact, they have to cope or deal with it," Ferguson said. He said that usually means "they're going somewhere else, or they're coming back at a different time of the day." That kind of "substitution," as Ferguson termed it, is harder on lower-income recreators. Women in the outdoors were significantly more likely, in Ferguson's study, to experience conflict during their visits.

Climate change is creating new stresses, too. During mud season, trails can come under a lot of pressure.

"You now have increased visitors because weather is warmer in the spring, and now more and more folks are recreating on these trails, thus this cycle begins of more and more trail-related impacts," Ferguson said.

The decrease in days when downhill ski areas are open has led recreators to go further into the backcountry to find snow, which can put people in dangerous situations if they don't have the training or gear to stay safe. And hikers are at increased risk of exposure to ticks.

Ferguson says those who manage recreation areas are working on solutions. National forests, which have many points of entry and often see visitors driving through, have different considerations than do national parks, which often have more limited entrance and exit points.

Parks in other parts of the country, such as Colorado, have started to implement registration systems and other ways to manage the increase in visitors, which has led to questions about accessibility and equity. Ferguson said more research is needed to see what would work in New England.

"We are at this crux, this tipping point, if you will," he said. "How many visitors are too many visitors?"

—Mara Hoplamazian, *New Hampshire Public Radio*  
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*Editor's note: For further reading, see an article by Michael Ferguson and colleagues, "Seeing the Forest for the Trees: A Social-Ecological Systems Approach to Managing Outdoor Recreation Visitation in Parks and Protected Areas" in the Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism 38 (June 2022) at [doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2021.100473](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2021.100473). See also their article, "The nature of the pandemic: Exploring the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon recreation visitor behaviors and experiences in parks and protected areas," Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism (February 28, 2022).*

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*“I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features.”—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber*

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