

## **Catskill Park State Land Master Plan Land Classification Amendment Big Indian Wilderness Area / Shandaken Wild Forest – January, 2014**

**Background:** The current edition of the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan (the Master Plan) was completed and approved in August of 2008 (a revision of the first plan, completed in 1985). The Master Plan implements the forever wild mandate provided in Article XIV of the New York State Constitution and provides additional guidance for management of the Forest Preserve lands in the four Forest Preserve counties in the Catskills as described in Environmental Conservation Law, section 9-0101(6): Delaware, Greene, Sullivan and Ulster, the majority of which lie within the Catskill Park. Included in the Master Plan is a land classification system that reflects the varying degrees of wild land ranging from remote, trail-less mountain peaks to extensively used camping areas and a developed ski center. Five basic land classifications are established in the plan: Wilderness, Wild Forest, Primitive Bicycle Corridor, Intensive Use and Administrative Use. The Master Plan classified all of the Forest Preserve lands in the Catskills owned by the People of the State of New York at the time of the completion of the latest edition of the Master Plan in 2008. Since that time the State has acquired additional lands that have been added to the Forest Preserve. The Master Plan prescribes two alternatives for the classification of newly acquired Forest Preserve land: either the unit management plan (UMP) for the unit the property will be added to may be amended or the Master Plan can be amended.

In December of 2011 New York State acquired approximately 1,200 acres in the Town of Shandaken, Ulster County within the Catskill Park to be added to the Forest Preserve. Commonly referred to as the Big Indian acquisition, the property adjoins or is in close proximity to three management units, the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center Intensive Use Area, the Big Indian Wilderness and the Shandaken Wild Forest. Because of its proximity to all three units and the potential to divide the property into different land classifications rather than classifying the entire property as one classification, the Department has chosen to pursue the classification of individual portions of the Big Indian acquisition in two separate processes. First, the portion of the Big Indian Acquisition proposed to be classified as an Intensive Use Area and as an addition to the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center's Intensive Use Area, is being pursued separately through the revision of the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center's Unit Management Plan. The remaining lands acquired in the Big Indian acquisition, approximately 930+/- acres, are proposed for classification as either Wilderness or Wild Forest through an amendment to the Master Plan as proposed herein..

**Description of lands acquired in the Big Indian acquisition:** The 1,200 acre Big Indian property encompasses a ridge on the eastern slopes of Belleayre Mountain. It lies completely within the City of New York's Ashokan watershed and includes a few segments of headwater streams to Birch and Esopus Creeks. Elevations range from 1,260 feet above sea level near the hamlet of Big Indian to 2,820 feet above sea level on the eastern ridge of Belleayre Mountain. It adjoins the inactive Ulster & Delaware Railroad bed on the north side, portions of Woodchuck Hollow Road on the west side, Lasher Road on the east side and portions of Lost Clove Road on the south side. The property was never developed, and past management included periodic timber harvesting as well as hunting by past owners and their guests. A network of wood roads and skid trails exist on some of the property, generally on the ridge itself, where slopes are modest.

The acquisition did not include a 31 acre property (now a private in holding) at the end of Woodchuck Hollow Road known as the Brisbane Estate. A conservation easement over the 31-acre Brisbane Estate was acquired by the State (in addition to the 1,200 acres acquired in fee) which limits further development of this property.

The property is dominated by northern hardwoods, including maple beech, birch and oak, with some significant stands of eastern hemlock present in some of the steeper ravines.

### **Proposed Land Classification:**

**Master Plan Amendment:** The Department proposes to classify the following property through an amendment to the Master Plan as follows:

**Belleayre Ridge Lands:** The bulk of the lands making up this new acquisition, approximately 630 acres on the eastern ridge of Belleayre Mountain, to include all lands acquired east of Giggie Hollow Brook and north of the Belleayre Ridge will be classified Wild Forest and added to the Shandaken Wild Forest. The southern boundary will be along a line 100 feet south of and parallel to an existing wood road along the crest of the ridge east of Belleayre Mountain. This road runs in a southeasterly direction the entire length of the ridge. Near the eastern end of the Ridge, the boundary will turn sharply to the west and begin a gradual descent of the ridge along a line 100 feet north of and parallel to an existing wood road. Not far below the ridge the wood road ends. However, the line will continue in the same westerly direction about 100 yards to a wood road that continues in the same westerly direction, descending the ridge gradually until it intersects with the Lost Clove Road at the existing Lost Clove Trailhead. This southeastern boundary is a change from the draft proposal, undertaken to provide a strip of wild forest land with several existing wood roads that could be developed in the future to allow for a moderate ascent/descent of the Belleayre Ridge by recreationalists.

This portion of the property will be classified wild forest because of its ability to accommodate a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities including hiking, cross-country skiing, mountain bicycling and hunting as well as its lack of wilderness character due to an existing wood road network and regular (including recent) timber harvesting. The current road and skid trail network will lend itself to improvements to facilitate these uses. In addition, these uses are compatible and will enhance similar recreational opportunities provided at the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center. The physical characteristics of this area are capable of withstanding higher levels of recreational use than what is allowed in Wilderness area, and the area conveys less of a sense of remoteness and provides fewer outstanding opportunities for the solitude of visitors than is found in Wilderness. Via this amendment, it is also proposed that unlike other Wild Forest lands, the Department will be allowed to develop *improved* cross-country ski trails (which, as defined in the Master Plan may be groomed with the use of motor vehicles). The Master Plan currently allows improved cross-country ski trails only in Intensive Use Areas. We propose this exception, specific to the Big Indian Ridge, due to its relationship with the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center Intensive Use Area. Furthermore, this exception from Wild Forest Guidelines would be limited to grooming with a snowmobile with or without a drag or track setter. Grooming would not be undertaken with large, dual track machines more commonly used to groom alpine ski trails.

Public access to this property can be gained from the current parking lot at the adjoining Pine Hill Lake Day Use Area, as well as from Winding Mountain Road, Lasher Road, and Lost Clove Road. Conversion of the Ulster & Delaware Rail Line to a pedestrian trail could improve access.

**Lost Clove Lands:** Approximately 300 acres in Lost Clove, inclusive of the Lost Clove Trail will be classified wilderness and added to the Big Indian Wilderness Area. When added to the Big Indian Wilderness Area it will expand the outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation that are present in the Big Indian Wilderness Area. The northern boundary will be along a line 100 feet south of and parallel to an existing wood road along the crest of the ridge east of Belleayre Mountain as describe above. Adding these lands to the wilderness area is in part proposed in anticipation of the State acquiring adjoining lands on the slopes and summit of Balsam Mountain from the Nature Conservancy. We anticipate that those lands, which directly adjoin the Big Indian Wilderness, would be acquired as an addition to the Big Indian Wilderness.

**Revision to the Belleayre Mountain Unit Management Plan (Ski Center UMP):** The Department is currently proposing the classification of 270+/- acres acquired as part of the Big Indian acquisition through a revision to the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center Unit Management Plan. The proposal includes the following information:

**Lands west of Giggle Hollow Brook / Pine Hill Lake Day Use Area:** This 270+/- acre property directly adjoins the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center intensive use area (Belleayre Mountain itself on the west side and the Pine Hill Lake Day Use Area on the east). The terrain and proximity to existing trails on Belleayre Mountain, as well as the Ulster & Delaware Rail line suggest this portion of the property could accommodate additional trail development that would complement the existing trail network. For example, the current parking lot and infrastructure at the adjoining Pine Hill Lake Day Use Area could provide parking for a trail system that could be expanded from the day use area to Belleayre Mountain. To allow for consideration of groomed cross-country ski trails, as well as a possible alpine (downhill) ski trail connection with the hamlet of Pine Hill, and because the terrain in the area can accommodate this additional trail development, this portion of the newly acquired property will be classified Intensive Use and added to the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center. Actual trail layout would be considered through an amendment to the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center Unit Management Plan.

**Belleayre Mountain Intensive Use Area Reclassification:** In addition to the classification of lands west of Giggle Hollow Brook through a revision to the Ski Center UMP as describe above, the Department also proposes to reclassify approximately 150+/- acres of the existing Belleayre Mountain Ski Center Intensive Use Area on the southern slopes of Belleayre Mountain which adjoin the Big Indian Wilderness to Wilderness, adding this area to the Big Indian Wilderness through the revision to the UMP. Bounded on the west and north by a line parallel to and 100 feet south of the Pine Hill – West Branch (also known as the Belleayre Mountain hiking trail, these lands encompasses steep, south and southeast facing slopes that have never been developed for and are not suitable for intensive recreation.

## **SUMMARY OF CLASSIFICATION PROPOSALS:**

**Summary of Classification** proposals for newly acquired Forest Preserve lands described herein:

<b>Management Unit</b>	<b>Current Size</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Proposed Size</b>
Belleayre Mtn Ski Center Intensive Use Area (See Section 2 of Draft Revision to UMP)	2,211 acres	+ 120 acres	2,331 acres
Shandaken Wild Forest: (See Draft Master Plan Amendment)	5,375 acres	+ 630 acres	6005 acres
Big Indian Wilderness: (See Draft Master Plan Amendment)	33,500 acres	+ 450 acres	33,950 acres

**Alternative Management:** The Department considered alternatives to the recommendations made above, including classifying the entire Big Indian acquisition as Wilderness, Wild Forest or Intensive Use. The Big Indian Plateau is typical of the Catskills, dominated by northern hardwood forest that has been managed for forest products. It includes an extensive wood road network, and lacks the primeval character associated with Wilderness. There are no records indicating the presence of threatened or endangered species or significant habitats on the property. There are no known significant wetlands or vernal pools. Portions of the property, particularly those in the Lost Clove area have steep slopes. Given the opportunities for developing some of the wood roads on the property for multiple use recreation, the Department concluded that from a resource standpoint, the only portion of the property appropriate for wilderness classification was the area encompassing the steep slopes that descend from the plateau into Lost Clove. Wild Forest and Intensive Use Area classifications were considered for the remainder on the property to provide the appropriate level of resource protection while allowing the property to be managed in a way that meets the recreational needs that have been expressed by a variety of stakeholders. Consistent with the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan, in developing this proposal, the Department considered the characteristics and capacity of the land to withstand recreational use.

### **State Environmental Quality Review:**

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, as lead agency of the Amendment of the Master Plan, has determined that the proposed actions, specifically i) the classification of 300 acres acquired as part of the Big Indian acquisition as Wilderness, and ii) the classification of 630 acres acquired as part of the Big Indian acquisition as Wild Forest, as described above, will not have a significant environmental impact and a draft environmental impact statement will not be prepared. Management actions proposed in individual unit management plans to be developed for this property by amendment or revision of existing plans will be reviewed for potential environmental impacts and a determination of significance will be made before any work is undertaken.

# Proposed State Land Classification

in the vicinity of the  
**Big Indian Parcel**

Town of Shandaken, Ulster County

## Areas Proposed for Classification / Reclassification

 Currently unclassified (Big Indian parcel)

 Currently classified as Intensive Use (Belleayre Ski Center)

### Proposed Land Classifications

 Wilderness  Intensive Use  
 Wild Forest

 Land owned by The Nature Conservancy

 Recreational trail  Public road

 Elevation contour  Old Road

 Parking area  Railroad



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