

# Catskill Advisory Group Report

## 2022







# Letter to the Commissioner

Dear Commissioner Basil Seggos:

The Catskill Strategic Planning Advisory Group (CAG) appreciates the opportunity to provide this final report. This report is a long-term strategic framework to guide the State, local government, and partners on current and future management of the Catskill Park (the Park). In our recommendations, we sought to achieve three goals for the Park: 1) balancing the increasing recreational use of the Park with 2) the continued protection and science-informed management of our natural resources while 3) ensuring the experience of using the Park is welcoming, accessible, and inclusive.

Recreational use of the Park was on the rise pre-COVID, and accelerated during the pandemic. Early data suggests public use continues to increase in the Park, in all four seasons and on every day of the week, not just on weekends and holidays. This puts growing pressure on many parts of the cherished natural resources in the Park, including, but not limited to, trailheads and trails, and lakes and streams, as well as other recreational facilities and local communities. This higher, and potentially growing, volume of use should be anticipated to continue for years to come.

Access to public recreation, including trails, campgrounds, parking, water resources, and associated recreation facilities, is vital to the State's economy and should receive increased financial investment. The CAG maintains that protecting the natural resources and the wild character of the Catskills region is essential to the economic well-being of the region's communities, and the economic well-being of the entire State. There are many benefits, both economic and health-related, including the critical role the Catskills play in protecting the watershed of New York City, providing 90% of the City's drinking water supply, along with large portions of the water supply for Westchester, Putnam, Orange, and Ulster counties in the Hudson Valley. The Catskills are, and will increasingly be, important as a key area of connectivity for wildlife, critical in this time of climate change.

The CAG recognized the importance of continued public engagement in its deliberations and long-term planning for the Park. The extensive public comments helped to focus the CAG's attention on the challenges and opportunities that mattered most to visitors and residents of the Park. This final strategic framework will only be successful with robust public engagement that includes those who inhabit the Park, residents of its surrounding regions, and all visitors who recreate in the Park.

It will take commitment, financial and human resources, and the support of partners—including CAG members and other stakeholders—to manage this revered region. The CAG believes the following recommendations begin to lay a foundation for future management of public recreation in the Catskill Park. Moreover, we feel it is imperative that funding be allocated to ensure these ideas and recommendations get implemented.

The CAG members want to recognize and thank DEC staff for their assistance, especially Mikaela Hameline and Sara Hart, the two dedicated facilitators who helped the group function through this lengthy and sometimes difficult process.

# Table of Contents

<b>The Catskill Forest Preserve and Catskill Park</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Background and Purpose</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Catskill Advisory Group Vision Statement</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>How to Read This Report</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Whole-Park Management</b>	<b>7</b>
Immediate Action Items	7
What Is Adaptive Management and the Visitor Use Management Framework?	9
Strategic Investments and Priorities	12
What Is Leave No Trace™?	13
<b>Natural Resources</b>	<b>15</b>
Immediate Action Items	15
Strategic Investments and Priorities	16
<b>Marketing, Communication, and Education</b>	<b>17</b>
Immediate Action Items	17
Strategic Investments and Priorities	19
A Mobile Visitor Center for the Catskills	22
<b>Traffic and Parking</b>	<b>24</b>
Immediate Action Items	24
Strategic Investments and Priorities	26
A Local Benefits Corporation for Parking and Community Opportunities	26
<b>Benefits to Catskill Park Communities</b>	<b>28</b>
Immediate Action Items	28
Strategic Investments and Priorities	29
<b>Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice</b>	<b>32</b>
Immediate Action Items	33
Strategic Investments and Priorities	33
<b>Appendix A</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Appendix B</b>	<b>40</b>

# The Catskill Forest Preserve and Catskill Park

**“The lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the forest preserve as now fixed by law, shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed . . .”**

Article 14, Section 1 of the New York State Constitution

The people of the State of New York have demonstrated a deep and abiding concern for the Catskill region for over a century. Following exploitation of the region during the nineteenth century by a series of natural resource-based industries, including the leather tanning industry (which used hemlock bark), the wood products industry, acid factories, and the bluestone industry, the citizens of the state demanded protection for the region. They were particularly concerned that intense timber harvesting had jeopardized the area's tremendous water resources on which they were so dependent. This led to the creation of the Forest Preserve, by statute, in 1885. It was one of the earliest attempts at land preservation in the United States. In 1894, an amendment to the State's Constitution gave constitutional protection to Forest Preserve

lands, providing that they be “forever kept as wild forest lands” and directing that they “shall not be leased, sold or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed.” This mandate, now Article XIV, Section 1 of the New York State Constitution, ensures lasting protection for one of the state's most valuable resources.

Since 1885, the Catskill Forest Preserve has grown from 34,000 acres to more than 290,000 acres. It serves as a watershed, wildland recreation area, and ecological and scenic reserve. While the Constitution's forever-wild clause has both protected and directed management of these lands for nearly a century, public use and interest have steadily increased. To cope with this ever-increasing demand, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) developed a Catskill Park State Land Master Plan (Plan) in 1985 to provide overall guidance for consistent and uniform management of the Catskill Forest Preserve, and updated that plan in 2008.

The Catskill Park is approximately 700,000 acres in size, with sections spanning parts of the four Forest Preserve counties of Delaware, Greene, Sullivan, and Ulster. The Park is composed of about 40% State Forest Preserve lands and 10% New York City water supply lands, with the other 50% mostly privately owned. The Catskill Park was created by law in 1904 as a way to highlight the Forest Preserve's most wild and mountainous areas and to focus New York State's land acquisition efforts in the Catskill region.

## Background and Purpose

The Catskill Advisory Group (CAG) was formed by the State of New York in 2020 amid a surge in visitation to the Catskill Park and communities within it.

Although visitors from the New York City metropolitan area have been coming to the Catskills for more than a century, the roots of this most recent uptick likely date back to the Great Recession of 2008, when the fiscal crisis compelled families to forgo air travel and opt instead for “staycations.” The trend toward cheaper, driving-distance vacations brought many families to the Catskills. Many came for the first time, while others rekindled their love for a region that they first discovered long ago. This resulted in a slow but steady uptick in visitors to trailheads, campgrounds, waterfalls, and communities across the Catskill Park.

The growth of visitation to the Catskills was given rocket fuel by a combination of factors that could not have been predicted when the staycation trend began more than a decade ago. Regional and national publications began to focus more attention on the Catskills by telling their readers that some of its hiking trails and swimming holes were among the best in the world. Social media allowed images of the Catskills to spread quickly, causing thousands of people to seek the beautiful vistas, waterfalls, and hikes that were broadcast onto their smartphones by friends who shared photos and videos of the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic further increased the flow of people into the Catskills. People sought refuge outdoors during the first year of the pandemic because the novel coronavirus made air travel and indoor recreation unsafe. Parks became some of the only safe havens for families that wanted to leave their homes, get exercise, or take a short vacation. The Catskill Park became a preferred





destination for hundreds of thousands of people because its reputation for scenic beauty and adventure was already well established. The Catskills were also uniquely positioned as a vast wilderness within driving distance of more than 20 million Americans who were eager to escape their densely populated urban centers and the restlessness that pandemic restrictions brought to their daily lives. As a result, the pandemic made the Catskills one of the most popular places in America to seek refuge from the virus and the anguish it inflicted on too many people.

Many who visited the Catskill Park in the 2000s also decided to buy homes here. The pandemic intensified this trend. Many people from the New York City metropolitan region purchased homes in the Catskills during the pandemic, and many more turned vacation houses into full-time homes. This pandemic-driven shift in population increased the baseline number of people who recreated within the Catskill Park on a daily or weekly basis.

What started more than a decade ago as a steady drip of new tourists evolved into a deluge of visitors, many of whom are returning each year. From 2018–2021, visitation to the Catskills more than doubled. State authorities estimate that more than 12 million people visited the Catskill Region in 2021. That is more than the total number of visitors to the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Yellowstone national parks in 2021 combined.

The considerable increase in tourism to the Catskill Park has brought a wide range of new challenges and opportunities that must be tackled by those who care for the park, its natural resources, and its communities. The CAG was formed to create a strategic framework—a road-map—that would guide New York’s management of the Catskill Park and identify investments that are necessary to protect its natural resources while accommodating a greater number of visitors. The strategies and invest-

ments outlined in this report were informed by a robust public survey, previous research efforts in the Catskills, interviews with representatives of more than a dozen parks across the country that experienced a similar uptick in visitation during the pandemic, and data and reports produced by the state, nonprofit agencies, and other subject-matter experts.

The CAG and its recommendations were also guided by a few bedrock principles that served as a foundation for this report. We believe a steady focus on the following concepts will make the Catskill Park a model for others across the United States.

**Challenges and opportunities** – The considerable increase in tourism across the Catskill Park has resulted in many challenges. A greater intensity of use has resulted in the degradation of certain natural resources, public safety hazards on mountainside roads, overcrowding at trailheads, litter, illegal camping and more. It has also stretched thin local services such as fire, ambulance, police, and mountain rescue teams. But the current growth in visitation also presents new opportunities for towns and businesses that depend on tourism for a significant portion of their economy. It also provides an opportunity to educate a new generation of visitors about the natural world around them, how it is changing, and how they can help protect it. The recommendations in this report seek to mitigate the challenges of greater visitation while also capitalizing on the opportunities it brings to the region.

**Natural resources** – The protection of our natural resources in the Catskills is a top priority. The intensive use of certain areas within the Catskill Park has damaged natural resources, highlighting the need for better education and more intensive management. The trampling of sensitive habitats near trailless peaks, erosion around popular swimming holes, and illegal fires or camping

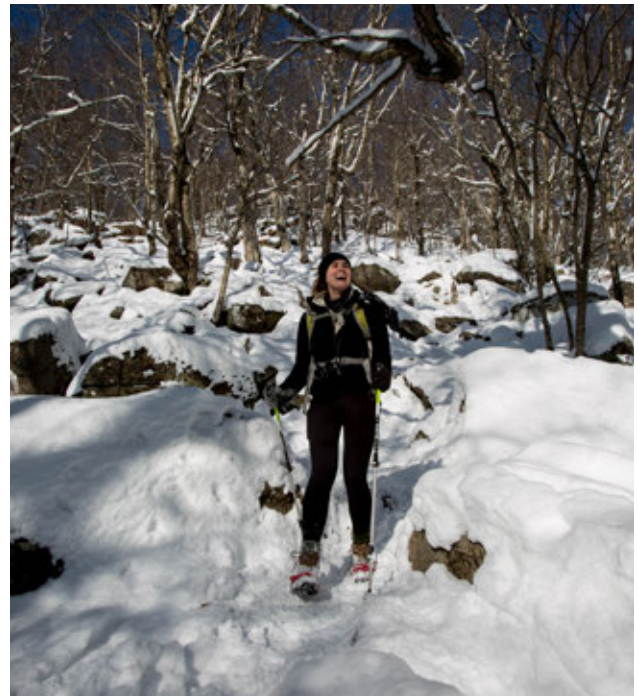
sites near the Catskills' highest peaks are just some examples of activities that the CAG sought to address through its recommendations. Efforts to protect natural resources in the Catskills carry an additional layer of importance because six large reservoirs in the region supply nearly all the water to New York City and more than 70 communities in the Hudson Valley. Those reservoirs, which constitute the largest unfiltered water supply in the United States, sustain half the population of New York State.

**Diversity and inclusion** – The Catskill Park was preserved by New York for the benefit and enjoyment of all its people. It is imperative that we make the park accessible and accommodating to every visitor who wants to enjoy its scenic beauty, respect its natural resources, and find adventure and solace within its wilderness. The face of recreation is changing across the Catskills. Our visitors are more diverse in every way—sex, race, color, religion, national origin, age, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, military status, and ability. The Catskill Park must be a welcoming place for every person who wants to visit.

**Climate change** – Management strategies and investments across the Catskill Park must account for the changing climate. Some of its effects are being felt already. Invasive species are killing entire swaths of the forest because milder winters are allowing them to survive. The change in seasonal patterns of snowmelt is causing mud season to begin earlier. Larger storms are causing more frequent and damaging floods that wash out trails and roads and increase the cost of their maintenance. Rising air temperatures also threaten the long-term viability of coldwater trout fisheries in the Catskills. Still, we must also focus on ways that the Catskills can help to combat climate change, including the potential of its forests to act as a carbon sink.

Finally, the CAG has researched and compiled this report through countless hours of volunteering. But the recommendations within this document—the work that is truly needed to sustain the Catskill Park as a vibrant, well-managed park for its residents and the visiting public—cannot be implemented without strategic planning and proper levels of investment by the State.

Through its research, the CAG learned that successful parks respond to intensive use with intensive management. That starts by managing the Catskill Park through a whole-park approach. For too long, the Catskills have been managed as a patchwork of lands and waters that belonged to different towns, counties, and DEC/Department of Transportation (DOT) regions. This splintered approach weakened its management, left the park ill-prepared to respond to growing visitation, and prevented the park from receiving the levels of investment that it direly needed.



Thanks to guidance from the CAG, the State has already taken an important step toward unified, whole-park management by appointing its first Catskill Park Coordinator. We believe the Catskill Park Coordinator will develop an all-inclusive approach, with input from community leaders and local nonprofits, that meets the park's challenges and opportunities. In fact, the CAG report and its recommendations make a good starting point for the Catskill Park Coordinator. That office should prioritize the recommendations in this strategic framework and develop a tactical plan that includes assignments, deadlines, and funding requests for the most urgent needs identified in this report.

The success of this report will also depend on the commitment of state lawmakers to fund its initiatives and continue and increase the annual funding they have already provided for the forest preserve. Our findings are clear: the natural resources of the Catskill Park cannot be protected, and the current level of use and visitation cannot be sustained, without a significant injection of funds from the State Legislature. Several decades of light-handed management and disinvestment have left the park with a shortage of forest rangers and land managers, a lack of adequate park infrastructure and planning, and methods of communication that lag far behind comparable parks across the country.

In the end, the growing popularity of the Catskill Park challenges the State and the region to redouble their commitment to its treasured lands and waters. Challenges and opportunities abound, but we believe the recommendations in this report can transform the Catskill Park into a national model for good management, responsible stewardship, and inclusivity.



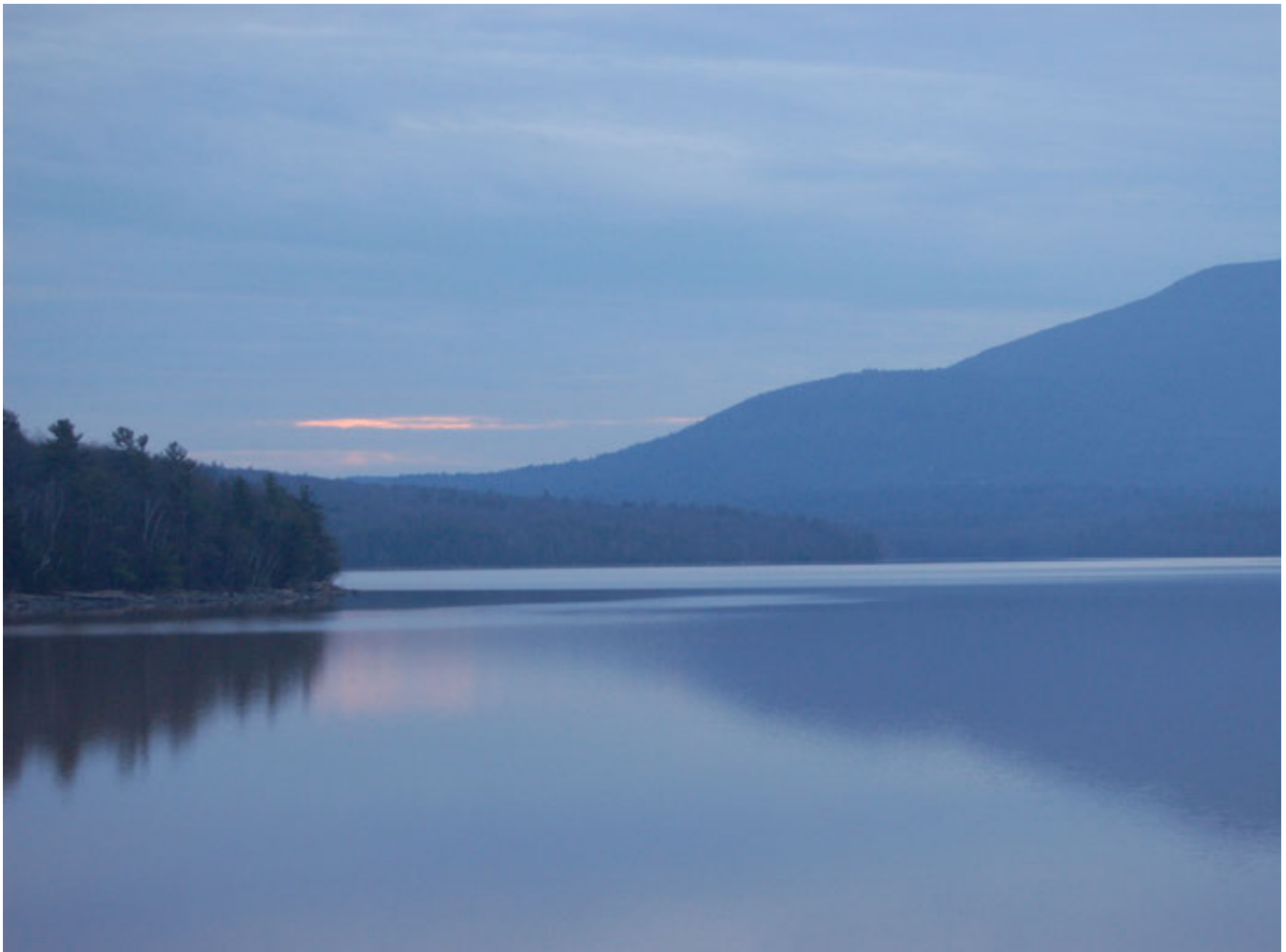
# Catskill Advisory Group Vision Statement

The Catskill Park will strive to be welcoming, accessible, and inclusive, offering a year-round sense of place for all who reside or work here, or visit its historic communities and legendary mountains, streams, and lakes. Through collaboration, investment, and education, the park's managers and stakeholders will increase the stature of the Catskills—honor its vibrant culture, protect its biodiversity, offer first-rate recreational opportunities, and always advance the economic vitality of its communities. The park will be a source of pride for visitors and residents alike, and it will inspire everyone to embrace a culture of stewardship and to pass down a love of nature and untrammeled places to future generations.

To this end, the park's residents, visitors, and organizations will collaboratively:

- Strive for maximum accessibility for all, without obstacles, no matter their gender, race, ethnicity, age, economic background, or ability;
- Balance the use of resources to ensure that residents have outstanding quality of life, local businesses thrive and enjoy growth, and tourism benefits the local and regional economy;
- Care for the park's wild and native flora and fauna, and firmly protect its sensitive or rare natural resources;
- Ensure public safety within communities, along roadways, and at trailheads; and
- Provide a quality recreational experience.





## How to Read This Report

The recommendations in this CAG report are split into six categories: Whole-Park Management; Natural Resources; Marketing, Communication, and Education; Traffic and Parking; Benefits to Catskill Park Communities; and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice.

Each section of the report includes two types of recommendations: immediate action items and strategic investments and priorities.

**Immediate actions items** are those recommendations that need attention and funding now. These recommendations generally comprise actions and investments that are necessary to manage the park for its current level of visitation, protect natural resources, or address adverse conditions in the park because of underinvestment. The immediate action items often require funding, staffing,

or other actions that must be undertaken by the State to manage the higher volumes of use that the park has experienced in recent years.

The recommendations categorized as **strategic investments and priorities** are also important, but many of them cannot happen without the immediate action items being accomplished first. Other recommendations within this category point to longer-term goals that would make the park easier to navigate, increase the number of recreational amenities available to park residents and visitors, and reach more visitors with educational programming while they are in the Catskills. These strategic investments and priorities do not deserve a back seat, but they also do not address needs that have a deep urgency like those found in the immediate action items.





## Whole-Park Management

Management of the Catskill Park has been fragmented for too long. Historically, the park has been split by municipal boundaries, police and highway jurisdictions, nonprofit service areas, and several DEC/DOT regions. Unlike a traditional park, the Catskill Park is also a mix of public and private lands, home to nearly 30,000 people, many of whom work in industry sectors that benefit from tourism.

The following recommendations seek to knit these pieces together by promoting a whole-park approach to management. The Catskill Park Coordinator and the coordinator's staff should act as a central hub to develop and implement plans, oversee the collection and dissemination of data, build consensus among stakeholders and communities within the park, and tackle challenges that cross jurisdictional boundaries.

With more than 12 million people visiting the Catskills each year, it is past time that New York begin to manage the Catskill Park as a whole park instead of a patchwork of lands that stretch across invisible boundaries that are unseen to its visitors.

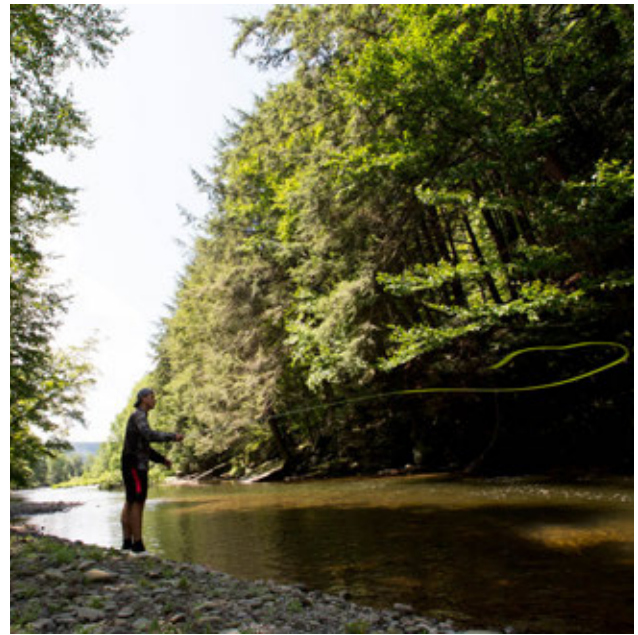
### Immediate Action Items

1. **The Catskill Park Coordinator** – The Catskill Park Coordinator position was created in 2021 after the CAG recommended this position in its interim report. Such a position has been called for since at least 1999. The State should provide adequate funding and staffing to support the Catskill Park Coordinator, whose duties should include the following:
  - Oversee the collection and sharing of data related to park visitation, natural resource management, and more;
  - Coordinate park management decisions and actions within DEC and between other agencies, stakeholders, and park communities. The coordinator should also oversee contracts necessary to maintain park programs and infrastructure;
  - Cohesively manage all stewardship and educational outreach programs;
  - Ensure all programs follow the same guidelines and incorporate the same messaging; and
  - Oversee and implement DEC's visitor-use management framework for the Catskill Park.

**2. Implement CAG recommendations** – The Catskill Park Coordinator should create a plan to implement the recommendations of the CAG, focusing first on its high-priority recommendations. A tactical plan should be created to break the recommendations down into actionable steps, assign them to the appropriate staff, set deadlines, and make the necessary budget requests. While the Catskill Park Coordinator acts on the most pressing needs identified in this report, the coordinator should also look toward developing a park-wide strategic plan that would incorporate longer-term goals and needs. The Catskill Park Coordinator should provide a progress report every six months to the Catskill Park Advisory Committee so that park communities, nonprofits, and other stakeholders can track the progress toward meeting goals from this report.

**3. Ample funding from New York State** – State lawmakers must provide adequate funding to implement the urgent projects and initiatives identified in this report. The Catskill Park cannot sustain its current level of visitation without increased, annual investments that will allow intensive management to meet the intensive use. Funding for the Catskill Park should be consolidated into a dedicated section of the budget, rather than spread across multiple programs and multiple agencies. Assemblymembers, Senators, and the Governor should provide funding each year for critical programs that include the following:

- Sustainable trail infrastructure for safety and climate resiliency;
- Educational stewards to engage visitors;
- Comprehensive planning for education, parking, and visitor-use management;
- Programs for accessibility, inclusivity, training, and education;
- Community infrastructure for parking, signage, education, and sanitation;
- Various project funding to implement recommendations by the CAG;
- Annual funding for the Catskills Visitor Center and the Catskill Science Collaborative; and
- Market research to better understand Catskills visitors and messages that will effectively promote good outdoor ethics.



**4. Adopt the Visitor Use Management Framework** – The state should move quickly to adopt the Federal Interagency Visitor Use Management Council's Visitor Use Management Framework (VUMF) as its core management tool. VUMF utilizes robust data collection to implement management actions on public lands. The VUMF process helps park managers identify the visitor experience that is desired at each location within the park, the associated carrying capacities of each area, and the management steps that are necessary to create the desired experience while also protecting natural resources.

For the Catskill Park, the VUMF process should specifically be used to:

- Identify areas that can accommodate high use or lesser volumes of use;
- Establish parking limits and carrying capacities for trails, waterfalls, swimming areas, and other locations;
- Identify the infrastructure that is necessary to accommodate visitor experience and volume of use; and
- Make management decisions that will prevent the degradation of natural resources.

(For reference, see the National Park Service's *2019 Monitoring Guidebook: Evaluating Effectiveness of Visitor Use Management*.)



### What Is Adaptive Management and the Visitor Use Management Framework?

Many parks across the United States are now utilizing adaptive management for their public lands. This process relies on data to implement management actions, regular monitoring to understand the results of those actions, and evidence-based adaptations to change the management of parks as their needs and conditions evolve.

A Visitor Use Management Framework (VUMF) is the tool that many land managers are using to set and achieve goals for natural resource protection and improved visitor experience on public lands. VUMF is adaptable, scalable, and flexible so that it can be used in parks of any type or size. Because it acts as an effective, transparent, and legally defensible model for park management, VUMF has been adopted by all five of the federal land-management agencies in the United States.

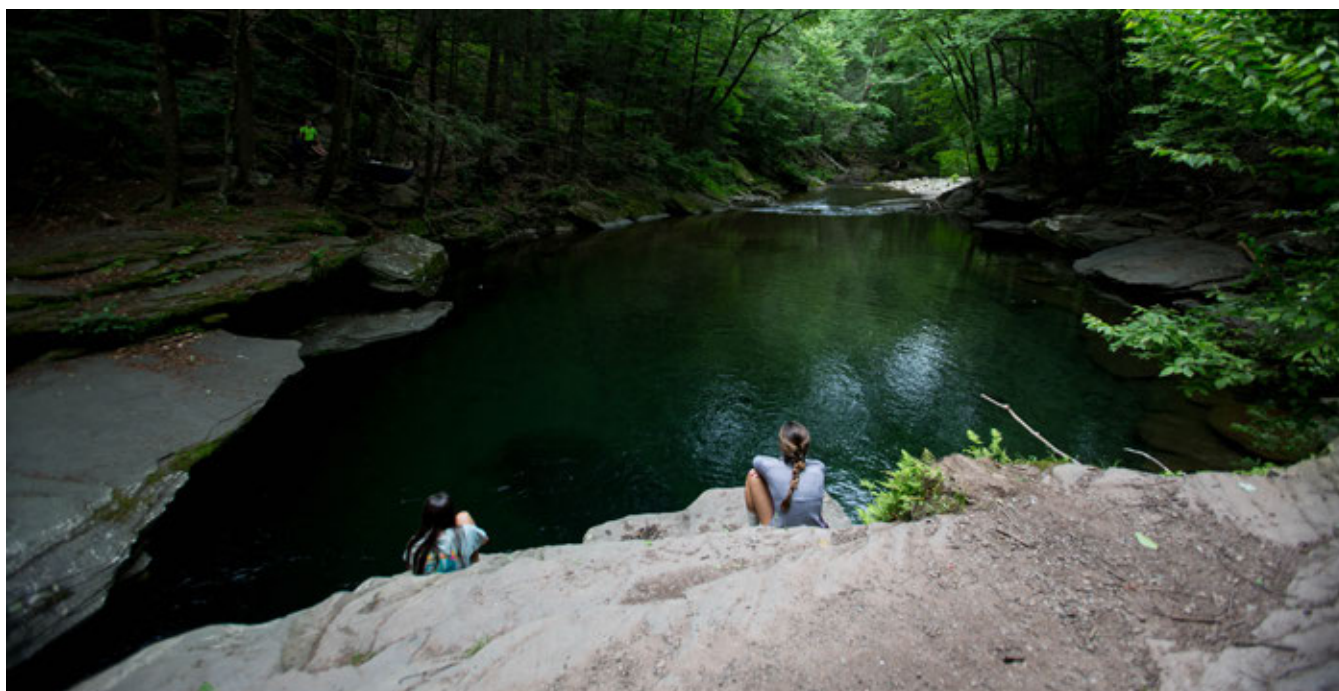
Significant data gathering makes the foundation of VUMF. For a particular park, or area within a park, data are gathered about natural resources and their conditions, existing park infrastructure, and visitor use. Visitor-use data are often collected in the form of surveys by social scientists or trained professionals. These data focus on the types of recreation that are most common within a park, the density or intensity of use, and the threshold of visitation that begins to harm natural resources or people's enjoyment of a natural area. (For example, a survey might find that people enjoy a waterfall until more than 100 people are visiting at the same time—a threshold at which they find the area to be overcrowded or unenjoyable.)

These data related to natural resources, visitor experience, and infrastructure are then used to set the desired conditions for the area, define a project, and establish maintenance plans. The VUMF process might determine that some areas should be managed for intensive use because they have the infrastructure to support it without harming natural resources. Other areas might be managed for lesser volumes of use to protect natural resources, or because visitors desire more solitary activities such as backcountry camping or hiking. Clearly defining the desired conditions is an important step in the VUMF process because it allows park administrators to identify management actions and implement them.

Importantly, each management decision is monitored and adjusted over time based on continuous data collection. The metrics that will be measured are clearly defined, including thresholds for acceptable conditions and limits of change. Baseline conditions are documented to help examine whether management actions are working successfully.

The case of Cummins Falls State Park in Tennessee offers a good example of VUMF in action. Cummins Falls is an extremely popular waterfall (similar to Kaaterskill Falls in the Catskills) that attracted thousands of visitors each day during the peak season. Because of its popularity, the high volume of visitors to Cummins Falls was resulting in degradation to natural resources, and overcrowding was ruining the outdoor experience for many of its visitors. Park managers teamed up with professionals from Clemson University to change the management of Cummins Falls through a VUMF process. Natural resources were surveyed and baseline conditions were documented. Thousands of park visitors were surveyed to understand their use of the park, their desired experience at the falls, and the level of use at which that experience suffered.

This information was used by park managers to understand the experience that park visitors wanted, the state of the park's natural resources, and the management steps that were necessary to account for both. Once the desired conditions were set, park managers crafted projects (parking, trails, and more) and regulations that would protect the resources while providing visitors with the experience they said they wanted through the survey. Acceptable limits of change were also set. The outcomes were monitored regularly through the collection of photos and data, and adjustments were made as necessary.



## 5. Adequate staffing for park management agencies

– The agencies that manage the Catskill Park are chronically understaffed, and they have been especially drained of resources since the Great Recession that began in 2008. For example, the current staffing level at DEC is approximately 250 positions below the cap imposed by previous administrations, and roughly equivalent to staffing levels from the 1980s. A building wave of retirements among DEC employees threatens to worsen the staff shortages that already exist. The challenges of high use in the Catskill Park cannot be addressed without adequate staffing. More broadly, the number of employees at DEC as a whole should be significantly increased to meet the needs of new and existing programs across the state. The following are specific steps that should be taken to support the Catskill Park:

- Staff in the DEC Division of Lands and Forests and Division of Operations are especially important to many of the proposals in this CAG report. Their planners, foresters, and scientists are responsible for the maintenance, operation, and stewardship of practically every portion of the park—recreation trails, parking lots, campgrounds, picnic areas, boat launches, wild forests, and the habitats within them. Staff in these divisions also supervise and coordinate capital projects and efforts funded by the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). They are responsible for lean-tos, fire towers, education programs, alpine summits, and pristine aquatic habitats. The DEC staff in the Catskill Park must be immediately expanded to include the following full-time equivalent employees:
  - Two additional foresters dedicated to the Catskill Park;
  - Two new positions for trail stewardship;
  - Two planners to manage projects through the budget and implementation processes; and
  - Three scientists dedicated to natural resource research, social research, and data collection to support the VUMF process.



- The number of forest rangers and assistant forest rangers patrolling the Catskill Park must be expanded to provide proper enforcement of laws and regulations, and education. The force must be large enough to deal with front-country issues, such as parking, and backcountry issues, such as illegal camping. Forest rangers should use the following tactics to increase their visibility and effectiveness across the park:
  - Laws and regulations should be enforced consistently;
  - Some modes of enforcement should be small, nimble, and mobile to create a visible presence throughout an entire corridor rather than in a single location, such as a parking lot;
  - Forest rangers and other law enforcement should consider a “Click-It or Ticket” type of weekend that is advertised throughout the Catskills and on social media to make the public aware of stepped-up enforcement. This is meant to proactively encourage compliance with front-county and backcountry rules;
  - Leave No Trace™ principles should be included in the DEC Ranger Academy;
  - The seasonal workforce of assistant forest rangers should increase during peak seasons to promote public safety and provide education; and
  - A DEC Junior Ranger Program should be established.



- DEC should continue to promote diversity among its staff and contractors in the Catskill Park and ensure that all are trained in the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). Visitors to the park are becoming more diverse. It is imperative that the State's training and staffing account for the growing diversity.
- Where State agencies cannot adequately staff programs on their own, the State should continue to contract with qualified nonprofits and other stakeholders to provide education and other services that are important to the Catskill Park, the experience of its visitors, and the protection of natural resources. This model has worked effectively with the current trailhead steward program and others.

#### 6. Data collection, monitoring, and surveying –

The Catskill Park Coordinator should establish and manage a process to collect data throughout the park. Smart management decisions cannot be made without a solid foundation of information. Baseline data should account for the following:

- The number of visitors to all or most trailheads throughout the park. The current system of trail counters must be greatly expanded to achieve this goal.
  - DEC should implement a system that yields accurate counts of visitors annually to drive management and education efforts;



- Data on natural resources, including photos to document their condition and more scientific measurements where necessary;
- A Catskills all-taxa biodiversity inventory that should be created, monitored, and regularly updated to understand changes over time;

- Visitor experience data that is collected and analyzed by qualified social scientists. These data are important for the development of plans within a VUMF. These data should include the following:
  - Research on the attitudes, perceptions, and desires of park visitors and park communities;
  - Analysis of the drivers of visitation, including areas where visitors commonly come from, who they are, and what their recreational interests are; and
  - A study of the economic benefit derived from visitors' time in the Catskill Park;
- Steward locations shall be mapped and updated;
- Data should be supplemented through park-visitor surveys using QR codes or similar technology;

The State must develop a method by which these data are collected in a systematic manner, across time and physical space. These data should be consistently examined for trends or changes. Data should be digitally accessible to the public as often as possible in real time. Data gaps should be identified early in the process so that appropriate methods can be established to collect them. Tracking trends over time can help Catskill Park managers request and direct resources that are necessary to run the park. Data should also be used to anticipate changes in environmental conditions and public use, allowing the Catskill Park Coordinator and others to make management decisions before problems arise.

## Strategic Investments and Priorities

- 1. Work with stakeholder collaboratives** – Those responsible for the management of the Catskill Park should continue to work with stakeholder collaboratives, such as the Catskill Park Coalition and the Catskill Park Advisory Committee, which can help identify and solve issues related to the park and the communities within it. The stakeholder coalitions can help with the following activities:
  - Developing and implementing stewardship programs and educational outreach;
  - Helping the Catskill Park Coordinator with communication to Catskill Park communities; and
  - Sharing key messages on social media, across the accounts of dozens of organizations, to ensure they reach the broadest audience possible.
- 2. Create a capital plan for Catskill Park infrastructure and facilities** – High use across the Catskill Park underscores the need for infrastructure and facilities that are modern, appropriately sized, and in a state of good repair. The Catskill Park Coordinator, with help from DOT and other agencies, should create a capital plan for the replacement, upgrade, or construction of infrastructure that is necessary to support the level of use that is expected within the park. The plan would include assets such as roads, parking areas, campgrounds and campsites, educational facilities, boat launches, and more. For example, the DeBruce Educational Camp should be maintained and improved as the only facility of its kind in the park.
- 3. Revise the group-use permitting system** – Groups above a certain threshold are required to get a permit for their use of the Catskill Park. The permitting system must be updated to require education before a group's visit. That education should focus heavily on Leave No Trace™ principles and the protection of natural resources. Data should be collected on group use, and the areas used by groups should be monitored for changing conditions.



- 4. Management of areas with increased use** – Significantly greater use at certain areas within the Catskill Park underscores two changes. First, park visitors in 2022 have more diverse views of what constitutes an enriching outdoor experience. Second, Catskill Park managers have reactively changed management strategies to catch up with the different types of use and intensities of use. The State should consider the following:
  - Park managers should use the VUMF process to review the existing management strategies at high-use areas to understand their effectiveness. Modifications should be implemented to protect natural resources and recognize the changing patterns and types of use;
  - Permit or registration systems should continue to be in the management toolbox for the highest-use areas. Investments in education, stewards, forest rangers, and other mitigation steps should be implemented before a permit system is used. Determining the need for a permit system should be included in the VUMF process. Park managers should be especially cautious about charging for permits. Our public lands should remain accessible to all, without cost barriers that might affect those with lower incomes; and
  - Park managers should continue to recommend alternatives to the highest-use areas, focusing on trailheads, parks, and preserves where the infrastructure can handle greater quantities of people. However, those alternative areas must also be monitored for their carrying capacity. For example, visitors to Peekamoose Blue Hole were being redirected to Minnewaska State Park Preserve at a time when it was also operating at its maximum parking and carrying capacity.



## 5. Develop working relationships with popular smartphone app developers

– The State should establish working relationships with entities whose smartphone apps (AllTrails, Strava, etc.) and search engines drive visitation to certain areas of the Catskill Park, resulting in increased use, parking problems, public safety hazards, and natural resource degradation. The State should help these companies pair their maps with information about Leave No Trace™, park rules and regulations, and more. Through market research, the State should explore the value of developing its own smartphone app for the Catskill Park to share information on trails, parking, rules and regulations, special events, and more.

## 6. Building Leave No Trace™ into project plans

– Many federal and state land managers have built Leave No Trace™ and stewardship concepts into their long-range plans. If Leave No Trace™ is embedded into management plans, it further institutionalizes the concept so that it is not linked to one program or one subgroup of employees. Specifically, the State should do the following:

- Build Leave No Trace™ into the Catskill State Land Master Plan;
- Codify Leave No Trace™ as guiding management principles; and
- Build Leave No Trace™ into Unit Management Plans and the VUMF process.

## 7. Improve management of litter and dog waste

– A substantial increase in visitors across the Catskill Park has been matched by an increase in litter and dog waste. The following recommendations seek to educate people about the proper disposal of waste (Leave No Trace™; carry in, carry out; etc.) and ensure the proper facilities are available:

- Require permits or reservations for primitive front-country camping at high-use sites. This will allow park managers to educate them in the permit process, and hold visitors accountable for litter that is left behind;
- Expand the promotion of campgrounds, which have bathroom facilities, trash cans, etc. This could alleviate issues with front-country sites, such as litter and poop near parking areas;
- Revise the group permitting process to require training in Leave No Trace™, and language that addresses the rules and expectations related to trash disposal and pooping;

### What Is Leave No Trace™?

Leave No Trace™ is a set of outdoor principles that encourages good environmental stewardship and responsible recreation in parks, forests, and other outdoor spaces across the globe. The concepts of Leave No Trace™ rely more on attitude and awareness than rules and regulations, encouraging outdoor recreation practices that minimize their impact on natural areas.

The core of Leave No Trace™ comprises seven principles:

- Plan ahead and prepare;
- Travel and camp on durable surfaces;
- Dispose of waste properly;
- Leave what you find;
- Minimize campfire impacts;
- Respect wildlife; and
- Be considerate of your hosts and other visitors.

Parks across the globe use the seven principles of Leave No Trace™ to help visitors understand how their actions can impact nature. In turn, educated visitors with the knowledge and skill to minimize human impacts on parks, forests, and other natural resources can preserve them for the long term.

In addition to the core principles, the Leave No Trace™ Center for Outdoor Ethics publishes guidance for specific activities, such as hiking, camping, biking, and even the proper way to go to the bathroom in the woods—all with the goal of promoting a collective outdoor ethic that keeps our natural spaces beautiful and unharmed by human activity.

- Expand the stewards to additional locations where trash and dog waste are a problem, and ensure they work on summer weekends and other times of high use;
- Work with partners to have stewards and assistant forest rangers visit group campsites and use the Authority of the Resource technique to educate visitors;
- Create educational messages that address the issue of camping trash and the need to dispose of it properly. This messaging should be used at kiosks, at the Catskills Visitor Center, on permits, on DEC webpages, in social media, and as part of an overarching campaign to keep the Catskills beautiful;
- Use Leave No Trace™ ethics cards and messaging for:
  - Front-country activities (picnics, swimming, camping);
  - Dogs (poop and controlling pets); and
  - How to poop in the woods and dig catholes.

- Messaging for visitors—especially those from New York City—should focus on water quality and the important protections required for drinking water that originates in the Catskills;
- Messages about the lack of public restrooms in certain parts of the Catskill Park should be explicit on websites, brochures, and other materials to help set an accurate expectation ahead of time;
- DEC should continue to provide temporary or permanent restroom facilities at certain high-use sites and regularly examine which sites need them;
- Offer the Leave No Trace™ trainer courses to educate people who run certain social-media networks and group pages; and
- Develop a protocol or regulation to deal with squatters—long-term campers who do not get permits and create extensive impacts, including improper waste disposal.

**8. Ensure that group-use and recreational challenges protect resources** – Group-use and recreational challenges have become more common across the Catskill Park. These include clubs with summit goals, “ultra” hikes and trail runs, and programs for kayaking and fire tower visits. Many of these are a great opportunity to drive visitation to certain areas of the Catskill Park, but inadvertently result in the trampling or degradation of natural resources. The State should continue to collaborate with these clubs and challenges. Leave No Trace™ training should be required for group leaders, event organizers, and participants. Special attention should be paid to group visits, and a notification system should be established to ensure multiple groups are not using the same areas of the park at the same time.

**9. Liaison with park communities** – The Catskill Park Coordinator should be a helpful and effective liaison with park communities. While some issues are unique in different corners of the park, many Catskill Park communities face the same challenges and want to capitalize from the same opportunities that come with higher visitation. To ensure that communities are well informed and well represented in decisions related the park, the coordinator can take the following steps:

- Simplify the presentation of information about the park, including reports, comprehensive plans, unit management plan updates, and proposed regulations. These documents are often long and complex. Many local governments do not have the time or expertise to review them. The Catskill Park Coordinator should make every effort to simplify this information and share it broadly with community leaders;
- Include more clear and concise executive summaries, infographics explaining key information, and a clear statement of public hearing dates or opportunities in reports.







## Natural Resources

The Catskill Park is home to a wide array of natural resources, including rare plants and animals, world-class fisheries, mountaintop conifer forests, and pristine drinking water that sustains nearly 10 million people in New York City and more than 70 communities in the Hudson Valley.

Increased visitation to the Catskills—along with other factors such as climate change and invasive species—poses a threat to these resources. Some effects have already been well documented. Significant erosion has occurred around popular swimming holes. The pursuit of trailless peaks by additional hikers has resulted in herd paths, including the trampling of some sensitive habitats. The improper disposal of trash has made it more likely for visitors to have encounters with black bears.

As the State considers how to accommodate more visitors in the Catskill Park, it must also spend time, energy, and funding on efforts to protect our natural resources.

Recommendations related to natural resources are found in other sections of this report, including the sections on whole-park management, and communication and education. This section seeks to underscore a few of the most salient points in greater detail.

## Immediate Action Items

- 1. Data collection and monitoring** – Managers of the Catskill Park must collect baseline data to understand the physical and biological conditions within the park as a basis for understanding how they change over time. Smart management decisions cannot be made without regular data collection that shows trends and changes across the park.

The Catskill Park Coordinator should lead an effort to identify data needs, and the standard operating procedures to collect and examine those data. Many methodologies—from simple to complex—exist for gathering baseline data. Baseline data could be collected by relatively simple photo documentation, paired with the use of GPS, or by other means. More intricate methods can also be used.

During its discussions for this report, the CAG was presented with excellent research on the effect of high use on trailless peaks in the Catskills. Simple photo documentation, paired with data on hiking volume, provided a compelling look at the degradation of certain habitats along these peaks.





DEC should seek to replicate this kind of work across broader swaths of the park where natural resources are likely to be threatened by recreation activities. The State should look outside its borders for standard methods of data collection that have been used at other parks and could be replicated in the Catskills.

2. **Natural-resource protection as a driver for decision making** – Visitation has exceeded the carrying capacity in many locations across the Catskill Park, resulting in increased erosion, trail braiding, trampling, reduction in water quality, noise, impacts to rare species, and more. Although we should strive to keep public lands open, certain threats to natural resources may require restrictions or temporary closures in some areas that need to recover from high use. Again, these decisions should be made based on the collection of data, and with the recognition that the park’s natural beauty, biotic communities, water quality, and other natural elements should not take a back seat to public access.

## Strategic Investments and Priorities

### 1. Create a Catskill all-taxa biodiversity inventory –

When it comes to natural-resource data, the work of DEC, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (NYCDEP), and other government and nonprofit employees can be supplemented by volunteers throughout the Catskills. So-called “bio-blitz” events are an effective way to engage citizen scientists and gather valuable data for a central repository. Many entities across the world have successfully utilized bio-blitzes to identify species in a specific area over a short period of time.

At a bio-blitz, scientists, families, students, teachers, and other community members work together to get a snapshot of an area’s biodiversity. Smartphone apps can be used to collect photographs and biological information during a bio-blitz, allowing that information to be fed into a central location. The National Park Service, for example, has utilized these events with great success. A bio-blitz acts as a force multiplier for State officials to collect more data than they could on their own. But it does more than that. It also enlists and engages park visitors in the meaningful protection of natural resources across the Catskill Park.







## Marketing, Communication, and Education

Those who manage, care for, and work within the Catskill Park will need to invest time, thought, and money into marketing, communication, and education.

Marketing and communication present an interesting tug-of-war for the Catskill Park, especially in the age of social media, smartphone apps, and other forms of digital communication. On one hand, these broad avenues for communication have brought additional visitors to a region that relies on tourism and outdoor recreation for a considerable portion of its economy.

But digital communication has also directed huge numbers of people to trails that are beyond their carrying capacity, creating problems such as illegal parking, litter, hikers endangering themselves due to lack of experience, and the trampling of precious natural resources, just to name a few. Social media has been especially influential. It has allowed Catskill visitors to instantly post photos of scenic vistas, stream videos of waterfalls and mountaintops, and share maps that direct people to these exact locations. In some cases, this has allowed certain locations—such as Kaaterskill Falls and Peekamoose Blue Hole—to “go viral” and attract many thousands of visitors beyond their capacities.

While digital communication has helped to drive the uptick in visitation across the Catskills, evidence suggests that it will take a multi-platform approach to educate visitors about the park and their role in caring for it. Education about outdoor ethics, natural resources, drinking water, and other topics will be essential to changing the attitudes and habits of visitors to the Catskills.

The following recommendations are meant to ensure that people continue to visit the Catskills, while caring for the health and beauty of our resources while they are here.

### Immediate Action Items

1. **Immediate actions along Route 23a/Kaaterskill Clove** – The impacts of high use require certain immediate actions for the Route 23a corridor in the vicinity of Kaaterskill Clove. Many of these recommendations will be refined through the VUMF process, which will be used to examine Kaaterskill Clove. Recommendations include the following:
  - Continue to post real-time communications about Kaaterskill Clove, including the status of traffic and parking in and around the Clove. The State’s current effort to post updates on social media should be expanded where possible;

- Improve information delivery to visitors when they arrive;
- Continue the use of temporary variable message (VMS) boards, with an eye toward permanent VMS boards that are designed in a way that is harmonious with the Mountain Cloves Scenic Byway;
- Investigate informational, low-wattage AM radio station broadcasting;
- Coordinate with the New York State Thruway Authority and New York State Police on messaging on Thruway VMS boards;
- Develop common messaging about Kaaterskill Clove that could be used on the websites of DEC, The Great Northern Catskills of Greene County, the Catskills Visitor Center, and more;
- Improve signage, including wayfinding and interpretive signs;
- Generate a common map to be used at all information points; and
- Promote town-based parking.

**2. Market research to drive messaging** – Market research should be conducted to understand where travelers to the Catskills get information to make their decisions, what messages about the Catskills resonate with visitors, and how to affect their decision making and behavior. This market research should include surveys, focus groups, and other tools that are typically used for this process. This would help the region understand whether a stewardship pledge, regional theme, or other tools might be appropriate and effective. It would also help the region understand the most effective channels through which these messages could be communicated. This kind of professional research is a key first step in developing education and marketing materials that will effectively reach and influence their intended audiences.

**3. Tourism task force and unified social media messaging** – State authorities, county tourism promotion agencies, and nonprofit organizations in the Catskills should meet regularly as part of a tourism task force. These groups should align their communication strategies, marketing, and messaging for travelers planning a trip to or currently visiting the Catskill Park.

- The task force should include a social media subcommittee or working group that meets monthly to create a social media calendar. The subcommittee would identify and develop common messages that would ideally be broadcast across the individual accounts of each organization and be shared by others. This would increase the number of people who see messages about park stewardship, outdoor ethics, seasonal events, or other information about the park and its communities. The Catskill Park Coordinator should identify messages that are most helpful and applicable, season by season, and month by month. Developing common messaging for dozens of Catskill-based organizations would also maximize their effectiveness by increasing the likelihood that visitors would see them multiple times.



**4. Expand opportunities for in-person interactions between visitors and stewards** – Although many of its new visitors are discovering the Catskill Park through digital and other media, experience suggests that it is important for educational messages about stewardship and outdoor ethics to be delivered face-to-face. Therefore, the state and its partners should continue to pursue avenues for in-person communication with visitors whenever possible. That is especially true for trailheads, swimming holes, and other wild and scenic areas where a “greeting” presence has not traditionally been located. Recommendations include:

- Expand the Catskill Park Stewards Programs, which funds seasonal staff to greet visitors and educate them about outdoor ethics at high-use areas across the Catskill Park. The stewardship program reached about 96,000 visitors at high-use areas across the Catskills in 2021. While that number is impressive, it still only accounts for less than 1% of visitors to the region;



- Hire additional forest rangers and assistant forest rangers and assign some to specific posts or hot spots during the peak seasons;
  - Expand the ridge-runner program on the Burroughs Range, Devil's Path, and other popular hikes; and
  - Create formal outdoor education programs that can be delivered by DEC staff or partners at its campgrounds. The campgrounds provide a captive audience and a good opportunity to educate visitors to the region.
- 5. Equity and inclusion in communication** – Visitors to the Catskills are more diverse than ever. Our communications, marketing, and education must reflect this in the following ways:
- The State and its partners should aim to have all its communications and marketing materials at least in English and Spanish, given the increase in Spanish-speaking visitors to the Catskills in recent years. The State must regularly seek information to understand whether certain materials should be published in additional languages; and
  - Public-facing park messages must be as inclusive as possible. For example, visitor centers, information delivery points, advertising, and publications should represent the diversity of visitors to the Catskill Park. Attention should be paid to language and words, and how people are portrayed.

## Strategic Investments and Priorities

- 1. Continue marketing efforts to attract visitors to the Catskill Park** – I LOVE NY; DEC; the New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (State Parks); county tourism promotion agencies; and other partners should continue their marketing efforts that attract visitors to the Catskill Park. State and local governments should ensure these campaigns are appropriately funded. The continued flow of visitors into the region supports communities, businesses, and families through the creation of jobs and the generation of tax revenue. While much of this report focuses on the challenges presented by increased visitation to our region, we cannot ignore the economic opportunities and pride of place created by tourism. All stakeholders in the Catskills must understand the balance between destination marketing and destination management, and that one cannot be successful the other.
  - Tourism marketing strategies should take into consideration how communications have an impact during different phases of the traveler experience: decision making, visitation, reflection, and advocacy.
  - Depending on the outcome of market research, tourism efforts should be paired with slogans that promote good outdoor ethics and stewardship, such as Keep the Catskills Beautiful; Catskills: Explore the Beauty; or other similar mottos that would be developed by professionals.
- 2. Expand the functional (non-promotional) use of social media** – The State should continue to expand its use of social media to provide frequent updates about the park. These should include near-real-time updates about the status of parking areas, trailheads, etc. DEC began this work in 2021 by establishing a Twitter account that provides parking and other updates about the Catskill Park and other areas across the state. Still, it should examine other models across the United States that have existed for many years to understand the branding, frequency of messaging, and other factors that make some functional social media efforts more successful and useful than others. Market research should also be used to identify the best way to reach visitors and the most effective messaging.
- 3. Management of stewardship and educational outreach programs** – Working with its partners, the State must expand its efforts to educate park visitors about outdoor ethics, stewardship, and responsible recreation. These messages must be well crafted, organized, and cohesively managed. Key points include:
  - Existing rules, regulations, and educational messages should be cataloged and harmonized where disparities exist;
  - The catalog of educational messaging and programming should be analyzed for gaps, and park managers should seek to fill those gaps with help from partners;



- The State should create a Catskill-specific education campaign around responsible recreation and stewardship. Specifically:
  - Create and use a unified stewardship message across all communication and education materials. This should focus on protecting the region's natural resources, watersheds, etc.;
  - Establish a common stewardship curriculum so that State employees and regional partners are delivering the same information in the same way. Consistency is key to effective communication;
  - Develop entertaining and immersive learning activities for children and their families at State campgrounds, the Catskills Visitor Center, and other locations. These programs should focus on natural resources, hiking, fishing, watershed protection, native plants and animals, and more. Leave No Trace™ principles should be incorporated into the programs;
  - Ensure consistency of signs and messaging across the park;
  - Create a plan to educate diverse visitors. This could include marketing outdoor recreation opportunities to populations that have been less likely or capable of visiting the Catskill Park. It should also include programming that brings schoolchildren and summer camps from urban, suburban, and local areas for day visits to the park;
  - Focus education efforts on front-country and backcountry issues;
  - Reinforce Leave No Trace™ principles at trailheads, trail signs, websites, the Catskills Visitor Center, etc.;
  - Utilize connections to organizations in the New York City metropolitan area to connect with visitors and deliver stewardship information before they arrive in the Catskills. For example, the current connection with the education department of the NYCDEP should be strengthened to reach more schoolchildren from the five boroughs of the city.
  - The State should seek to understand how visitors from the New York City metropolitan area receive and share information that leads them to the Catskill Park. The State should utilize these methods to communicate with visitors through educational opportunities in their neighborhoods in the city, social media, and other platforms; and
  - Review existing DEC, NYCDEP, Catskills Visitor Center, and other programs and partnerships to understand where educational messaging and programming could be plugged in.



**4. Stewardship and education council** – Education efforts will benefit from the collective knowledge of stakeholders throughout the Catskills. A Stewardship and Education Council should be created as a working group within the Catskill Park Advisory Committee. Its members should come from a diverse cross section of organizations committed to education and stewardship in the region. The council should help with the following:

- Help the Catskill Park Coordinator identify educational opportunities and build a curriculum;
- Review education and stewardship objectives and provide feedback; and
- Participate in education and stewardship programming at the request of the Catskill Park Coordinator or other park managers.

**5. Stewardship and education implementation** – The Catskill Park Coordinator, working with the Stewardship and Education Council, should develop a multiyear plan to implement outreach and education programs. The programs should seek to reach diverse audiences and those engaged in a wide range of recreational activities across the Catskill Park. Near-term activities should include the following:

- Continue to craft and broadcast educational messages across multiple platforms, including Love Our NY Lands, Leave No Trace™, etc.;
- Work with I LOVE NY to include Leave No Trace™ principles on its promotional platforms;
- Conduct preventative search and rescue education efforts;
- Improve the content and promotion of social media pages and websites for DEC and the Catskills Visitor Center to boost their visibility;
- Catalog and rank the top 25 educational opportunities to implement in the Catskill Park on the basis of their ability to be implemented and their likely effectiveness; and
- Include Leave No Trace™ principles in brochures and printed materials, trailhead signs, park maps, websites, public service announcements, and educational programs.

**6. Highlight and support the Catskills Visitor Center** – The Catskills Visitor Center should serve as a central resource for information about recreation, tourism-related events, outdoor stewardship and education, and more. Recommendations include:

- The State and its partners should seek to strengthen the public's awareness of the Catskills Visitor Center through their marketing and education efforts. The center provides parking, education, advice from knowledgeable staff, fire tower access, bathrooms, and other resources, such as maps;
  - Search-engine optimization should also be used to increase the likelihood that visitors interested in the Catskills will see information about the visitor center; and
  - The State and the Catskills Visitor Center should explore the idea of a mobile visitor center that could park at different trailheads, swimming areas, and park entry points throughout the year. This would create an additional touchpoint for park visitors, and allow on-the-road staff to provide information in the field. Mobile visitor centers have been created for other parks across the globe, often by modifying a trailer or recreational vehicle that can act as a hub for information and education.
- 7. Train educators and volunteers** – Those providing education, doing business, or guiding trips within the Catskill Park should be trained on the principles of Leave No Trace™.
- Entities operating under a Volunteer Service Agreement (VSA) should be trained in Leave No Trace™.
  - DEC should make Leave No Trace™ a required component of New York Guide License Program. The awareness workshop should be required at a minimum, and a certificate of completion should be submitted as part of the guide license application or renewal application.
  - Specific DEC staff, including forest rangers, should be trained in Leave No Trace™ and the Authority of the Resource technique, which are proven methods of effectively interacting with park visitors about stewardship.
  - Those contractors participating in the Catskill Park Stewards Programs should also be trained in these methods.



#### A Mobile Visitor Center for the Catskills

The Catskills Visitor Center in Mount Tremper was constructed at one of the major gateways to the Catskill Park to provide visitors with information about outdoor recreation, events, park communities, and education about good outdoor ethics. This center is complemented by the county tourism promotion agencies, which provide information at their physical locations and on their websites.

Information delivery in the Catskill Park, however, is challenged by the fact that our park does not have a single point of entry. Visitors to the park enter through multiple highways, counties, and gateways at every corner of the Catskills.

That is why the Catskill Park would benefit greatly from having a mobile Catskills Visitor Center to complement the brick-and-mortar locations. The mobile visitor center could move around the park to provide information at hot spots, popular trailheads, events that attract tourists, and other locations.

From Long Island to Toronto and Texas, mobile visitor centers are becoming more common at parks, beaches, and tourist towns. Many of them are constructed by modifying a trailer or box truck, which is often wrapped in an iconic image of the location. The insides of these mobile centers are outfitted with TVs that broadcast a list of local events and promotional videos of the region, maps that guide people to outdoor destinations and local communities, and kiosks that carry brochures for local businesses and tourism attractions. The mobile visitor centers are staffed by trained employees who provide information about hiking, campsites, outdoor ethics, and more.

A mobile presence throughout the Catskill Park would help to achieve many of the goals outlined in this CAG report. It would provide a visible presence to educate more visitors at hot spots across the park. It would also help connect visitors to local restaurants, guide services, and other businesses in park communities that rely on tourism.

That is exactly how officials from the Missouri National Recreational River use their mobile ranger station when it was developed in 2013. The station—equipped with TVs, photos, and maps—was stationed at popular tourism areas around the river to encourage more visitation to the river and local businesses. Officials from the National Park Service brought the trailer to state fairs, outdoor festivals, sporting events, and even Mount Rushmore to educate more people within the region about recreational opportunities along the Missouri River. Staff also used the trailer to offer educational programming for children. The trailer cost \$20,000 to purchase and equip.



**8. Promote accessibility** – The State should improve and promote its printable, web-based guide that provides facility accessibility information. This should include methods that nonprofits may use to share trail information with people with disabilities. The State and other entities should standardize facility and trailhead signs to promote accessibility. The content should be kept current through visitor feedback and regular revisions. The state should renew its dedication to inclusivity by providing and updating facilities to meet accessible standards for people with disabilities, and by ensuring that its website is accessible.

**9. Create and install universal signage at trailheads** – Information and maps should be posted at trailheads, specifically to help hikers preview the degree of difficulty and accessibility along the full length of the trail. The maps will help people of all abilities understand the obstacles they might encounter on the trail, the length of each trail, the hiking difficulty, and more. This will allow visitors to make their own decisions about whether to go on the hike. In addition to posting these maps at each trailhead, they should be available online for advance viewing. Similar maps—which show the length of the trail, topography and elevation gain, and difficulty—can be found at Minnewaska State Park Preserve and other parks within New York.

**10. Promote historic resource sites for educational purposes** – There are several educational and historical sites throughout the Catskills that can help educate people about the park and its history. The State and its partners should:

- Continue to promote fire towers as destinations that provide recreational and educational opportunities. The trails leading to the fire towers are often old roads that are already hardened, limiting the impact to surrounding natural resources. Staff and volunteers are located at the fire towers to provide education; and
- Determine major historic education opportunities in the Catskill Park, working with State and county tourism entities and local historical societies to plan on-site events and curate exhibits at the Greene County Historical Society, Mountain Top Historical Society, Time and the Valleys Museum, and other locations. Such events would help to alleviate pressures on areas of increasing use by offering alternative destinations. These events would also help to support local businesses and provide opportunities to educate visitors about the special qualities of the park. For example, the 200th Anniversary of the Catskill Mountain House (2023–2024) is an excellent educational opportunity.





## Traffic and Parking

Roadways and parking infrastructure across many parts of the Catskill Park were not designed to accommodate the number of vehicles that are cramming onto them during peak seasons. That is especially true for a handful of trailheads, waterfalls, and swimming areas where the highest increases in visitation have been seen.

Consequently, dozens or hundreds of cars have parked illegally on the shoulders of narrow roadways, creating public safety hazards as visitors walk sometimes more than a mile to get to their destination. This public-safety hazard is especially acute in areas that lack cellular phone service.

The traffic and parking hazards that have sprung from the Catskills' popularity require us to think differently and reach for new tools—shuttles and reservation systems, new parking areas that include beverage and bathroom facilities, and steady enforcement of the rules. The following recommendations represent the best strategies to alleviate traffic and parking issues within the Catskill Park, while making public access easier, safer, more equitable, and less impactful to our natural resources.

### Immediate Action Items

1. **Traffic study for Kaaterskill Clove shuttle system** – The State should finish the planning necessary to establish a shuttle for the Kaaterskill Clove, building off existing plans developed by the surrounding towns and Greene County. As a first step, the State should use the VUMF process to gather data and understand the need for a shuttle service. This work should include:
  - Funding and completion of a full traffic study for the Kaaterskill Clove area to determine the feasibility of a shuttle, with a cost-benefit analysis. This study should include:
    - An analysis of potential shuttle routes, stops, and necessary infrastructure improvements;
    - A parking plan for the Clove area; and
    - Materials necessary to apply for funding under the Federal Highway Administration, the State's Consolidated Funding Application, or other funding sources to implement the recommendations; and
  - Study long-term parking needs surrounding the Clove and options for those needs to be met with existing or new infrastructure.



**2. Prioritize solutions for hot spots** – DEC, DOT, and other partners should prioritize their efforts on current hot spots across the Catskill Park, with a particular emphasis on solutions to solve overcrowding, promote public safety, and protect natural resources.

- The Catskill Park Coordinator should examine the already-compiled list of hot spots where parking, traffic, and high-use issues are pervasive. These areas should be compared to existing Unit Management Plans (UMPs) to create detailed recommendations that can be developed for each area.
- DEC should catalog and finish mapping all public parking lots, their maximum capacities, and their actual levels of use. DEP parking areas should be included. Trail counters should be employed at all hot spots to assist with data analysis. To conduct a thorough analysis of existing conditions, DEC should include all parking areas, regardless of ownership or management, that serve trailheads and other public recreational areas. This parking area information should be consolidated into a comprehensive document.

**3. Communicate traffic and parking in real-time** – Information about traffic, parking, and alternative destinations is only effective if it reaches visitors before they arrive at their destination, and before they reach a parking lot that is full. That's why DEC and its partners should continue to explore technologies and communication tactics that can broadcast parking and traffic information in real-time.

- The State should continue to utilize social media to post real-time parking and traffic information.
- Variable message boards on the New York State Thruway should be used to broadcast the status of popular trailheads on peak weekends.
- Variable message boards should also be established at the gateways to the park—and designed in a way that is consistent with the park and its scenic byways—to share traffic and parking information as people get off the highways and head toward their destinations within the Catskills.
- The State should explore partnerships with smart-phone maps (Google Maps, Waze, etc.) to understand whether their technology could be used to share the density of use at trailheads. These technologies are currently used to show traffic on highways and bridges. That kind of density data—based off a quantitative assessment of pings to local cell phone towers—could be used to warn people that certain areas within the Catskill Park are busy or full before they arrive.



## Strategic Investments and Priorities

1. **Investigate the feasibility of a park-wide shuttle system** – Public transportation has often been deployed at state and national parks to alleviate traffic and parking problems. A privately run shuttle system was piloted in the Kaaterskill Clove area in 2022, and traffic studies will determine whether a permanent system should be funded and implemented along the Route 23a corridor. Those efforts should be watched carefully to measure their success and understand whether other portions of the park would benefit from similar transportation services.

- The State should develop a feasibility study of public transportation options for the Catskill Park, with a particular focus on high-priority hot spots to determine whether shuttles could help visitors enjoy the park without driving to every destination. This would also reduce carbon emissions in the park. This analysis should include diverse stakeholders from the Catskills and visitors from outside communities. Outreach should be conducted in multiple languages to make sure that feedback represents the broadest cross section of visitors possible. Fees for transportation service should be analyzed carefully to ensure no visitors are priced out of access to their public lands.

### A Local Benefits Corporation for Parking and Community Opportunities

Through its discussions with other parks across the country and the globe, the CAG found some innovative models that were deployed to meet the challenges of high use, while also seizing on its opportunities.

One model came from Wales, in the United Kingdom. Its Brecon Beacons National Park is similar in scale, size, and scope to the Catskill Park. Its challenges were also similar, with the pandemic driving thousands of new visitors to its waterfalls, hiking areas, and caves. The increased visitation filled parking areas beyond capacity, caused litter at hot spots, and contributed to erosion at popular destinations.

The Brecon Beacons have begun to employ an innovative model to solve its parking challenges, while also connecting visitors with more communities that are located within its national park.

The park began by identifying existing parking areas, within park communities, that were underutilized during the peak days and seasons. Managers found that existing parking lots at churches, community centers, grocery stores, and other locations were underutilized, with dozens or hundreds of parking spots going unused.

With help from non-governmental organizations, park managers created a local benefits corporation (LBC) that would pay a fee to rent a portion of these parking lots from their owners. Park visitors were then encouraged to park at these locations through the use of a reservation system, and the LBC established transportation from the parking lot to the trailheads of nearby trails or waterfalls.

Similar to the Catskill Park, much of the increase in visitation to the Brecon Beacons came from nearby urban areas in Wales. Park managers said that these visitors had different expectations when they arrived at the park, including bathroom facilities, refreshment stations, and a place to leave their garbage.

The LBC provided those facilities at the rented parking lots. Mobile bathrooms were set up. The LBC allowed local companies to provide refreshments, and food trucks could rent space to sell fresh meals. The revenue into the LBC from these local businesses and the parking fees were used to rent the parking lot from the property owner, and for the salaries of staff who managed the parking area. Trash cans were set up. And the LBC even established a concierge service at the site to funnel visitors into local towns, restaurants, overnight facilities, and guide services.

Managers of the Brecon Beacons National Park report that many challenges, such as litter, were significantly reduced once these parking areas were set up. For example, people did not bring disposable food containers to the park as often because they knew food would be available from vendors in the parking lot. Visitors stopped parking and peeing on the side of the road, because they knew parking and toilets would be available at the lots operated by the LBC.

This innovative model, which solved challenges and capitalized on opportunities, could be replicated in the Catskill Park. The Catskill Park Coordinator should survey existing parking lots that are within a reasonable distance of popular hiking and swimming areas. Existing nonprofits or benefits corporations could be utilized to provide the services in a similar fashion to the Brecon Beacons.



2. **Consider expanded permit or reservation system for hot spots** – Parks across the globe have implemented reservation or permit systems in response to increased use. These systems come in a variety of styles. Some require a payment for a daylong reservation. Others, known as timed-entry systems, provide a specific time slot for arrival to spread use throughout the day rather than concentrating it within peak hours. DEC implemented one such system at the Peekamoose Blue Hole to address extremely high use and chaotic, illegal roadside parking that created public safety hazards. The reservation system at Blue Hole has trimmed the use of that area to levels that are more manageable and match the capacity of parking lots within the corridor. DEC should examine other hot spots carefully to understand whether they would benefit from a reservation or permitting system. At the same time, DEC should look at models across the country—including those identified by the CAG during its research process—to understand which are the most effective and replicable for our park. As reinforced elsewhere in this report, all parking and reservation systems should comply with accessibility standards and minimize financial barriers that could prevent low-income families from accessing their public lands. Investments in education, stewards, forest rangers, and other mitigation steps should be implemented before using a permit system. Determining the need for a permit system should be included in the VUMF process.
3. **Support and expand multi-modal transportation infrastructure** – The vast majority of visitors to the Catskill Park drive to the region in a personal vehicle. Public transportation to the region is very limited. While vehicular travel will likely remain the predominant method for getting around the Catskills, the State should prioritize planning and development that supports other transportation methods, including bus, bicycle, and trolley. Rail-to-trail access via trains and bicycles should be explored wherever possible.
  - DEC and its partners should examine opportunities to connect existing rail trails with the goal of linking them to the park’s hiking trail system. This would allow more bicycle and walking access. Bicycle infrastructure should be expanded within the park where appropriate, including paved trails, bike lanes, facilities to repair flat tires and lock up bikes, etc.
  - All facilities should meet accessible standards for people with disabilities.

4. **Promote underutilized trails and recreation areas** – To alleviate overcrowding in hot spots, DEC and its partners should promote visitation to underutilized areas, such as campgrounds, that have public infrastructure capable of handling greater use. A comprehensive plan should be developed utilizing visitor data in the form of a heat map, which would allow for data-based decision making on how and where to promote additional use. Once priority areas for increased use are identified, DEC and its partners should utilize marketing and communication tools to promote them. This would include redirecting people from hot spot areas that are often filled to capacity.
5. **Explore additional parking options off State lands** – The State should identify additional opportunities for new or expanded parking off State lands, especially where that parking could be connected to popular destinations by trail, bicycle, or other simple modes of transportation. Additional parking would be helpful for areas that can handle high use or greater volumes of visitation, but the State should be careful not to build additional parking for portions of the park that are already at or beyond their carrying capacities.



## Benefits to Catskill Park Communities

Management strategies for the Catskill Park cannot focus on challenges alone. Opportunities abound with the influx of new visitors to our region. A steady flow of visitors into the Catskills supports communities, businesses, and families through the retention and creation of jobs. It also supports local governments by generating sales tax revenue.

As the CAG noted in a previous section of this report, we cannot ignore the economic opportunities and pride of place created by tourism—especially in the Catskills, where tourism-related business sectors make up a substantial portion of the economy.

The following recommendations aim to capitalize on the opportunities that exist now and identify new opportunities for economic growth through tourism, all with an eye toward helping park communities benefit from tourism within the Catskill Park.

### Immediate Action Items

#### 1. Increase park and community connectivity –

Managers of the Catskill Park should aim to create a year-round, interconnected network of towns, campgrounds, and trails, to help guide visitors into the villages, hamlets, and other downtown areas that are located within the park.

Strategies to connect park visitors with its communities include:

- Explore models of governance that would establish parking at underutilized parking lots in villages or hamlet areas. These parking areas should include restrooms, refreshment stations, food trucks, and concierge services to connect park visitors with nearby businesses;

- Encourage hut-to-hut or place-to-place hikes that connect hamlet areas. These allow a group of visitors to start a hike in one community and end in another, providing economic benefits to both places. The Catskill Park Coordinator should collaborate with communities to identify potential hut-to-hut hikes and work on a cohesive plan to market them;
- Create “Park Towns” and/or “Trail Towns” to promote a stronger connection between the park and the communities within it.
  - Develop a region-specific Trail Town manual;
- Encourage “open street” festivals in downtowns that are near popular trailheads, on select weekends throughout the peak seasons;
- Develop new trail links that would connect central business districts without outdoor recreation opportunities.
  - Develop short-distance trail spurs and loops that connect the main streets of trail towns with outdoor recreation opportunities through clear signage, public art gateways, and other methods; and
- Create unique branding identities for each participating network of trail towns based on available amenities (water, trails, snow, biking) and reinforce it through multi-town events.



## Strategic Investments and Priorities

1. **Create new destinations within the park** – The State and its partners—in collaboration with local communities and business groups—should continue to develop new destinations within the park. These might include:
  - Expanding both hiking trails and rail trails wherever possible to improve the connected network of destinations within the park and beyond; and



- Working with the owners of ski facilities and other large destination sites to ensure year-round programming that can be expanded and marketed to create a critical mass of activities for park visitors.

The State should continue to identify new recreation opportunities for a variety of visitors with different interests and abilities. For example, areas that offer strenuous hiking, family-friendly walks, and wheelchair-accessible trails. Marketing efforts should seek to connect these recreational amenities to neighboring villages and hamlets to ensure that local businesses get the fullest benefit of increased visitation to the Catskills.

2. **Redirect use within the park** – The development and marketing of additional outdoor recreation opportunities throughout the Catskill Park can alleviate the burden experienced in high-use areas, and spread the benefits to additional communities in every corner of the park. Other agencies across the country have started “packaged experiences” to shift visitor focus to lesser-known areas. Efforts to redirect visitors to other locations within the park should be done carefully to ensure that other locations do not become filled beyond their carrying capacity, or that their natural resources are not endangered by increased visitation. Some strategies could include the following:

- Passport programs – These programs encourage the dispersion of visitors by inspiring visitors to seek out a checklist of sites around the Catskills. Passport programs have been developed as scavenger hunts with a ranging number of stops. They can be downloaded for free from a website. Participants can earn a reward after visiting five stops, and additional rewards for each five stops after that. Some passport programs allow visitors to win prizes, such as a kayak fishing trip for two, gear from outfitters, or a trip for four to a local attraction. This would help families find places to visit and spread the economic benefit of visitation to more places across the park. This curated program should direct visitors to locations that are able to accommodate their traffic and offer visitors services. Leave No Trace™ principles would be built into the program, and visitors would generally be sent to locations where staff are available to stamp their passports.



3. **Optimize use of the Catskills Visitor Center** – The Catskills Visitor Center aims to be the starting destination for more visits to the region, helping visitors find information about recreation and events, and helping connect them with local communities. This can be done through the following actions:

- All kiosks in the park should reference the Catskills Visitor Center and the services it provides; and
- The Catskills Visitor Center and DEC should help other visitor centers throughout the region by standardizing information about the Catskill Park that is printed and distributed, and by developing exhibits about the park that could be made available to other visitor centers for their use. The visitor centers run by the county tourism promotion agencies remain valuable locations that deliver information to the visiting public, and would benefit from having universally developed information to deliver.

**4. Improve park information kiosks** – Although park visitors are getting much of their information digitally, park kiosks still play an important role in helping them discover new destinations, events, restaurants, overnight facilities, and more. The existing network of kiosks throughout the Catskills should be improved by taking the following actions:

- Standardize the design and information provided at kiosks. The ones that currently exist across the region are built, installed, and maintained by myriad organizations. The State and park communities should work together to standardize a design and information for kiosks across the park; and
- The State should use its parking reservation and campground data to establish remote kiosks outside the Catskills that will provide information about the park. Since data show that a large number of visits originate from New York City, the state could collaborate with public parks and outdoor retail stores to install kiosks and reach a large number of potential visitors before they arrive in the Catskill Park. The kiosks should include the proper logos for DEC, NYCDEP, and the Catskills Visitor Center.

**5. Community-based transportation solutions** – Connections between recreational resources and town, village, and hamlet centers must be built and strengthened as transportation solutions are proposed to solve high-use issues. Solutions that incorporate nearby towns and villages should be given a higher priority to promote benefits for communities, better park access, and natural resource protection. Local communities should be central to this process.

**6. Responsible expansion of cellular service** – The responsible expansion of cellular service across the Catskill Park is an important goal that must be implemented. This is particularly challenging in our mountainous, forested area, where the cellular signal can rapidly weaken and struggle to reach valley floors. The installation of cellular infrastructure faces a unique challenge in the Catskill Park and Adirondack Park because of forever-wild provisions in the State Constitution that prohibit the development of such infrastructure.

Despite these challenges, the expansion of cellular service across the Catskills is important for the following reasons:

- The lack of cellular service across the Catskills, including forests and significant lane miles of roadways, prevents residents and visitors from calling to request emergency services. This has contributed to fatalities and slowed the start of search-and-rescue missions. For this reason, it is also important that the emergency-radio network relied upon by police, fire, ambulance, and other first responders also be improved and expanded;
- Scant cellular service reduces the ability of local communities to promote themselves, hampers local businesses from attracting visitors, and reduces visitors' ability to use navigational apps to discover nearby services that they might need or want. Put plainly, visitors might not visit a nearby hamlet or restaurant because the lack of cell service prevents them from seeing it is there;
- The lack of cell service impedes the ability of park managers and partners to effectively communicate park conditions to one another in real time. This also prevents the development of "smart" parking lots and other infrastructure that could help redirect visitors before they arrive at a location that is filled to its capacity;
- Sparse cellular service also prevents the delivery of information about the park to visitors once they have entered the Catskills, making it difficult to give visitors accurate information on the proper use of the park, incoming storms, event promotions, and more; and
- The public safety and community benefits of cellular service need to be balanced against the fact that many who visit and live in the Catskills come to the region to escape connectivity. The expansion of cellular service should be part of a public discussion about where such infrastructure is appropriate.

While the New York State Constitution clearly prevents Forest Preserve lands from being used to improve cellular infrastructure, DEC should work with communities, first responders, and local organizations to identify private and municipal lands that would be suitable for cellular infrastructure, especially in cases where it would expand the signal to high-use areas of the park.

In 2021, the Governor's Office released the final report of the New York Upstate Cellular Coverage Task Force, which examined the lack of cellular service across much of upstate New York, including the Catskill Park. The report made three recommendations to improve service in these areas—maximizing private-sector investment, streamlining regulatory processes, and evaluating



potential economic incentives. Those recommendations can be read in more detail by viewing a copy here: [New York Upstate Cellular Coverage Task Force Final Report](#).

**7. Creating “smart” trailheads** – The state should consult with local phone, cable, and internet companies to explore the feasibility of “smart” trailheads across the Catskills. These trailheads would act as internet hot spots at the start of popular trails. This would offer a number of benefits, including the following:

- Providing a means for DEC to accurately count visitors to each trail;
- Allowing visitors to download maps, take QR code surveys, and obtain other helpful information for their outdoor excursion;
- Providing a small cell phone service area from which people could call for emergency services in the case of hiking or swimming injuries;
- Allowing internet access that could help visitors find a restaurant, overnight facility, or other local businesses to patronize when they are finished with their hike, and before they leave the region; and
- Helping DEC and its partners “push” information about Leave No Trace™, outdoor ethics, rules and regulations, local events, and more, onto visitors’ cell phones as they are starting their hikes.



**8. Improving communication and collaboration with park communities** – Starting with the release of the CAG’s final report, improvements must be made in the distribution and explanation of documents related to the park. (Some of this was outlined in the section on [whole-park management](#).) Recommendations include the following:

- The Catskill Park Coordinator should act as a central hub of information for all park communities, utilizing regular communication to keep them engaged and informed;
- The Catskill Park Advisory Committee is a forum through which local governments and organizations provide assistance, advice, and guidance to DEC, NYCDEP, and other land managers. While there has been some local government participation in the advisory committee, the group does not yet have broad representation from governments throughout the park. It should aim to recruit more participation through outreach or adjusting the schedule of its meetings; and
- The CAG should establish a working group that will conduct outreach to local governments following the publication of its final report, to share its findings and recommendations.



## Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

Creating safe and equitable access to public lands and recreational opportunities has been identified across the United States as a critical component of improving recreational experiences, quality of life, and a strong economy supported by tourism.

Thanks to successful collaboration within the region, the Catskill Park is well-positioned to become a model that incorporates diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) initiatives in its plans, practices, and policies. This is especially true because many of the park's visitors come from one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse metropolitan areas in the country. It is important that everyone visiting, living, or working in the Catskills enjoys the benefits derived from DEIJ initiatives. It is equally important to implement strategies that strengthen DEIJ priorities for the park.

What is DEIJ?

- **Diversity** – The collective of differences and similarities of individual and organizational characteristics, values, beliefs, behaviors, experiences, and backgrounds, including perspectives from different sex, race, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, gender identity or expression, marital status, familial status, military status, and any other classes protected by law;

- **Equity** – Fair treatment and equal opportunity provided free from conscious and unconscious biases;
- **Inclusion** – The process that values and cultivates a welcoming and safe environment, including or involving people from a range of backgrounds and beliefs; and
- **Justice** – The practice that provides access to resources and opportunities, and results in all people being treated in a way that is fair, equal, and balanced for everyone.

Inclusion is what we do. Equity is how we do it. Diversity and justice are the outcomes.

The recreational needs and preferences of visitors and local communities have been changing ever since the Catskill Park was established. That will continue, especially as visitors to the park and residents in the Catskills region become more diverse. The following recommendations seek to promote and embrace the benefits of DEIJ, and to achieve a more welcoming and inclusive Catskill Park by eliminating bias in all its forms.



## Immediate Action Items

1. Ensure public-facing park resources are as inclusive as possible—including visitor centers, information delivery points, advertising, publications, etc. Special attention should be paid to language and words used, and how people are portrayed.
2. Renew dedication to inclusivity by providing and updating facilities to meet accessibility standards for people with disabilities.
3. Ensure DEC promotes diversity among its staff. Ensure that all staff and contractors in the Catskill Park are trained in DEI. Encourage partners to do the same.
4. The State should examine the diversity of visitors to the Catskills and study the economic and other benefits. A report on the economic impacts of public lands in the Catskills, and the visitors they attract, is included as an appendix to this report.
5. The State should highlight the benefits of diversity and embrace diversity by creating a safe and welcoming environment throughout the park.
6. Align park strategies with the Open Spaces for All work that was published by the Open Space Institute and the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition. This project aimed “to identify innovative policies, programs, initiatives, and partnerships to support and engage a growing and increasingly diverse constituency of park users.”
7. DEC should work with partners to obtain their input on DEI issues in the Catskill Park. For example, consider establishing or support the creation of a Catskill Park DEI Working Group that is representative of diverse visitors and community members.

## Strategic Investments and Priorities

1. Establish programs that connect Catskill Park users from diverse communities to the park. This should initially focus on communities within and directly surrounding the park, and then expand to villages and cities farther away once a pilot is tested and adjusted based on experience.
2. Conduct a review of existing management strategies at areas with increasing use, and implement modifications that simultaneously protect natural resources and recognize that use patterns have changed over time. Visitors to the park and local communities have diverse views regarding what constitutes an enriching outdoor experience. Those conducting the review should consider the full range of suitable uses, without giving undue favor to or discounting historical uses or excluding the current/actual activities that are happening on these lands.
3. Consider incorporating equity into currently implemented and future strategies by removing barriers to access (financial and otherwise) to the extent possible and by providing reservation guidance, regulations, and other information in multiple languages across all platforms. Significant effort should be put into providing facilities that meet accessibility standards.
4. Apply an equity lens to all management decisions so the park can become a model for other natural areas that strive to be accessible to all.



# Appendix A

## Response to Public Comments

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
Advertising and Park Promotion	2
Appreciation for the CAG's Interim Report	2
Attractions	2
Catskill Park Coordinator	2
Cell Service	2
Climate Change and Sustainability	3
Conservation and Stewardship	3
Criticism of the CAG's Interim Report	3
Education	3
Enforcement	3
Equity and Inclusion	4
Fire Towers	4
Implementation and Funding	4
Parking and Sanitation	4
Permit System	4
Signage and Wayfinding	4
Trail Improvements	5
Transportation	5
Visitor Centers	5
Visitor Use Management	5
Comments beyond the CAG's Scope	5

# Introduction

A total of 26 comment letters were received on the CAG's Interim Report. In addition, a member of the CAG and the Catskill Park Coordinator attended a meeting with local sportsmen federations and received verbal and written comments at that time. Below is a list of topics that public comments included with the CAG's response to each topic.

The list below is organized in alphabetical order and not in any order of significance.

## Advertising and Park Promotion

Some commenters advocated to end advertising for the Catskill Park and not promote the Park. A commenter stated that expanded outreach efforts through social media should not be undertaken. On the other hand, numerous commenters noted a need to increase communication, to include Chambers of Commerce and other community groups and organizations in communication efforts, to strengthen local tourism economies, and asked for better collaboration to ensure messaging and programming is correct.

**Response:** *The CAG report's section, on "Marketing, Communications, and Education," makes recommendations to ensure that people continue to visit the Catskills, while caring for the health and beauty of our resources while they are here, including thorough market research to develop education and marketing materials that can effectively reach and influence their intended audiences. The final report recommends promoting consistent messaging using a social media task force. This report recommends using social media to provide real-time information about parking lot capacity, to promote areas that are designed to withstand higher visitation, and ultimately, to provide the desired visitor experience.*

## Appreciation for the CAG's Interim Report

At least eleven comments expressed general support for the Interim Report, including the scope and content of the report.

**Response:** *The members of the CAG appreciate the positive comments on the Interim Report and for the work of the committee.*

## Attractions

Several comments spoke about creating and/or maintaining attractions to make specific areas more desirable or enjoyable. These suggestions included opening up viewpoints, installing non-obtrusive observation towers, and reclassifying the Kaaterskill Falls immediate area to intensive use because this unique attraction receives a vast number of visitors. Several commenters reasoned against reclassification of wild forests to more active use, arguing

that these wild and scenic areas should remain protected, and the increasing recreational use should be accommodated through the UMP process.

**Response:** *The CAG recommends using the Visitor Use Management Framework (VUMF) (see "What is Adaptive Management" in the final report) to identify areas that can accommodate higher volumes of use, establish carrying capacities, identify the infrastructure to accommodate visitor experience and volume, and make management decisions that will prevent the degradation of natural resources. This process would be used to determine which, if any, areas should be reclassified. Constitutional amendments or reclassifications would be considered only after a VUMF process, which provides a transparent, legally defensible decision-making process.*

## Catskill Park Coordinator

Several comments welcomed the newly created Catskill Park Coordinator position. Commenters called for a realistic budget and staff to assure the position's success. Comments suggested that the coordinator serve as a single voice for all Catskills regions, and the coordinator be a familiar presence for locals across municipalities.

**Response:** *The CAG's Final Report, under "Whole-Park Management," urges that adequate funding and staffing be provided for DEC to support the coordinator and outlines the duties of the coordinator recommended by the report. Also in this section, immediate action items urge the Catskill Park Coordinator to create an implementation plan for the CAG's report, focusing first on its high-priority recommendations as well as developing a park-wide strategic plan that would incorporate longer-term goals and needs. (See also our responses under "Implementation and Funding").*

## Cell Service

Comments noted that the lack of quality cell service hinders activities in the Park on multiple levels.

**Response:** *The final report's "Benefits to Catskill Park Communities" section calls for the expansion of cellular service in an environmentally responsible manner.*



## Climate Change and Sustainability

A commenter urged that climate change be addressed in the Final Report, with a goal towards carbon neutrality for Park infrastructure and visitors. Another commenter asked for a sustainability strategy for the Park informing not only natural resource management, but also the investments in processes, people, and tools for better management of the Catskill Park.

**Response:** *The Final Report clarifies that its recommendations are guided by foundational principles, including the need to address climate change through management strategies and investments across the Catskill Park. The report urges a focus on ways that the Catskills can help to combat climate change, including the potential of its forests to act as a carbon sink.*

## Conservation and Stewardship

Comments noted that the Interim Report does not speak to conservation and stewardship needs for the natural resources of the Catskill Park. It was also noted that there is no baseline biology report for the Catskill Park to measure impact against.

**Response:** *The CAG Final Report includes a section on “Natural Resources.” Efforts to protect natural resources in the Catskills carry an additional layer of importance because 6 large reservoirs in the region supply nearly all the water to New York City and more than 70 communities in the Hudson Valley. Recommendations are found in the “Natural Resources” section of the report. Other sections of this report, including the sections “Whole-Park Management,” and “Marketing, Communication, and Education,” also have recommendations addressing natural resources.*

## Criticism of the CAG’s Interim Report

Commenters expressed dissatisfaction with the interim report for several reasons. They noted that the interim report does not address specific problem areas other than Kaaterskill Clove and environs. Some commenters felt that having stakeholders on the CAG who also receive government funding is a conflict of interest. Commenters also stated that the members of the CAG did not represent all stakeholders who utilize the park; for example, the hunting and fishing community.

**Response:** *The final strategic framework includes more recommendations for managing areas throughout the Catskill Park. In fact, the preamble in the Final Report*

*identifies the protection of natural resources in the Catskills as a top priority and a foundational principle for the report.*

*CAG membership gives the organization no authority and no actions are being taken by the CAG. The members instead make recommendation to the Department of Environmental Conservation.*

*The Catskill Park Coordinator and CAG representatives met with local sportsmen federations and incorporated their comments into the final recommendations in this report.*

## Education

Commenters spoke about the need for improved education. Multiple commenters reiterated that stewards, rangers, assistant rangers, and other staff need to focus on educating visitors to the Catskill Park about Leave No Trace™ and responsible outdoor recreation.

**Response:** *The CAG’s Final Report incorporates numerous recommendations that focus on education, including Leave No Trace™ principles. DEC staff, Forest Rangers, and many stewards are currently being trained in this technique. The CAG’s Final Report also recommends universal signage at trailheads that includes Leave No Trace™ messaging.*

## Enforcement

Commenters noted that existing regulations should be properly implemented and enforced, including leash laws. Commenters called for more Forest Rangers in the Catskill Park.

**Response:** *Under “Adequate Staffing for Park Management Agencies,” in the “Whole-Park Management” section, the CAG’s Final Report urges increasing the number of Forest Rangers and Assistant Forest Rangers. The force must be large enough to deal with front-country issues, such as parking, and backcountry issues, such as illegal camping. This section also urges using Leave No Trace™ messaging for dog poop and controlling pets, along with expanding the stewards to locations where trash and dog waste are a problem. The CAG urges that laws and regulations be enforced consistently, and that Leave No Trace™ training be provided during the Forest Ranger Academy (which was, in fact, part of the training in 2022). We also appreciate the hard work of DEC Environmental Conservation Officers and acknowledge their contributions to law enforcement across the Catskill Park.*

## Equity and Inclusion

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A commenter appreciated how the Interim Report included issues of equity, inclusion, and fairness.

*Response: Thank you for the commendation. The CAG's Final Report's recommendations are guided by foundational principles, including the need to address diversity, equity, and inclusion by making the park accessible and accommodating to all.*

## Fire Towers

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Comments urged the DEC to adequately maintain the fire towers. Some asked to stop directing people to fire towers until natural resource impacts are addressed and adequate parking and bathroom facilities are provided at trailheads. A commenter noted the success of the Catskill Fire Tower Challenge program and said that it should be continued.

*Response: The CAG's Final Report recommends promoting historic resources for educational purposes, including fire towers, as destinations that provide recreational and educational opportunities. Commenters are correct that maintenance and continued support for fire towers are essential. Under the "Whole-Park Management" section, the final report's immediate action items include the need for ample funding from New York State and acknowledgment that State lawmakers must provide adequate funding to implement projects and sustain facilities.*

## Implementation and Funding

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Commenters urged that the Final Report include an implementation plan for the CAG's recommendations that includes funding needs (and sources), responsible parties, and a timeline for the implementation of each recommendation. Several commenters notes that increased funding in the New York State budget is essential, with investment for both increased facility and staff resources.

*Response: Under the "Whole-Park Management" section, the Final Report's immediate action items include:*

- 1. the acknowledgment that State lawmakers must provide adequate funding to implement the urgent projects and initiatives identified in the report;*
- 2. urging the Catskill Park Coordinator to create an implementation plan;*
- 3. a recommendation to create a capital plan for Catskill Park infrastructure and facilities that is necessary to support the level of use that is expected in the park.*

*This section in the report advocates adding at least nine additional full-time staff for the Catskill Park, along with more Forest Rangers and Assistant Forest Rangers.*

## Parking and Sanitation

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Commenters spoke to the need for improved and increased parking and bathroom facilities/privies, and improved enforcement. Multiple commenters expressed the need to improve parking, particularly at trailheads to fire towers.

*Response: The CAG's Final Report calls for funding a comprehensive plan for parking, including a full traffic study and a park-wide shuttle system, and state funding to address sanitation. Our report recommends the creation of a capital plan that would include parking infrastructure. The CAG's Final Report also calls for hiring more staff to implement parking projects and for enforcement. Lastly, the Final Report also recommends the use of technology to inform visitors about parking capacity.*

## Permit System

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Commenters expressed both opposition and support for a permit system. Some voiced dissatisfaction with any existing or proposed permit system that would limit access or use of the Catskill Park, especially a paid permit system. Other commenters were in support of permits to manage the volume of visitors and potential negative impacts from large visitor numbers.

*Response: Parks across the globe have implemented reservation or permit systems in response to increased use. The CAG's Final Report recommends that DEC look at models across the country to understand which are the most effective and replicable for our park. The report also advises that all parking and reservation systems comply with accessibility standards and minimize financial barriers that could prevent low-income families from accessing their public lands. The CAG recommends that investments in education, stewards, Forest Rangers, and other mitigation steps should be implemented before implementing a permit system.*

## Signage and Wayfinding

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Commenters urged to establish sign limitations for Catskill Park and strive for compliance to signage standards and signage that is appropriate for a rural setting. We also received comments to provide maps at trailheads and possibly QR codes that visitors can scan for trail information.

*Response: The CAG's Final Report includes numerous recommendations for funding new or improved interpretive and directional signage, wayfinding, etc. It also*

*recommends improving signage, including wayfinding and interpretive signs, and ensuring the consistency of signage across the park.*

## Trail Improvements

Multiple commenters expressed the importance of improving hiking trails in the Catskill Park, especially in muddy and eroded areas where improvements would make the hiking experience more enjoyable, while also protecting natural resources. A commenter stated that the State should formalize an official trail on trailless peak where social trails have led to significant impacts to natural resources.

**Response:** *The CAG's Final Report recommends ample state funding to support sustainable trail infrastructure for safety and climate resiliency, with increased staffing at DEC's Division of Lands and Forests. The Final Report recommends supporting and expand multi-modal transportation infrastructure that connects with trails and recreational facilities. Stakeholder input for recreational facilities is an important part of Visitor Use Management projects (see Visitor Use Management below). Lastly, DEC is currently conducting a Visitor Use Management project in the Catskill's trailless peaks to determine management actions needed for this area.*

## Transportation

Several comments were received regarding park-wide transportation issues. Suggestions included ways to increase the New York State Department of Transportation's participation in the Catskill Park, utilizing Scenic Byways as a way to communicate with the public, improving road signage, establishing hiker and visitor shuttles (specifically for Route 23A in Kaaterskill Clove), and increasing county bus service in the Park.

**Response:** *The CAG's Final Report, under "Traffic and Parking," recommends investigating park-wide transportation issues, such as implementing pilot shuttle systems and exploring the feasibility of a park-wide shuttle system. CAG members recommend planning and development that supports and expands a multi-modal transportation infrastructure. The Final Report recommends managing the Catskill Park through a whole-park approach, with all stakeholders working together and coordinated by the Catskill Park Coordinator.*

## Visitor Centers

Commenters noted that the Catskills Visitor Center is a valuable park-wide resource that should be improved. A commenter noted that satellite locations should be identified and developed to increase visitor outreach.

**Response:** *The Final Report recommends highlighting and supporting the Catskills Visitor Center with annual funding and also recommends exploring the idea of a mobile visitor center that could park at different trail-heads, swimming areas, and park entry points throughout the year. The visitor centers run by the county tourism promotion agencies remain valuable locations that deliver information to the visiting public and would benefit from having universally developed information to deliver.*

## Visitor Use Management

Many comments were received on this subject. Commenters advocated for setting capacities for specific areas, determining appropriate activities, establishing data collection protocols, identifying hot spots, involving stakeholders and the public in the process, and so on.

**Response:** *A prominent recommendation in our Final Report, under "Whole-Park Management," is the adoption of the Federal Interagency Visitor Use Management Framework. All of the issues in the relevant public comments can be addressed through the VUMF process. Please also see the Final Report's call-out section "What Is Adaptive Management?"*

## Comments beyond the CAG's Scope

The CAG received a number of comments that fall outside the scope of the CAG's work and the scope of our strategic framework. Nevertheless, the CAG appreciates the commenters' efforts to submit their thoughts.

These comments included topics such as: mandatory hunter orange for all; a moratorium on the lead ammunition ban; general liability from inaction; county-level staffing; allowing more than one organization to hold a volunteer service agreement for the same location; use conflicts; addressing erosion downstream of Moore's Bridge in Kaaterskill Clove; addressing a lack of affordable housing in the Park, which is a significant problem for those living and working there; etc.



# Appendix B

## List of Contributors

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# Contributors

## Catskill Advisory Group (CAG) Members

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Melissa Abramson, Local Brand Engagement and Impact, REI

Ramsay Adams, Founder and Executive Director, Catskill Mountainkeeper

Patrick Barnes, Region 1 Director, New York State Department of Transportation

Adam Bosch, President, Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress

Thomas Davidock, Acting Section Chief, Bureau of Water Supply, Watershed Lands and Community Planning

Dr. Joshua R. Ginsberg, Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies and Catskill Science Collaborative

Warren Hart, Deputy County Administrator, Greene County Economic Development, Tourism & Planning

Joshua Howard, Executive Director, New York-New Jersey Trail Conference

David Kukle, Town of Hunter Councilman and Director of Food and Beverage at Hunter Mountain Ski Bowl, Inc.

Adrienne Larys, President, Mountain Top Historical Society, Inc.

Lisa Lyons, Owner, Morgan Outdoors, Livingston Manor

Gilles Malkine, Architectural Modification Consultant, Resource Center for Accessible Living

Cathy Pedler, Director of Advocacy, Adirondack Mountain Club

Jeff Senterman, Executive Director, Catskill Center for Conservation and Development

Matthew Shook, Director of Development and Special Projects, Palisades Interstate Park Commission

Markly Wilson, Director of International Marketing, New York State Division of Tourism – I LOVE NY, and Ross Levi, Executive Director/Vice President, New York State Division of Tourism – I LOVE NY

Michelle Yost, Watershed Assistance Program Manager, Greene County Soil and Water Conservation District

## Additional Contributors

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Maria Bedo-Calhoun, President, Catskill 3500 Club

Wendell George, Board member, Catskill Mountain Club

Reed Sholtes, Region 1 staff, New York State Department of Transportation

## Meeting Facilitators (September–December 2021)

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Cheryl Amrani, Wildlife Biologist, USFWS (retired), and Conflict Resolution specialist

Dr. Mamie Parker, Success Coach and Commissioner, Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources

## DEC Facilitators and Participants

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McCrea Burnham, Catskill Park Coordinator

Josh Clague, Adirondack Park Coordinator

Laura DiBetta, Director of Outdoor Recreation

Ian Dunn, Forester, Region 3

Peter Frank, Bureau Chief, Bureau of Forest Preserve Management

Mikaela Hameline, Agency Training and Development Specialist

Sara Hart, Natural Resources Planner, Bureau of Forest Preserve Management

Peter Innes, retired Assistant Division Director, Division of Lands and Forests

Anthony Luisi, Regional Director, Region 4

Katharine Petronis, Deputy Commissioner of Natural Resources

Jeff Rider, Assistant Division Director, Division of Lands and Forests

Pine Roehrs, Natural Resources Planner, Region 3

Bill Rudge, retired Natural Resource Supervisor, Region 3

Alicia Sullivan, Forester, Region 4

Kelly Turturro, Regional Director, Region 3

