

Saranac Lakes Wild Forest Unit Management Plan – From Guy Middleton, Upper Saranac Foundation’s Lake Manager

The NYSDEC is currently in the process of finalizing the Draft Saranac Lakes Wild Forest Unit Management Plan. Unit Management Plans (UMPs) are individual management plans for each unit of land classified in the State Land Master Plan (SLMP). UMPs follow guidelines set forth in the SLMP.

The Saranac Lakes Wild Forest (SLWF) unit is comprised of approximately 75,000 acres of state land and 19,000 acres of waterbodies in Franklin and Essex Counties. The draft plan refers to USL as the “centerpiece” of the SLWF unit. The SLWF unit does not include the Intensive Use units of Fish Creek and Rollins Pond Campgrounds nor does it include the St. Regis Canoe Area.

Since 46% of USLs shoreline and the vast majority of our watershed is state owned and mostly within the SLWF, this plan will have a direct effect on USL and its residents. The full plan, 363-pages can be found at: http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/slwfump.pdf . As the Upper Saranac Foundation’s Lake Manager, I have attended the NYSDEC SLWF UMP availability sessions for public review, the public meetings and most recently have met with a subcommittee from Lake Clear Association addressing concerns of the plan.

The NYSDEC will accept public comments up until August 11, 2017. Below is a summary of the proposed Management Plan that will have an effect on the USL watershed. I have also attached links to NYSDEC “Fact Sheets” that relate to each subject.

The intent of this document is to provide accurate information to support written comments. Individuals or organizations have the opportunity to submit comments regarding concerns effecting our watershed. Not submitting a written comment representing our lake could be construed as fully supporting the draft UMP.

Trails http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/slwfumptrails.pdf : There are currently about 82 miles of hiking trails in the SLWF. Popular hiking trails include the trails to, Panther Mountain, Floodwood Mountain, Deer Pond, Middle Saranac Lake Beach, and Trombley Landing.

The plan includes:

- A 0.4-mile reroute of Bartlett Carry Trail through the woods to get the trail off the road
- Developing a one-mile multi-use trail connecting Rollins Pond Campground to the Adirondack Rail Trail

Trailheads and Water Access Sites http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/slwfumpboats.pdf :

The only designated boat launch in the SLWF, within the USL watershed is the USL launch at Back Bay. The remaining access sites are classified as either Fishing Access Sites or Waterway Access Sites and, in accordance with the State Land Master Plan (SLMP), cannot provide the launching of trailered boats. Fishing and waterway access sites do not “contain a ramp for or otherwise permit the launching of trailered boats.”

The Plan includes:

- Block vehicle access some distance from the water's edge so that boats must be carried to the water's edge at the following locations
 - East Pine Pond
 - Floodwood Pond
 - Hoel Pond
 - Indian Carry
 - Middle Pond
 - Polliwog Pond
 - Follensby Clear Pond (south Parking lot)
- Set a 15 HP limit and enact "no change" to launching boats from trailers at Follensby Clear Pond (N). Essentially not following compliance with the SLMP guidelines, allowing the launching of trailered boats at a Fishing Access Site.
- Create a fishing access site at Lake Clear Outlet
- Allow vehicles to drive closer to Lake Clear (beach) from the current parking area
- Improve the fishing access site at Polliwog Pond and create a seven-vehicle parking area
- Build a slide of rustic material, low to the ground at Hoel Pond to make it easier for water craft to be transported to the pond

Camping http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/slwfumpcamp.pdf : There are 162 designated campsites and eight lean-tos in the SLWF. The majority of the campsites are located along the shorelines of the unit's waterbodies. Currently there are 19 campsites along the shores of USL.

The plan includes:

- Upper Saranac Lake - close 2 sites and build 11 new for a cumulative total of 28 campsites
- Lake Clear Outlet – build 2 sites
- Additional roadside campsites will be built at:
 - Beaver Wood Road (The Point Rd) with access to Lower Fish Creek Pond
 - Route 30 with access to Lower Fish Creek Pond
 - Dunlap Road with access to USL north basin

Justification: The State Land Master Plan (SLMP) guidelines suggest tent sites to be out of site and ¼ mile apart. Nearby Follensby Clear Pond will have 14 of the current 32 sites closed and in order to not restrict camping, new sites complying with the SLMP will need to be built.

Parking http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/slwfumppark.pdf : SLWF is served by approximately 37 trailheads which vary considerably in condition. Twenty of the trailheads directly access a waterbody, the others provide access to trails.

The plan includes:

- Expand the parking area along Floodwood Road adjacent to the Adirondack Rail Trail crossing to hold 20 more vehicles.
- Reconstruct the Hoel Pond Parking Area to accommodate 17 cars
- Construct a parking area for 4 cars along the Forest Home Road at Lake Clear Outlet
- Construct a parking area at Polliwog Pond to hold 7 vehicles

Proposed Management Actions:

- A boathouse may be built on private property that is underwater in front of the undeveloped part of the Upper Saranac Lake boat launch. The boathouse project will need approval under APA regulations. The boathouse will have two slips, one will be for use by the Department and the other will be for use by the Saranac Lake Volunteer Fire Department

Concerns with the plan that can effect USL watershed

Although the vast majority of the draft UMP, including addressing overused and eroded campsites / shorelines and blocking trailered watercraft launching from car-top only water access sites, would be a positive for our watershed, there are a few areas within the plan that could be considered concerning.

Aquatic Invasive Species: The goal of the SLMP is to protect and preserve the natural resources of the state lands within the park. The SLMP states, *“human use and enjoyment of those lands should be permitted and encouraged, so long as the resources in their physical and biological context as well as their social or psychological aspects are not degraded”*. It can be argued that the physical and biological context have already become degraded due to the introduction of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS).

Although creating barriers for trailered watercraft and implementing horsepower limits at non-designated boat launches may help with AIS prevention, the “no change” to launching boats from trailers at Follensby Clear Pond and improvement and expansion of Fishing and Waterway Access Sites (Lake Clear, Lake Clear Outlet, Polliwog, Floodwood, Hoel, Follensby Clear Ponds) can lead to increase use. Adverse impacts in regard to AIS introductions at the newly proposed or improved fishing and waterway access are not addressed in the plan. The increased use at un-monitored sites (by Watershed Stewards) has the potential to make the watershed more vulnerable to unwanted AIS.

The UMP acknowledges *“Invasive Species are likely to spread –undermining the ecological, recreation, and economic value of the Park’s natural resources”*. The plan also states that *“the DEC shares an inherent obligation to minimize or abate existing threats in order to prevent widespread and costly infestations”*. Yet, despite owning nearly ½ of the USL shoreline, to date the DEC has invested little in comparison to our shore owners and the plan neglects to elaborate on how the DEC will share in this obligation in the future.

The plan fails to elaborate on preventive strategies to thwart the spread of AIS nor does it mention the management of current infestations but does state, *“there are few measures currently in place in the SLWF to control the spread of exotic and invasive species”*. In addition, the plan acknowledges the *“the major work to control the spread on invasive species in the SLWF has been conducted by private organizations”* and even identifies the USF. Other than the use of signage, and *“partnering with organizations involved in fighting invasive species”* the management actions of the plan fall significantly short in addressing the problem and a strategy for AIS prevention and management.

Carrying Capacity: UMPs, according to the SLMP *“must provide an assessment of the impact of actual and projected public use on the resources, ecosystem and public enjoyment of the area with particular attention to portions of the area threatened by overuse”*. Furthermore, *“the UMP must provide an assessment of physical, biological and social carrying capacity of the area with particular attention to*

portions of the area threatened by overuse in light of its resources limitations". The UMP "objectives are to address actions to minimize adverse impacts on the resources of the area and to preserve aquatic and terrestrial habitats of the area".

The draft UMP itself states *"the SLWF cannot withstand ever-increasing, unlimited usage without suffering the eventual loss of its natural character"*. The question that arises is, what is the carrying capacity of our watershed before the impacts cause serious degradation of the resource? Although this is a subjective figure, there are many on the lake who would suggest we have reached our carrying capacity. Will the increase of primitive tent sites and increase accessibility to water exceed what the watershed can withstand? The UMP for the High Peaks Unit arguably failed to address carrying capacity for visitors relating to issues with overcrowding that is now problematic.

While the UMP embraces the theory of *"Acceptable Change"* there are limited clear measurement objectives outlined in the plan. The UMP states *"It may not be possible to complete all inventories called for by the SLMP"*. Due to the absence of current assessments and overall lack of *"Management Actions"* addressing adverse impacts, such as sanitation disposal, noise, shoreline erosion, and user conflicts relevant to water related activities, indicates that the SLWF plan may fall short in considering carrying capacity.

Resources for Implementation: One can argue that the SLWF UMP also falls short on resources to implement the SLWF Unit Management Plan. Considering the perceived lack of facility maintenance and enforcement currently in the SLWF, developing accessibility and facilities leading to increased demand, will only add to the strain already on the DEC.

Comments can be submitted to:

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