Area Overview

The Sundown Wild Forest (SWF) and Vernooy Kill State Forest (VKSF) offers an impressive mix of natural features such as waterfalls, mountains and valleys that make it an increasingly popular area for outdoor recreation. This Unit Management Plan (UMP) includes approximately 34,568 acres of land comprised of two different land classifications which include 30,882 acres of Sundown Wild Forest-Forest Preserve lands within the Catskill Park and 3,686 acres of Vernooy Kill State Forest-Reforestation lands that lie outside the Catskill Park blue line. Many recreational facilities are shared between the two land classifications.
The lands within this unit are in the towns of Denning, Olive, Rochester, and Wawarsing in Ulster County and the Town of Neversink in Sullivan County. The unit is comprised of a mixture of contiguous and non-contiguous parcels and is bordered to the north by the 47,442 acres Slide-Panther Mountain Wilderness, to the west by the 14,870 acre Willowemoc-Long Pond Wild Forest. The unit can be accessed by motor vehicle from New York State Route 28A, Route 28, State Route 209, County Route 42 and State Route 55. Local roads that provide access to SWF and VKSF include: Watson Hollow Road, Cherrytown Road, Red Hill Road, Dinch Road, Sundown Road, Peekamoose Road and Claryville Road.

History of Development of the Unit Management Plan

1990: The Peekamoose Valley Wild Forest UMP was adopted by the Commissioner.

1996: The first Sundown Wild Forest UMP was adopted by the Commissioner.

2000: NYS acquired nearly 5,000 acres of the former “Lundy Estate” adjoining the Sundown Wild Forest in the towns of Rochester and Wawarsing, Ulster County. Lands that were contiguous with Sundown Forest lands but outside of the blue line were acquired and designated as Vernooy Kill State Forest lands. Lands from that acquisition that were inside of the Blue Line were added to Sundown Wild Forest.

2003: DEC initiated development of a combined Sundown Wild Forest and Vernooy Kill State Forest UMP

2018: After years of discussion and planning, a draft UMP has been produced that is in conformance and with the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan (CPSLMP) and the Strategic Plan for State Forest Management. (SPSFM)

Issues and Challenges Associated with the UMP:

**Overuse of the Peekamoose Blue Hole:**

The Peekamoose Valley, an area encompassing approximately 2,200 acres of forest preserve land straddling the upper Rondout Creek along Peekamoose Road (Ulster County 42) in the Town of Denning, Ulster County, has been a very popular public destination since the state began acquiring land in the valley in the 1960’s. It is a remote area in the heart of the Catskill Park and New York City’s Catskill/Delaware watershed. By 1971 the area had been discovered by more distant visitors including those from urban areas to the south. Camping grew increasingly popular in this remote valley (several thousand people over the course of a typical summer), resulting in
garbage and other unacceptable impacts. To address this DEC instituted a camping permit system and limited camping to designate campsites in 1990. This proved effective, but in recent years' public use of the “Blue Hole,” a large, deep and very cold swimming hole in the Rondout Creek immediately upstream of the camping area increased exponentially over previous years, due to social media and several websites, including national magazines touting the Blue Hole as “one of the best swimming holes in the nation.” This dramatic increase resulted in rampant human waste, refuse, fires, broken glass and an overwhelming of the parking areas which spilled out all along Peekamoose Road. The Town of Denning was concerned with the road not being passable by emergency service vehicles due to blockage with illegally parked cars and the sheer number of visitors standing in the road and unwilling to yield to passing motorists.

In 2015, the Department implemented several strategies to address the problems associated with overuse, including:

- clearly defining parking lots and limiting parking to those lots, prohibiting parking along the road (as posted by the Town);
- performing weekly garbage pick-ups;
- assigning two seasonal back country stewards to work weekends in Peekamoose from June through Labor Day;
- updating our twitter and Facebook pages to notify the public of the issues one may encounter in the Peekamoose region which included limited parking and crowding and provided a map of the area showing the authorized parking areas;
- recommending alternative swimming/picnicking areas, including our campgrounds, more suitable and with appropriate facilities;
- notifying media outlets who had posts touting the area to see if they could modify their sites to inform the public of the parking and overuse issues;
- maintaining a daily presence of up to 3 Forest Rangers and ECOs working in conjunction with the Ulster County Sheriff’s office and NY State Police in a joint law enforcement effort to curb illegal use of the area.
- Parking restrictions limiting parking to those lots, prohibiting parking along the road (as posted by the Town);

In 2016, DEC adopted special regulations (6 NYCRR Part 190) for the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor to increase public safety and address overuse while still providing a quality outdoor recreational experience for users of the property. The regulations prohibit fires, glass containers, portable generators, audio devices, and the
use of the area from ½ hour after sunset to ½ hour before sunrise. However, visitor use and interest in the Blue Hole has continued to increase.

In 2018, the Special Regulations were modified to include a no-cost, day use permitting system that requires visitors to obtain a permit to access the Blue Hole to protect the Blue Hole area and reduce overuse issues. Permits are now required at the Blue Hole on weekends and holidays from May 15th through October 15th. Under this system, 40 permits are issued per day. Each permit allows entry for up to 6 individuals allowing for a maximum of 240 people.

The Department will evaluate and adjust permit numbers as necessary to ensure resource protection and user satisfaction. Permits are only available on-line through Reserve America at: https://newyorkstateparks.reserveamerica.com/

Parking and Pedestrian Use of County Route 42

In the past, the demand for parking along County Route 42 has exceeded the available parking, especially during the popular summer holiday weekends such as Memorial Day and Labor Day. Currently, the demand for parking far exceeds the available parking on weekends from mid-May through Labor Day weekend. The current parking demand is strictly for access to the Blue Hole. Recreationists wishing to utilize this popular swimming area are now utilizing any available space for parking, including areas more than a mile away from the Blue Hole. Once the parking lots servicing the area are full, visitors park anywhere they can along Ulster County Route 42 (Peekamoose Road).

While the Town and the Department have, both posted signs prohibiting such parking, the public continues to park in undesignated areas and utilizes County Route 42 to walk to the Blue Hole. This situation presents at least two problems. First, it undermines the intent of the parking areas which were sized to limit use of the area to an appropriate number of visitors. Secondly, it creates a public safety hazard as pedestrians use a section of County Route 42 that has limited visibility to access the Blue Hole because there is no designated trail from the remote parking areas to the swimming area.

The Department has considered several trail and parking proposals to provide a safer route for the public to travel to the popular swimming area. Four alternative management scenarios have been considered and presented in the draft plan and a preferred alternative has been identified.

The preferred alternative requires construction of a 30-40 car parking lot east of Bear Hole Brook and construction of a +/- 1,500-foot accessible trail to connect that parking area to the Blue Hole. This alternative will require that County Route 42 will be shifted north approximately 20 feet for approximately 200 feet in the area near the Blue Hole that precludes trail construction between the highway and Rondout Creek. Once the road is shifted north, the Department will use a portion of the footprint of the current
highway to establish the accessible trail to the Blue Hole. The alternative management scenarios are provided in detail in Appendix I. Alternative Analysis in the draft plan.

**New Acquisitions:**

The acquisition of nearly 5,000 acres of the former “Lundy Estate” in 2000, as well as the acquisition of the 231-acre former Camp Pine property in 2011 and the 136-acre Malloy property in 2015 have provided an opportunity for increased recreational opportunities in the unit. Public interest in developing expanded recreational facilities, including hiking and mountain biking trails is an issue addressed in this plan.

**The Following Significant Management Actions are Proposed:**

The SWF- VKSF UMP proposes to make changes to current recreational facilities in order to protect natural resources on Forest Preserve and State Forest lands, improve recreational experiences, comply with guidelines in the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan (CPSLMP) and the Strategic Plan for State Forest Management (SPSFM) and to improve the economy of the region. The following significant management proposals are included in the plan:

**General Access and Trail Improvements:**

- Sixteen new parking areas and approximately 30 miles of recreational trails including hiking, biking, and horse/snowmobile trails are proposed within the plan.

- A lean-to is proposed along the Ashokan High Point trail.

- A 30-40 car parking area with two accessible parking spaces is proposed to accommodate visitors to the Blue Hole on Peekamoose Rd, 1,500 feet west of the Blue Hole.

**New Foot Trails:**

- Blue Hole Access: a +/- 1,500-foot accessible trail is proposed from the parking areas on County Route 42 to the Blue Hole. This footpath will provide the recreating public with a safer alternative to pedestrian use of sections of Peekamoose Rd. that have limited visibility.

- Long Path: The UMP proposed construction of approximately 10 miles of new trail that will re-route a section of the Long Path. The proposed re-route will enhance the hikers experience by eliminating a 9.6 mile stretch of the Long Path
that runs along public highways. The re-routed Long Path will run adjacent to the proposed multi-use trail.

- Terwilliger Loop Trail: a 4-mile foot trail will be constructed from Terwilliger farm parking area to Pottermill in Vernooy Kill State Forest, returning to the Terwill

**Trail Re-Routes:**

- The Ashokan High Point loop trail is an example of a poorly constructed trail and as a result, it gets little use and has problems with erosion. The UMP includes two different re-route possibilities that will require approximately 2 to 2.5 miles of new trail construction. Both possibilities could be constructed without need for extensive cutting of trees in Sundown Wild Forest.

- This UMP proposes construction of 10.1 miles of new trail that will re-route a section of the Long Path. The proposed re-route will enhance the hikers experience by eliminating a 9.6 mile stretch of the Long Path that runs along public highways. The re-routed Long Path will run adjacent to the proposed multi-use trail (see description below).

**New Multi-Use Trail:**

- A multi-use snowmobile/ equestrian/ mountain bike trail is proposed from the Cutler Road parking area near the intersection of Cutler Road and Lundy Road. This proposed trail will enhance the existing Vernooy Kill Falls snowmobile trail and will provide a viable trail system of about 20 miles for all users of this trail. This trail will utilize portions of Sundown Wild Forest as well as Vernooy Kill State forest lands.

**Forest Management:**

- Sustainable forest management will be conducted within the Vernooy Kill State Forest in accordance with the Department’s dual Green Certification standards. Approximately 2,485 acres of the Vernooy Kill State Forest are targeted for treatment during the course of the next 10 years. Treatments will include both commercial and non-commercial timber sales as well as periodic timber stand improvement activities.
Vista Maintenance:

- The UMP proposes that vistas along the Ashokan High Point trail will be maintained.

Accessible Projects:

- A proposal to convert an existing primitive tent site in the trailer field in the Peekamoose Valley into an accessible tent site is contained in this plan.
- A proposal for the construction and installation of an accessible mounting platform for equestrian use for persons with disabilities in Vernooy Kill State Forest is included in this plan. This platform will utilize the gravel pit and parking areas off of Cutler Road.

Trail-less areas:

- The UMP includes provisions for several areas to be managed as trail-less areas. These areas are intended to provide the public with undeveloped recreational opportunities. Historically these areas have been heavily used during deer hunting season and the trail-less proposal will help to limit conflicts between various user groups. The herd paths in these areas may remain, but formal trails will not be built or maintained.

Access to Public Lands:

- There are 22 known access locations with unresolved access and right of way issues associated with this unit. Public and administrative access to State lands is blocked by private landowners in several locations creating conflicts between users and adjacent landowners. The UMP proposes to research and document the contested access areas and rights of ways. Where they clearly exist and are needed, public access to State lands will be resolved.

Additional Information:

Maps are provided on the following pages that illustrate the proposed management actions included in the draft plan.

State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA)
For the Forest Preserve portion of the plan, SEQRA review has been initiated with the preparation of a Long Environmental Assessment Form (LEAF). Upon review of the information contained in the LEAF, it was determined that there will not be any large or important impacts
associated with any of the proposed management actions and therefore, there will not be a significant impact on the environment. Based on the scope of the current management proposals, the Department has made a tentative determination that a Negative Declaration for the proposed management actions on Sundown Wild forest will be issued upon completion and adoption of this plan.

The Strategic Plan for State Forest Management (SPSFM) serves as the Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS), regarding management activity on Vernooy Kill State Forest. The SPSFM establishes the environmental impact thresholds that would trigger future SEQRA reviews of proposed management activities requiring a more detailed or site specific assessment of potential impacts. None of the management activities proposed in this plan for Vernooy Kill State Forest exceed specific thresholds established in the SPSFM, and therefore, additional SEQRA review is not required for the Vernooy Kill State Forest portion of the plan.
Alternatives Analysis for Blue Hole Access

Background

Increased visitation to the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor and the lack of a designated trail from a parking area to the Blue Hole has resulted in people walking along County Route 42 to access the Blue Hole. The Department has considered several trail and parking proposals to provide a safer route for the public to travel to the popular swimming area. To address the public safety hazard the following management alternatives have been considered:

Alternatives

Alternative 1 (preferred alternative)

Construct a new parking lot south of County Route 42 and east of Bear Hole Brook large enough for 30-40 cars to accommodate most Blue Hole users on an average day. Connect the parking area to the Blue Hole through construction of a 1,500-foot accessible trail. The established lot will include two parking spaces that meet accessibility standards.

Construction of a new parking area in this location will eliminate the need to construct and maintain bridges that would be required if alternative 2 or alternative 3 was selected. Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 would require bridge construction over Bear Hole Brook. Alternative 2 also would require construction of a second bridge 200-feet in length on a very steep and unstable slope on a narrow strip of land between the highway and Rondout Creek.

Alternative 1 will require County Route 42 to be shifted north approximately 20 feet for approximately 200 feet in the area closer to the Blue Hole that precludes trail construction between the highway and Rondout Creek. Once the road is shifted north, the Department will use a portion of the footprint of the current highway to establish the accessible trail to the Blue Hole.

Alternative 1 Eliminates the need to construct and maintain two bridges and minimizes future maintenance costs while providing safer access to the Blue Hole.
Estimated cost of Alternative 1: $400,000

Alternative 2
A 2,700-foot accessible-trail would be constructed from the 12-car existing parking area south of County Route 42 and to the Blue Hole. This accessible trail would require construction of several foot bridges and boardwalks for a total of 400 feet of bridging. One foot bridge would span Bear Hole Brook. The location of the other bridge is in a 200-foot section where the terrain involves traversing a very steep unstable slope on a narrow strip of land between the highway and Rondout Creek. Alternative 2 is the least cost effective option. Installation of the footings for these bridges will require significant drilling in the bedrock of the Rondout Creek and will cost approximately $500,000. The Department will also have to allocate funds to maintain these bridges over the course of the future to ensure that they meet safety standards. Alternative 2 will require significantly more Department resources than Alternative 1. The cost of bridge construction and allocation of money for future bridge maintenance makes Alternative 2 less cost effective than Alternative 1.

Estimated cost of Alternative 2: $1,000,000

Alternative 3
Construct a 2,750-foot trail on the north side of County Route 42. from the 12-car parking area on the North side of County Route 42 to the Blue Hole. This potential foot trail route has been assessed for accessibility and it has been determined that it would be cost prohibitive for the Department to make a trail on the North side of the road accessible. Alternative 3 would require two road crossings and construction of one 50-foot bridge over Bear Hole brook that would use the existing abutments on the north side of the road bridge. The existing abutments on the bridge would be utilized to facilitate construction and installation of the bridge. Visitors using the trail will need to cross the road at a blind turn to access the Blue Hole. Alternative 3 requires construction of one bridge so it is more cost effective than Alternative 2 but it requires that visitors cross County Route 42 twice to access the Blue Hole so it does not adequately address the current public safety concerns. Alternative 3 is also not the preferred alternative because the proposed trail would not meet accessibility standards.

Estimated cost of Alternative 3: $250,000

Alternative 4 Maintain Status Quo/ No Action
The historical use of the area will remain unchanged and visitors will continue to walk along the road to access the Blue Hole. This option poses many public safety concerns. The No Action Alternative is not the preferred alternative because the threat to public
safety will persist if people continue to walk on County Route 42 to access the Blue Hole.

Estimated Cost of Alternative 4: $0