

High Peaks Visitor Use Management Stakeholder Working Group Meeting #1 Summary

Background

On October 4, 2023, an in-person meeting of the High Peaks Visitor Use Management Stakeholder Working Group (HP-SWG) was convened by Otak and held from 9 a.m.- 12:30 p.m. at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's office in Ray Brook, New York. The meeting agenda is included in [Appendix A](#). The purpose of the meeting was to:

1. Convene the Stakeholder Working Group and affirm guidelines for how the group will work together.
2. Review and discuss summer 2023 onsite data collection activities to learn the type of information that has been collected and how it will be analyzed and applied in the project.
3. Discuss ideas about desired conditions, indicators, and thresholds for visitors' experiences and public safety in the project area.

Susan Hayman, Ross Strategic, facilitated the meeting. Abbie Larkin, Otak, provided VUM technical expertise, and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) staff were present as observers and responded to questions. See [Appendix B](#) for a table of meeting participants.

[Appendix C](#) contains a map of the project area that was on display as a reference during the meeting.

Gathering

The meeting began with a welcome and meeting overview provided by Susan Hayman, Facilitator (Ross Strategic).¹ The group participated in a round of introductions, and each person shared a favorite memory of this area.

Stakeholder Working Group Operational Guidelines

Susan reviewed key sections of the proposed HP-SWG Operational Guidelines. The following are key areas of discussion:

- The working group is convened by Otak, and is not an advisory body to DEC. This process is different than processes that many of the working group members previously participated in, and will not result in the working group producing and submitting a final report to DEC.
- Management strategies discussed in the VUM report submitted to DEC by Otak will be informed by discussions facilitated with the HP-SWG.

¹ Ross Strategic is part of the broader consulting team led by Otak.

- Otak is aware of prior proposed management strategies from prior reports and previously existing data, and will incorporate those relevant to this study.

As there were no objections to the Operational Guidelines as written, Susan affirmed them as adopted ([Appendix D](#)).

Summer 2023 Onsite Data Collection

Abbie presented slides containing information on onsite data collection (see [Appendix E](#)). Key points of discussion included:

- When considering management practices (i.e., reflecting on the question about management practices posed to visitors), it seems the greatest success will be found through a combination of practices tailored to specific areas.
- Each of the management practices posed to visitors would be experienced after arrival. Would like to see management practices that address the aspects of planning a trip and how good planning could mitigate many of the problems (a member noted that ROOST is evaluating how people are using planning information pre-arrival).
- There were several questions about data collection locations and practices. Some members expressed disappointment that data collection was designed and conducted without direct involvement of the members, and expressed a desire for more ‘front-end’ input into this process than provided to-date.

Pete Nelson (Adirondack Wilderness Advocates) shared some of the very preliminary findings from data his organization collected this summer, focusing on diversity, wilderness attitudes, information about the area, parking measures, and other observations. He reported that most users they surveyed were day hiking, and there was little increase noted in visitor diversity. Most hikers believed they had sufficient information for their activity (many cited the AllTrails application as a key resource for them). Those with disabilities reported feeling less welcomed. Pete said they were in the midst of decoupling data on the desire for “solitude” versus “wilderness.” Laurie Rankin, The 46ers, noted additional trail and summit data collected this summer by her organization, and Julia Goren (Adirondack Mountain Club) noted a large amount of data regarding parking at the Loj collected annually by her organization. There were questions about how this, and other information collected this summer might be shared with Otak and considered in the VUM study. Abbie affirmed that she was in contact with ROOST about getting their data, and that Otak is coordinating with the Adirondack Mountain Club and other organizations for background information and datasets that describe visitor use in the project area.

Desired Future Conditions, Indicators, and Thresholds

Desired Future Conditions Activity

Meeting participants gathered in small groups of 3 people to discuss how they would describe desired future conditions for the High Peaks study area. While a discussion of desired future conditions occurred at the May 9, 2023, public meeting, Otak emphasized the value of having a separate, consolidated perspective of desired future conditions from this assembled group of key stakeholders.

To prepare participants for this discussion, Otak provided a desired conditions “thought activity” with prompting questions to HP-SWG members one week in advance of the meeting. One member of the stakeholder working group who could not be in attendance sent in a written response to the information, which was reflected in the discussion.

When reconvened as a large group, members shared the following key concepts related to desired conditions:

- Preserve ecological integrity, regardless of visitor use, by maintaining a natural resource condition informed by a baseline condition—a pristine environment where nature is whole (biological, ecological, aesthetic, and consistent with the State’s legal definition of Wilderness.
- People have enough information across a variety of spectrums so that they can actively choose the experience they want, and that they feel they can have a safe experience—e.g., a maintained, stable surface to walk on; trailhead access without crossing a roadway, etc.
- Local community and people should benefit economically from the visitors—the “economic engine” for the area links to the high peaks.
- Safe trailhead parking with basic amenities (information, toilets, water—physical safety side, too).
- Opportunities for hiking on trails other than “summit” experiences—suitable for people of different abilities (helps with the overall experience).
- “Front country” infrastructure exists to help provide a safe experience—food, general information, information of degree of difficulty; visitors can still come and have an “Adirondack Experience” without doing so in the backcountry/High Peaks Wilderness; connects to people’s desire to/sense of feeling safe and educated/informed.
- Trail conditions that do not impact wildlife (current impacts to wildlife from degraded trail conditions and visitor use are unknown)
- Important to invite others with diverse demographics to weigh in on desired future conditions for the High Peaks.

- Provides an “inspirational experience” that influences visitors to become a steward of these resources.
- Residents are able to live in their communities, conducting their lives and businesses without disruption.
- Management program that is based on science and data.

Some of the members expressed the need to more closely align the analysis of visitor use/social science data with biological/ecological science data. For some, doing these analyses separately (VUM versus ecological scorecard development, for instance) is an area of concern.

Indicators Activity

Small groups again met for several minutes to brainstorm potential indicators for measuring desired conditions. As with the desired conditions activity, Otak provided an indicators “thought activity” with prompting questions to HP-SWG members one week in advance of the meeting. When reconvened as a large group, members shared the following indicators from their small group discussions, based on 1) the quality and character of visitors’ experiences, and 2) public safety

Quality & Character of Visitors’ Experiences

- Inspiration that results in action (donation, picking up trash, other stewardship activities).
- Return rate / frequency of revisiting areas (would need to factor in the “ability” to return—physical, economic).
- Access (parking, restrooms, trail conditions).
- Inspiration to learn from the experience, and taking personal action to go out more prepared next time.
- Correlations between volume of trail use and impact on flora, fauna, and overall ecological conditions of the trail.

Assessing Public Safety

- Inspiration to learn from your experience, and taking personal action to go out more prepared next time.
- Number of accidents, although establishing a threshold/benchmark would prove challenging.
- Ranger reports of rescues (incident reports—many which are resolved before ranger’s deploy—analyze on contributing factors; whether/preventable-avoidable).

- Multiple dimensions to the concept of “safety,” (e.g., differences in perspective from urban, diverse populations), may require social science study to understand.

Thresholds--Photo simulation activity

Meeting participants were invited to participate in an activity to document perceptions of crowding in a scene on the summit of Mount Marcy (see representative slides 8-13 in [Appendix E](#)). Otak presented a series of photo simulations² engineered to include an increasing amount of people per photo or “viewscape.” Members were given a worksheet to record whether they would or would not feel crowded if they were on the summit of Mount Marcy with the number of people depicted in each viewscape (i.e., people-per-viewscape or PPV). During a brief break, Otak tabulated the results and shared them with the meeting participants (Table 1).

² A similar photo simulation exercise was conducted onsite as part of the visitor use survey administered at the Adirondack Loj Trailhead.

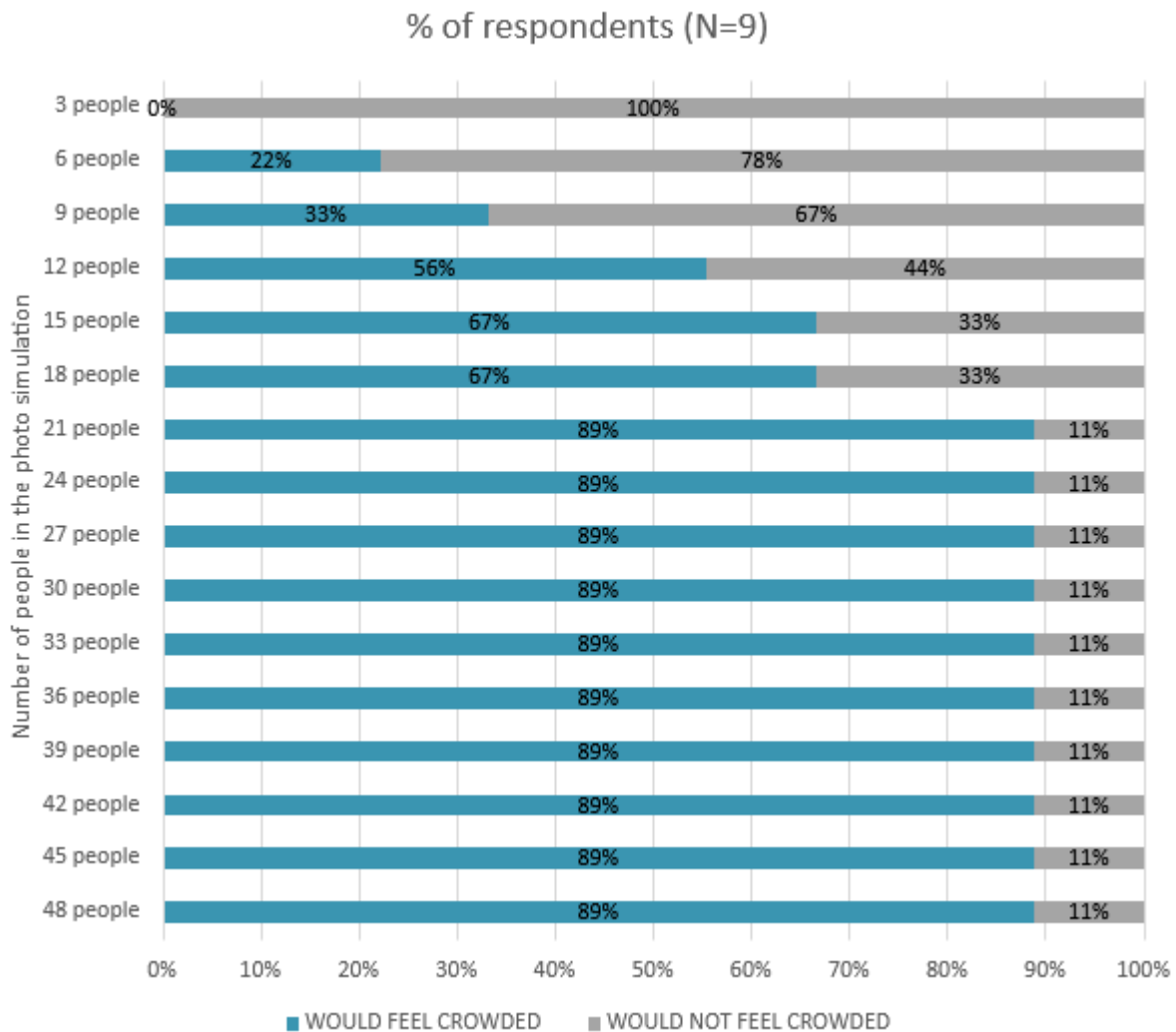


Figure 1. Results of photo simulation exercise with meeting participants.

These results suggest that 22% of meeting participants would feel crowded with 6 PPV, the majority (56%) would feel crowded with 12 PPV, two-thirds (67%) would feel crowded with 15-18 PPV, and nearly all participants (89%) would feel crowded with 21 or more PPV. These results are similar to results from the onsite visitor use survey administered at the Adirondack Loj Trailhead that Otak is currently analyzing. Otak emphasized that these and other perspectives will be important for developing draft thresholds as part of the resulting management report and monitoring plan.

The following comment followed the thresholds exercise:

- Crowding may not be important as an indicator if it doesn't result in changed behavior (e.g., if it doesn't reduce visitation). People may prefer less crowding,

but accept that such crowding is inevitable for certain places in the Adirondacks. Therefore, an alternative and better indicator may be necessary.

Next Steps

Members were invited to comment on whether future HP-SWG meetings should be held online or in-person. The group agreed that in-person, Tuesday morning meeting were preferable. Members also noted the importance of getting dates on calendars soon.

The following closing thoughts were shared by individual members:

- Some expressed disappointment that they weren't invited to provide input into the survey questions and other aspects of the data collection plan.
- One member expressed disappointment that Otak did not yet have results of the data collection to share at this meeting (analysis is still underway).
- One member expressed skepticism with DEC moving forward with any management activity in the absence of a more comprehensive scientific analysis—that it might be difficult for DEC to make a defensible decision without collecting all potentially relevant data (biological and social).

A summary of today's meeting will be distributed to HP-SWG members. Abbie will confirm with the project team about sharing the slide deck in advance of the summary.³ In addition, there was a request for Otak to share the survey questions and data set—Abbie will confirm with the project team when that will be appropriate, given that analysis is still underway.

Otak provided a review of the project's next steps:

- Data entry, cleaning, and preliminary analysis: September-- December 2023
- Data tabulation and final analyses: January—May 2024
- Study report and monitoring plan: May—October 2024

Otak and NYSDEC thanked participants for their engagement, and reminded everyone that an ongoing source of information about the project can be found on the project website at: www.highpeaksvum.com. Members of the HP-SWG are encouraged to disseminate the project website throughout their network to raise awareness about the project and to share information with the public.

³ PDF file of slides were emailed to HP-SWG members on October 11, 2023.

Appendix A: Meeting Agenda

Stakeholder Working Group Meeting #1 Meeting Agenda

Wednesday, October 4, 2023

9:00am-12:30pm

NYSDEC Region 5 Headquarters Conference Room

1115 NYS Rt. 86, Ray Brook, NY



Meeting Purpose:

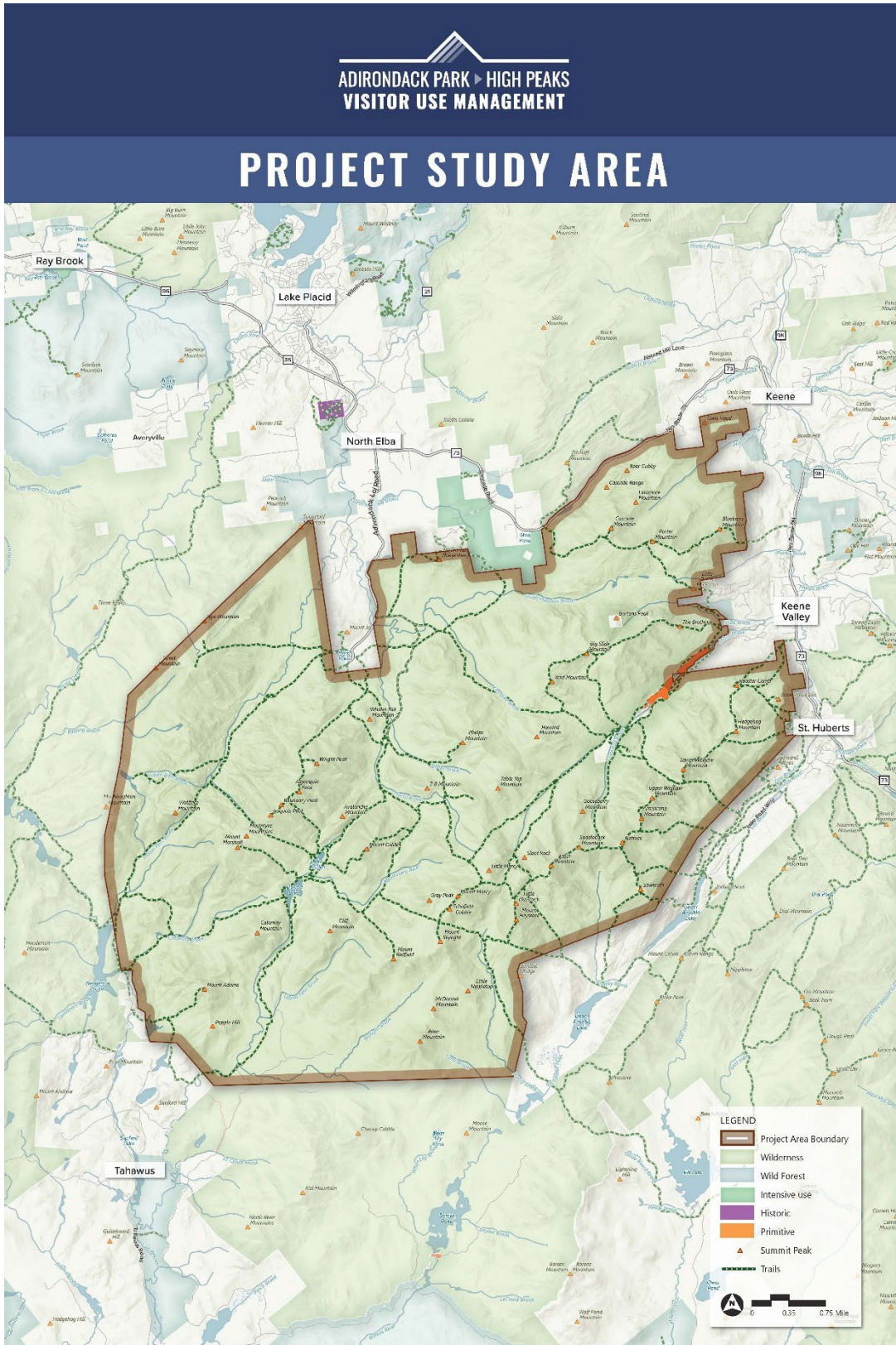
1. Convene the Stakeholder Working Group and affirm guidelines for how we will work together.
2. Review and discuss summer 2023 onsite data collection activities to learn the type of information that has been collected and how it will be analyzed and applied in the project.
3. Discuss your ideas about desired conditions, indicators, and thresholds for visitors' experiences and public safety in the project area.

Time	Topic/Speakers	Reference Materials
9:00 am	Gathering— <i>Susan Hayman, Facilitator</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome and introductions • Meeting purpose and overview • Gathering activity/introductions 	---
9:20 am	Stakeholder Working Group Operational Guidelines — <i>Susan Hayman</i>	Draft Operational Guidelines (meeting packet)
9:45 am	Summer 2023 Onsite Data Collection— <i>Abbie Larkin, Otak</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refresher on VUM components and how they interconnect • Overview and summary of data collection efforts • Questions/responses/discussion 	Presentation slides (in-meeting)
10:15am	Break	
10:30am	Desired Future Conditions and Indicators— <i>Facilitated Activity</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desired future conditions activity • Indicators activity • Photo simulation activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desired Future Conditions Thought Activity (meeting packet) • Indicators Thought Activity (meeting packet) • Photo simulation slides (in-meeting)
12:15pm	Next steps and future meetings— <i>Susan Hayman</i>	
12:30 pm	Adjourn	

Appendix B: HP-SWG Meeting Attendance

Organization	Representative	Attendance
Adirondack 46ers	Laurie Rankin	Yes
Adirondack Climbers' Coalition	Will Roth	Yes
Adirondack Council	Jackie Bowen	Yes
Adirondack Diversity Initiative	Tiffany Rea-Fisher	No
Adirondack Mountain Club	Julia Goren	Yes
Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve	David Gibson	No
Adirondack Wilderness Advocates	Pete Nelson	Yes
Ausable Club	John Schuler	No
Olympic Regional Development Authority	Emma Lamy	Yes
Protect the Adirondacks	Peter Bauer	Yes
Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism	Mary Jane Lawrence	No
SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry	David Rosenbaum	Yes
Town of Keene	Joe Pete Wilson	Yes
Town of Newcomb	David Hughes	No
NYS Dept of Environmental Conservation	Josh Clague	Yes
	Rob Daley	Yes
	Tate Connor	Yes
Otak	Abbie Larkin	Yes
Ross Strategic	Susan Hayman	Yes

Appendix C: High Peaks Project Study Area



Appendix D: Adopted Operational Guidelines

High Peaks Visitor Use Management Stakeholder Working Group Operational Agreements

October 2023



Context

This document guides the scope and function of the High Peaks Visitor Use Management (VUM) Stakeholder Working Group (HP-SWG) convened by Otak, Inc., which is under contract with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to lead a VUM planning process for the High Peaks Project Study Area. The VUM planning process focuses on the experiential, social, and public safety elements of visitor use management and visitor capacities, to promote sustainable visitor use. The final project report Otak provides to DEC will include recommendations for management strategies and a monitoring plan to achieve and maintain desired conditions over time.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of the HP-SWG is to enable a diverse group of stakeholders representing organizations with key interests in the project area to engage in focused discussions about desired future conditions and visitor use management strategies. The HP-SWG will share information, exchange ideas, and provide individual or collective perspectives around substantive topics relevant to the High Peaks Visitor Use Management Project. There is no hierarchy of importance among HP-SWG members—no one's voice carries more weight than another's. Each member brings an important and equally valued perspective.

While this will not be a consensus-based decision-making or DEC advisory group, group discussions will be timed and structured to maximize opportunities to meaningfully inform key process milestones. Facilitated processes may be used to gauge participant's viewpoints, and areas of agreement will be identified should they emerge.

The HP-SWG will include up to 20 members (see Attachment 1). DEC will participate in the HP-SWG meetings in an ex-officio capacity. Otak knows each member has other interests and needs in the project study area that extend beyond the scope of this visitor use management study. Otak expects members will continue to engage with DEC around these interests and needs—participation in the HP-SWG does not replace other ongoing, important coordination.

Participants agree to:

- Actively participate in discussions, and complete pre-meeting assignments as requested.
- Actively and respectfully listen to and consider other points of view and interests.
- Attend up to three meetings. Participants may designate one alternate to represent their organization in the event they themselves cannot attend.
- Serve as a conduit for information to and from affiliated organization members.
- Assume responsibility for costs (travel expenses, salary, etc.) associated with their participation as an organizational representative in this voluntary working group.

Quorum Requirement

Since this is not a decision-making group, there is no quorum requirement.

Duration

The HP-SWG will be convened in September 2023, and meet three times: Fall 2023, Spring 2024, and Fall 2024. Meetings will generally last up to 3.5 hours. HP-SWG members prefer to meet in-person, with a preference for Tuesday morning meetings. Dates for subsequent meetings will be collaboratively determined within the parameters of the project schedule.

Meeting Materials

A meeting packet with the agenda and any pertinent pre-meeting reading material will be provided to group members at least one week prior to each meeting.

Meeting Outcomes

Meeting summaries will contain key discussion points, areas of agreement, action items, and other synthesized information that will not be attributed to any individual meeting participant, except for the Otak team and DEC representatives.

Information created as a part of this process may eventually be considered part of the public record. A list of HC-SWG participants is attached to these operational agreements (Attachment 1) and may also be considered public information.

Process Facilitation

The Otak team includes an independent third-party neutral facilitator who will support this working group. The facilitator neutrally and impartially supports all participants, maintains the integrity of the process, and facilitates communication about the process among participants and other interested parties. The facilitator will collaboratively prepare meeting agendas, suggest process design, and compile working group products.

Private conversations between individual working group members and the facilitator will be considered confidential unless otherwise identified.

Group Conduct

All meeting participants, including Otak team member, DEC representatives, and stakeholders agree to:

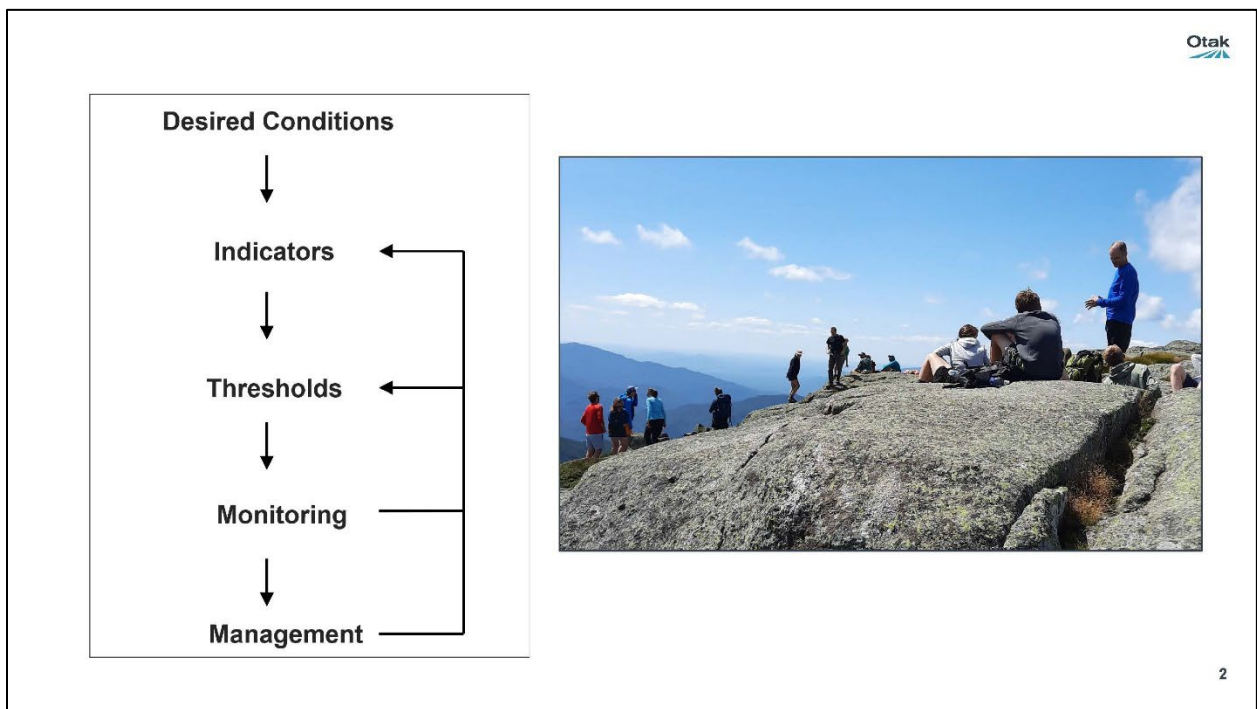
1. Listen to and appreciate a diversity of views and opinions
2. Actively participate in the group
3. Behave constructively and respectfully towards all participants
4. Respect the role of the facilitator to guide the group process

Disagreement and differences of opinion are acknowledged, explored, and appreciated. Should conflict arise, it will be addressed with the guidance of the facilitator.

Attachment 1: High Peaks VUM Stakeholder Working Group

Organization	Representative
Adirondack 46ers	Laurie Rankin
Adirondack Climbers' Coalition	Will Roth
Adirondack Council	Jackie Bowen
Adirondack Diversity Initiative	Tiffany Rea-Fisher
Adirondack Mountain Club	Julia Goren
Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve	David Gibson
Adirondack Wilderness Advocates	Pete Nelson
Ausable Club	Roger Roumpf
Olympic Regional Development Authority	Emma Lamy
Protect the Adirondacks	Peter Bauer
Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism	Mary Jane Lawrence
SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry	David Rosebaum
Town of Keene	Joe Pete Wilson
Town of Newcomb	David Hughes

Appendix E: Summary of Onsite Data Collection



Data Collection Approach

Operationalize the VUM framework

- Indicators
- Thresholds
- Management strategies

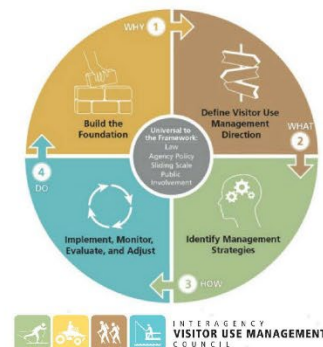


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Data Collection Approach

Operationalize the VUM framework

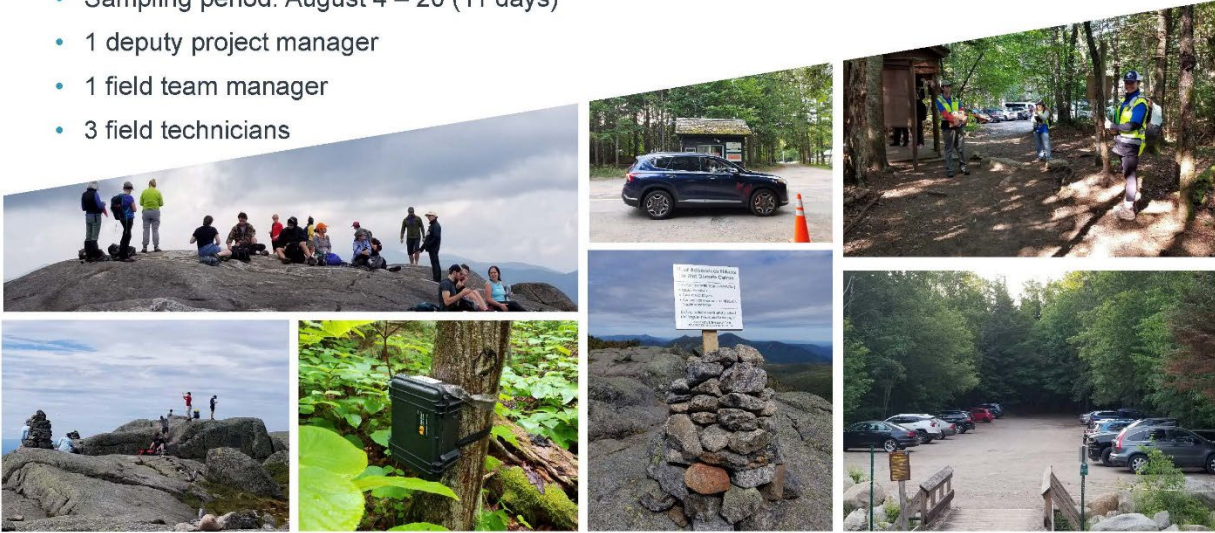
- Describe current conditions
- Help identify relationships between recreation use and impacts
- Evaluate recreation use conditions
 - Visitor-based thresholds
 - Visitor perceptions, preferences, tolerances
 - Visitor attitudes and opinions



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Onsite Data Collection

- Sampling period: August 4 – 20 (11 days)
- 1 deputy project manager
- 1 field team manager
- 3 field technicians



Data Collection Summary

- **334 GPS tracks**, 100% response rate
- **217 surveys at ADK Loj**; 76% response rate
- **174 surveys at Cascade**; 82% response rate
- **84 hours of PAOT/PPV counts** on the summits of Cascade and Marcy



Data Collection Summary

- **77** hours of **parking accumulation** at ADK Loj, Cascade, and the Garden
- **5** months of **traffic volumes** (ongoing through mid-October)
- **5** months of **trail volumes** (ongoing through mid-October)



7

Visitor Survey - *Would You Feel Crowded?*

Photo #1



8

Visitor Survey - *Would You Feel Crowded?*

Photo #2



9

Visitor Survey - *Would You Feel Crowded?*

Photo #3



10

Visitor Survey - *Would You Feel Crowded?*

Photo #4



11

Visitor Survey - *Would You Feel Crowded?*

Photo #5



12

Visitor Survey - *Would You Feel Crowded?*

Photo #6



13

Visitor Survey – Management Practices

Support/oppose potential management practices to help address parking issues that occur during peak periods:

- Expand or create new parking lots...
- Temporarily stop vehicles from entering parking lots...
- Require people to park at an offsite parking lot and ride a free shuttle bus...
- Require people to make an advanced parking reservation...
- Require people to solve the problem on their own...

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Visitor Survey – Management Practices

Extent you would support/oppose potential management practices to help address **crowding issues** that occur during peak periods:

- Require people to make advanced reservations for...
 - Hiking on weekend days and holidays
 - Hiking on any day of the week
 - To hike the most popular mountain summits
 - To hike any route in this area
- Require people to expect and adapt to crowded conditions

Next Steps

Task	Tentative Timeline
Data entry, cleaning, and preliminary analysis	September – December 2023
Data tabulation and final analyses	January – May 2024
Study report and monitoring plan	May – October 2024