

Central High Peaks Visitor Use Management Project Synthesis of March 30, 2023 Virtual Stakeholder Conversations

Background

On March 7, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) announced the initiation of a visitor use management (VUM) planning process within the Central High Peaks area of the Adirondack Park. The VUM planning process will focus on the experiential, social, and public safety elements of visitor use in this important recreation area. As public outreach and stakeholder engagement is critical to the success of this project, DEC asked the Otak consultant team¹ to convene this meeting of key stakeholders to:

1. Provide foundational information about the Central High Peaks visitor use management project to stakeholders who have long histories with the appreciation and management of these public lands.
2. Begin learning stakeholder perspectives about the project to help focus data collection and public engagement.
3. Solicit thoughts about the project's public involvement plan.

The first part of the meeting began at 6:30 pm with a welcome and the self-introduction of participants ([Attachment 1](#) contains a table of attendees), followed by a project overview provided by DEC and Otak. The second part of the meeting was conducted in a manner similar to a stakeholder group interview, where participants were asked open-ended questions and invited to share their perspectives. DEC representatives were excused prior to beginning the stakeholder conversations.

Part 1: Project Overview

Joe Zalewski, DEC Regional Director, provided brief opening remarks. Josh Clague, DEC, provided an overview of the project including its background, purpose, other data collection efforts, an overview of the study area and project team, and timeline of the project. Steve Lawson, Otak, provide a brief overview of the VUM framework. The complete meeting slide deck may be viewed through this link: [Central High Peaks Presentation Slides](#). DEC clarified that the project will focus on the social side of VUM (experiential, social, and public safety) to promote sustainable visitor use. The biological and physical aspects are very important and also part of DEC's responsibility. DEC is tackling the social issues with the assistance of Otak because the social aspects area not within DEC's expertise. As there were no further questions, Susan Hayman, third-party neutral facilitator from the Otak team, excused DEC staff and continued the meeting.

Part 2: Synthesis of Stakeholder Perspectives

Susan led a Mural Board activity with a series of questions followed by a conversation where stakeholders were invited to discuss their feedback and responses. [Attachment 2](#) contains screen shots of the Mural Boards, the contents of which are synthesized below.

¹ The Otak team will conduct the VUM analysis, and support public outreach and stakeholder engagement.

Organizational Interests in VUM in the Project Area

Prior to the meeting, stakeholders were asked to briefly describe their organization's interests in VUM in the Central High Peaks Project Area. Identified Interests included:

- **Preservation of Natural Resources:** Ensuring natural resources are protected to preserve the wilderness character of the region; supporting on-the-ground stewardship and monitoring the ecological impacts of recreation on Adirondack Forest Preserve lands.
- **Recreation:** Supporting, managing, and providing opportunities for recreational interests such as mountaineering, rock, ice, bouldering, slide, and hiking; engaging in on-the-ground stewardship and maintenance of trails, trailheads, and other structural features to protect alpine vegetation.
- **Safety:** Providing a safe space for visitors, including those on trailheads, trails, and along busy roads; providing emergency response when needed.
- **Parking:** Addressing parking issues and providing adequate parking options.
- **Education:** Educating the public to become visitors who are safe, well-informed, and prepared about responsible resource use and preservation, and recreating in the wilderness; fostering appreciation for the area.
- **Non-exclusionary Language:** Ensuring non-exclusionary language is used in and to describe the VUM study.
- **Visitor Management:** Understanding and addressing the effects of high visitor use to protect residents and visitors from negative impacts of high use.
- **New Management Paradigm:** Creating a new, iterative, flexible, and adaptive management paradigm that is informed by data and science, and applies Wilderness guidelines found in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan.

Greatest Concerns about the VUM Process

- **Process Integrity:** Stakeholders support a science-based, data driven process that transparently uses data to inform and drive decisions; that is uses a methodology that is replicable, with open access to others, and provides stakeholders the opportunity to contribute to the process foundation and structural framework.
- **Process Clarification:** While the VUM process should be comprehensive, it should be ensured that desired conditions and near term goals are well defined and background context is used to set the VUM up. Uncertainty exists among some stakeholders as to what this VUM analysis actually includes (social science or beyond), and clarification of the process and its terminology is needed.
- **Desired Conditions:** Some stakeholders emphasized the importance of desired conditions that reflect wilderness guidelines with respect to naturalness, opportunities to experience solitude, and minimizing human imprint.
- **Potential for Over-regulation:** Some stakeholders expressed concern that additional regulations will be the outcome of the VUM process, and would like to see limitations placed on regulations that may hamper recreation opportunities and positive visitor experiences.
- **Inclusivity:** Stakeholders expect the process to cast the widest possible net to involve the spectrum of people/user groups with interests in this place—that input is not limited to the perspectives of a select few, and is collected in a manner that minimizes the potential for bias. The VUM process should consider how various demographics are or are not engaged, and the reasons behind this.

- **Ability to Implement the Outcomes:** Some stakeholders struggle with having confidence and trust in DEC’s ability to make decisions and implement programs, pointing to recent planning processes where recommendations have yet to be implemented. It is important that these recommendations are not shelved.

Greatest Needs for the Central High Peaks Project Area

- **Ability to Protect the Wilderness:** Stakeholders are concerned about wilderness protection. Programs in trail maintenance, education, and conservation should be implemented. The Board also needs to be educated on these issues and programs.
- **Trust and Transparency** Stakeholders need the ability to trust DEC. Transparency and support from DEC to involved partners will help with this. Stakeholders would like DEC and the APA to take ownership of management outcomes, use the experience they have to guide the process, and respect the Wilderness guidelines.
- **Adaptive Management:** VUM needs to create an iterative, adaptive management framework that incorporates existing plans (i.e., High Peaks Wilderness Unit Management Plan) and is compliant with Wilderness Master Plan guidelines. Other stakeholders, however, believe comprehensive plans are needed before certain infrastructure actions are implemented, such as eliminating or adding parking to an area.
- **Protection of Resources:** Stakeholders emphasized that natural resources, especially those contributing to wilderness character, need to be protected. Visitors need to be educated on resource protection and how data can inform decision making in ways that are responsive to visitors levels of understanding. Preventing introduction of invasive species and maintaining proper trail and road connections also contribute to resource protection.
- **Safety:** Safety, including along roadsides and in wilderness, needs to be a priority. As visitor use has increased, so has the need for emergency response. People are often unprepared for the activity they are undertaking, and put themselves in situations where they have to request help. Education and visitor management are necessary tools to improve visitor safety.
- **Understanding Visitor Interests:** A better understanding is needed of where users get information about the Forest Preserve, and what messaging is provided in those sources. Through surveys and other tools to listen to visitors, the VUM process can discern visitor motivations for where, when, and why they visit. Stakeholders also noted the importance of understanding education gaps among visitors, and how different demographics and communities interact with the landscape.
- **Visitor Capacity Management:** Stakeholders believe it is important to understand and define carrying capacity. VUM should keep in mind that visitor growth is a moving target. There need to be metrics to find a lower carrying capacity bar to start from to determine proper management. Understanding visitor interests and visitor capacity is important so communities do not feel overrun, natural resources are conserved, and an adequate amount of parking or transportation options can be created for all user groups.
- **Financial Resources:** New York State needs to invest more money into the management of this area, including additional support for partners involved in managing access, parking, education, visitor safety, etc.

Greatest Opportunities for VUM in the Central High Peaks Project Area

- **Progress through Adaptive Management:** Stakeholders are excited for a possible paradigm shift. They recognize the first iteration of actions will be imperfect and will require tweaking and changing over time. Adaptive management can be less resource intensive and time consuming. It is important to invest in a process to make progress.
- **Connecting Natural Resources Protection and Visitor Use:** Stakeholders noted that visitors can contribute to degrading natural resources or protecting them, based on choices of where they go, when, and what they do when they get there. Conservation/resource protection is tied to visitor experience.
- **Education that Supports Management:** Stakeholders believe it is important to educate visitors how their choices can affect natural resources. Topics such as where to dispose of trash or park, how to create sustainable trails, or why resource conservation is important, helps to protect natural resources and in turn, gives visitors a better experience—perhaps making them more motivated to support management recommendations.
- **Creating Connections:** Stakeholders observed that a lot of willing people want to contribute to this planning process. VUM is an opportunity for people to help and form connections between people, and with resources and landscapes.
- **Improvement of Land Management with Data:** The VUM process can be based on rational management, centering the role of data and science for land management rather than political deal making, which can be applied beyond the Central High Peaks. Based on data, there could be opportunities to improve trails and balance use of access points.

Preferences for Organizational Involvement in the VUM Process

- **Needs to be met:**
 - Continued involvement through all discussions in the process
 - Multiple opportunities to provide feedback
 - Engagement with the initial structure and aspirational pieces of VUM so that stakeholder interests are fully reflected in the project structure
- **Involvement by:**
 - Regular updates via email and meetings
 - Collecting on-the-ground data
 - Contributing regional expertise on locations, trailheads throughout the project area

Measuring/Evaluating Success of Public Participation in the VUM Process

The public participation process will be successful if it:

- Maintains a **collaborative, open, and transparent structure** for both the stakeholders and the public.
- Allows **sharing and easy accessibility** of information, including across demographics and the state.
- Provides an **annual shared field experience** to evaluate desired conditions, indicators, thresholds, and management to see if desired conditions were achieved.
- Demonstrates **how user group needs were met** and, if not, **WHY** they were not met.

Best Ways to Provide and Receive Information in the VUM Process

- Provide input and feedback to DEC through:
 - Email
 - Meetings
 - Reviewing and commenting on draft recommendations
 - Other options DEC/consultant team might suggest
- Receive project information through:
 - A project website
 - Other options DEC/consultant team might suggest

Other Interests to Contact

Additional interests suggested for stakeholder outreach include skiers and riders.

Next Steps/Action Item Summary

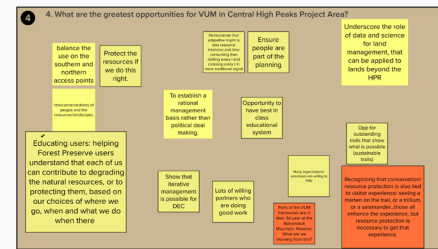
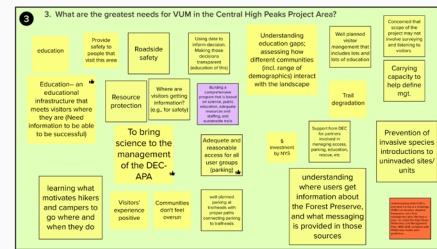
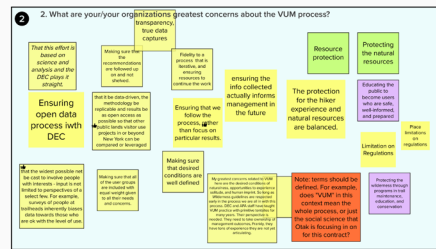
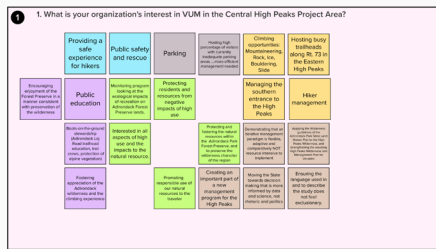
The facilitation team will complete additional stakeholder interviews before finalizing the project's public participation plan. Participants in today's meeting will be contacted as future engagement opportunities emerge, including an anticipated public meeting in May. Susan invited participants to contact her with any questions about the public process, or to provide additional feedback. A summary of tonight's meeting will be prepared and distributed soon. Susan thanked everyone for attending and participating, and adjourned the group around 8:00 p.m.

Attachment 1—Participants

Stakeholders	Affiliation
Laurie Rankin	Adirondack 46ers
Will Roth	Adirondack Climbers’ Coalition
Jackie Bowen	Adirondack Council
Tiffany Rea-Fisher	Adirondack Diversity Initiative
Julia Goren	Adirondack Mountain Club
David Gibson	Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve
Pete Nelson	Adirondack Wilderness Advocates
John Schuler	Ausable Club
Emma Lamy	Olympic Regional Development Authority
Peter Bauer	Protect the Adirondacks
Mary Jane (MJ) Lawrence	Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism
Natasha Karniski-Keglovits	SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry
Joe Pete Wilson	Town of Keene
David Hughes	Town of Newcomb
Derek Doty	Town of North Elba
Facilitators	
Joe Zalewski	New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)
Rob Daley	New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)
Josh Clague	New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)
Kevin Prickett	Adirondack Park Agency
Abbie Larkin	Otak
Steve Lawson	Otak
Susan Hayman	Ross Strategic Facilitation Team
Casey Hart	Ross Strategic Facilitation Team

Attachment 2— Mural Board Screen Shots (zoom in to view)

Part A: Project Perspectives



Part B: Public Participation Opportunities

5. How would you/your organization like to be involved in this VUM effort?

- Active participation in the solar panel operational process of the VUM. It is essential that the solar and wind of Forest Hill and Williams character be fully reflected in the project structure.
- Continue to be included in all discussions
- We want to be part of discussion and help collect data. We are a boots on the ground org.
- Meet as outlined previously, and have email updates
- receive regular updates via email and multiple opportunities to provide feedback and have discussions
- receive regular updates
- Tapping into regional expertise on locations, trailheads, etc.

6. How would you measure/evaluate the success of this public participation effort?

- By the way in which a client is collaborative with stakeholders and the public, by how information and thinking is shared throughout the process.
- Annual shared field experience to evaluate desired conditions, indicators, thresholds, and management to achieve conditions
- The process is viewed as open and transparent
- Transparency of process (sharing of information to all stakeholders)
- To see a public that believes the process has been transparent and valid
- Accessible information across demographics, state, etc.
- That the wants/needs of the user groups are met and if they are not met, objective and informative data based reasoning is provided for WHY the wants/needs were not met.

7. How would you like to GIVE project input/feedback to DEC?

- What are the options?
- Live meetings, email, give feedback on drafts of any recommendations, etc.
- Updates via email as well as meetings

8. How would you like to GET project information from DEC?

- A project website would be useful for updates

Who else should we talk to about the project?

- Skiers/Riders