



Department of
Environmental
Conservation

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ESSEX CHAIN LAKES PRIMITIVE AREA

Amendment

to the

2016 Essex Chain Lakes Management Complex Plan

NYS DEC, REGION 5, DIVISION OF LANDS AND FORESTS

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Introduction

The Essex Chain Lakes Management Complex is located in the Towns of Indian Lake (Hamilton County) and Towns of Minerva and Newcomb (Essex County). The unit is approximately 19,600 acres in size; the land area was acquired by the State of New York and added to the Adirondack Forest Preserve in 2013. A Management Complex Plan ("Plan") for the area was adopted in March 2016.

This Amendment contains a management proposal to remove the campfire prohibition proposal described in the 2016 Plan. It also proposes to improve the Outer Gooley Parking Area, particularly for equestrians.

Campfires

History

In March 2016, a Plan was adopted for the Essex Chain Lakes Management Complex (ECLMC). Due to anticipated high public use and quality of the shoreline vegetation, three measures were put in place to accommodate public use, while preventing unwanted natural resource consequences. The first measure was to allow shoreline camping on the Essex Chain Lakes and interspersed ponds at designated sites only. The second measure was to require tent sites be reserved through a permit system. During the first five years, the area sustained low camping use and the permit system seemed to be a barrier for visitors. In 2018, the camping permit system was discontinued.

The third resource protection measure was the prohibition of campfires within 500' of the Essex Chain Lakes shoreline (including at designated tent sites). Development of a fire prohibition regulation was proposed, but never promulgated. To date, this fire prohibition has been managed by signage and public outreach. (Fires were not proposed to be prohibited elsewhere in the ECLMC.) The Plan discussed the ecological significance of the Essex Chain shoreline, and the impacts that campfires may have on natural resources, especially understory tree and coarse woody debris removal from firewood gathering.

Existing Conditions

The Department's ~~position on the concerns with possible~~ natural resource impacts of campfires ~~has~~have not changed. However, the area has seen low levels of public use since NYS acquisition, and ~~local communities have expressed an interest in increasing visitor use~~has not presented the level of ~~the ECLMC concern that warrants continuation of this unique restriction~~. Since the area was acquired by the State of New York and opened to the public in 2013, visitor use has been low, as compared to anticipatory expectations. It is believed that ~~a portion~~the lifting of the ~~low public use is due to the~~ waterfront campfire prohibition may not significantly increase public use levels in this area and will align it with nearly all other Forest Preserve units within the Park.

Usage Data

The Deer Pond parking area facilitates the majority of ECLMC access and is the entry point used by most visitors paddling or camping on the lakes/ponds. The trailhead register data from the Deer Pond parking area is below:

Deer Pond Parking Area Trailhead Register			
Year	Number of Users	User Days	Notes
2013	249	249	ECLMC open (only for day use) in fall 2013
2014	1,126	1,363	
2015	754	985	
2016	568	739	
2017	446	508	
2018	265	333	

These declining trailhead register numbers over time indicate an ongoing lessening of visitor use of the ECLMC. Ideally, a public survey would help to understand this trend. Anecdotally, the portage distances from the Deer Pond Parking Lot to Deer Pond, and from Deer Pond to Third Lake have been described as prohibitive to the average visitor. The unique fire prohibition is for the other anecdotal negative feedback communicated about the ECLMC shoreline tent sites has also been raised as an additional deterrent to public use.

The ECLMC is quite literally, a “complex” area. Multiple APA State land classifications, a variety of allowable public uses, and the landscape location of the area requires that potential visitors look twice at the area before visiting, to understand what opportunities exist and where. Removing the campfire prohibition around the Chain Lakes will contribute to simplified management and ease in visitor understanding of the area (fires allowed at all designated camping locations in the area). Through this Amendment, campfires will be allowed everywhere in the ECLMC (including where prohibited in the 2016 Plan), pursuant to general State Land rules and regulations.

Desired Conditions

Campfires at designated tent sites and lean-to sites will be facilitated by durable rock fire rings built by the Department. Fire rings accommodate fires in a safe manner that is resilient to initial and long-term use.

This management change will be used as a learning opportunity. The Adirondack region has relatively little observational data regarding the impacts of campfires on natural resources. General ~~tent~~tent site monitoring protocols assess campfire impacts, such as loss of vegetative screening and ground cover, tree damage and user-created fire sites.

Wildland monitoring variables for tent sites and lean-tos will include: tracking of impacted site expansion, soil compaction and vegetation loss, erosion, fire and firewood collection impacts, live tree damage, and presence of trash and human waste.

Proposed Management Actions

Objectives

- Facilitate consistent and simplified public use of the ECLMC;
- Minimize effects of fires on the natural resources

Management Actions

- Build safe and durable rock fire rings at the Essex Chain Lakes waterfront tent sites; Fires will be prohibited until rock fire rings are constructed by DEC at each waterfront tent site
- Monitor conditions at tent sites and surrounding areas to measure use impacts, including those related to firewood gathering
- Reinstate campfire prohibition if impacts exceed acceptable thresholds
- Provide Leave No Trace outreach regarding minimization of campfire impacts, including alternatives to the traditional campfire for both cooking and aesthetics.

Removing the fire prohibition in the Essex Chain Lakes is not necessarily a permanent management action. If increased campfire use causes ~~the types of~~ negative natural resource impacts ~~associated with, either within or outside of primitive tent sites, DEC may again prohibit campfires that increased public use may precipitate, then fires may be prohibited once again (without another UMP Amendment).~~ Conditions, monitored over time, will inform future decision-making. DEC and APA are in the process of developing a Visitor Use Management (VUM) framework that will inform decision-making. In part, this VUM framework will establish natural resource impact standards and thresholds. Exceedance of thresholds associated with campfire impacts (i.e., live tree cutting, tree damage, etc.) would prompt management action that could include prohibiting campfires at the Essex Chain Lakes waterfront tent sites once again.

Due to evolving outdoor technologies and wildland ethics, a campfire is no longer the only ~~(or primary)~~ cooking, warming, and entertainment method available to overnight users at primitive camping sites. The Department will continue to promote these methods and encourage public stewardship to minimize natural resource impacts.

The construction of fire rings at Essex Chain Lakes waterfront tent sites will be completed in coordination with closure and relocation of several existing tent sites. Existing sites have been assessed, resulting in the future relocation of several sites to more desirable locations with greater capacity to withstand camping use.

Equestrian Facilities

History

The 2016 ECLMC Plan described and proposed equestrian opportunities, including parking, trail riding and camping. The ECLMC provides the opportunity for both relatively short distance equestrian riding, plus long-distance connections to communities and other areas of the Forest Preserve.

Existing Conditions

On the northern end of the unit, an equestrian parking and staging area exists near the beginning of the Chain Lakes Road North. It accommodates horse trailer parking and has an accessible mounting platform and kiosk. On the southern end of the unit, horse trailer parking is envisioned for the Outer Gooley Parking Area, but the current parking area only accommodates approximately six vehicles (without trailers).

Desired Conditions

Parking areas that are intended for horse trailer parking will allow for easy maneuvering, while having minimal impact on the surrounding environment. Signage and kiosks will provide trail-

maps and minimally impactful outdoor recreation information. Gates, mounting platforms, sanitary facilities and other parking area features will remain free of trash and in working condition. Equestrian staging areas will be free from live tree damage, invasive species introductions and waste. Loss of ground cover vegetation will be limited to a minimal distance from the bounds of the parking areas.

Wildland monitoring variables for equestrian parking and staging areas will include: parking surface erosion or expansion, sanitary facility conditions, presence of trash, waste or invasive species, and loss of ground cover vegetation.

Proposed Management Actions

Objective

- Provide facilities that contribute to equestrian use of the ECLMC and prevent resource degradation;

Management Actions

- After the Outer Gooley building is removed and the site reclaimed, ~~expand~~adapt the existing parking area to better accommodate parking maneuvers of up to six vehicles with trailers;
- Construct an accessible outhouse, an accessible horse mounting platform and hitching posts/rails at the Outer Gooley parking area;
- Install one or two kiosks in the vicinity of the Outer Gooley Parking Area. One kiosk will provide Forest Preserve use information, and the other may highlight the history of the area;
- Provide trail etiquette and Leave No Trace messaging at the Outer Gooley parking area, and at all other relevant access points.

Essex Chain Lakes Primitive Tent Sites

