



Catskill “Formerly Trailless” Peaks

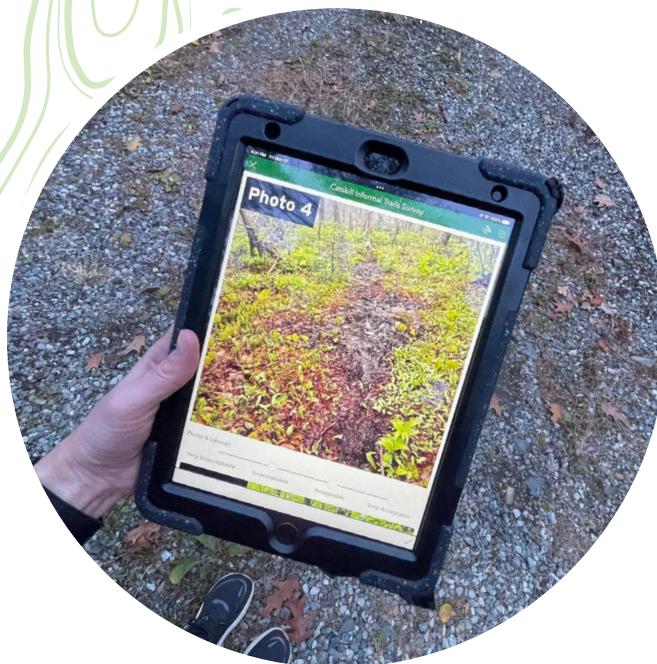
SURVEY REPORT **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

SURVEY CONDUCTED OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2023

SUBMITTED MARCH 2024 BY THE
New York-New Jersey Trail Conference



Department of
Environmental
Conservation



Executive Summary

The New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, in collaboration with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), conducted a visitor perception survey focused on 17 formerly trailless peaks in the Catskill Mountains and impacts to the sensitive habitats on these peaks. 802 participants submitted surveys over a 39-day period during the autumn season of 2023, providing a statistically significant representative sample of people visiting the focus area.

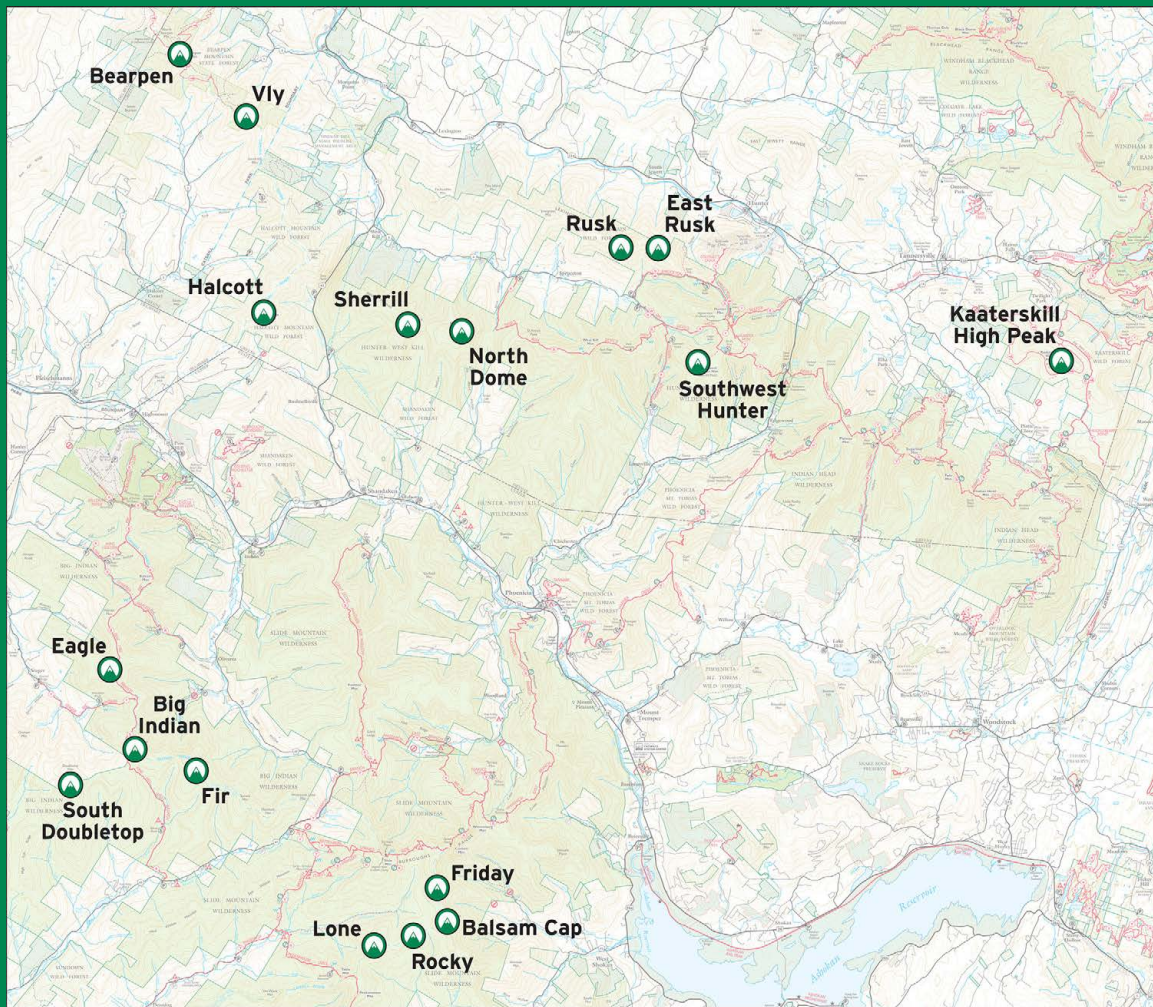
The survey results suggest:

- **Support for educational signage and a need for education on this topic.**
- **Support for the designation of formal trails to summit peaks, as a case-by-case management option.**
- **Opposition to establishing a seasonal and/or annual permitting system to limit access to these peaks.**

The high number of responses, high completion rate, and extensive positive feedback illustrate the importance of public participation in this process. This is a topic that many feel passionate about. Results from this survey should be considered in recommendations related to management, messaging, and volunteer or ambassador programs that address these impacts on the formerly trailless high peaks in the Catskill Mountains.

MAP OF 17 HIGH PEAKS WITH INFORMAL TRAILS

This map, showing the 17 high peaks with informal trails, was provided to survey participants as a reference for the survey questions.



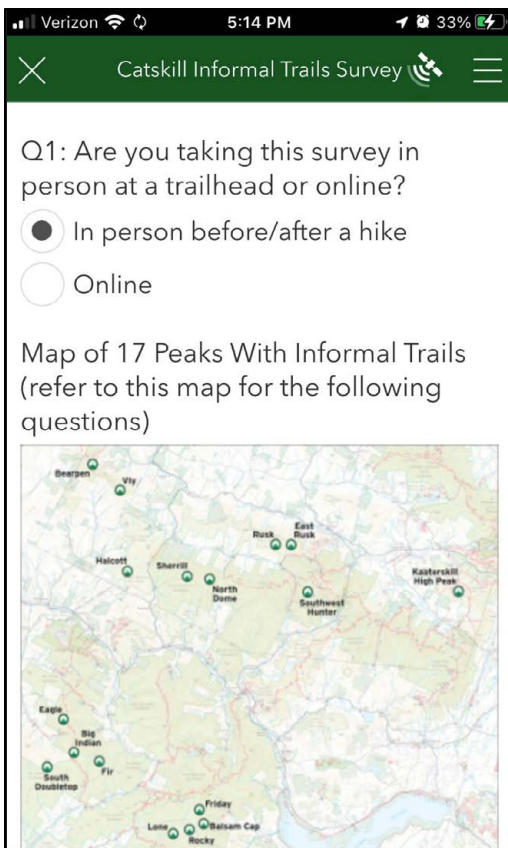
Survey Creation and Distribution



The visitor survey was developed by the Trail Conference in collaboration with New York State DEC staff through an iterative review process. A New York State DEC-prepared survey, which was made available for public participation for a month in the fall of 2022, served as a starting point for creation of the survey. Once the survey content was finalized into a series of 21 questions, it was formatted into a web- and app-based survey through ArcGIS Survey123. Use of this platform allowed for the collection of surveys at trailheads with little or no internet connectivity, among other benefits.

The survey was published on October 4, 2023 and remained open for 39 days through November 11, 2023. This time period coincides with the most popular time of year for hiking in the Catskills. To help ensure a significant number of responses and also obtain a variety of perspectives, a two-pronged approach was pursued in terms of distributing the survey.

First, the survey was shared as an online survey through a variety of resources, including Trail Conference social media and communications, New York State DEC communications, and social media of several partners in the Catskills. Second, in-person surveying was conducted at 10 different trailheads over a 3-day holiday weekend. The in-person surveys on October 7, October 8, and October 9 were conducted between 8:00am and 2:00pm by a total of 8 Trail Conference staff, 2 Trail Conference Conservation Corps members, and 7 volunteer surveyors. The 10 trailhead locations were chosen, in consultation with New York State DEC staff, to be locations where many potential visitors of the 17 peaks would be starting/ending their hikes. In-person surveying was done using tablets and the Survey123 app, and surveyors also made available QR-code based handouts for participants who wished to complete the survey later.



Overall Survey Results



STATISTICS

TOTAL SUBMISSIONS
802

MARGIN OF ERROR
+/- 3.5%

COMPLETION RATE
98%

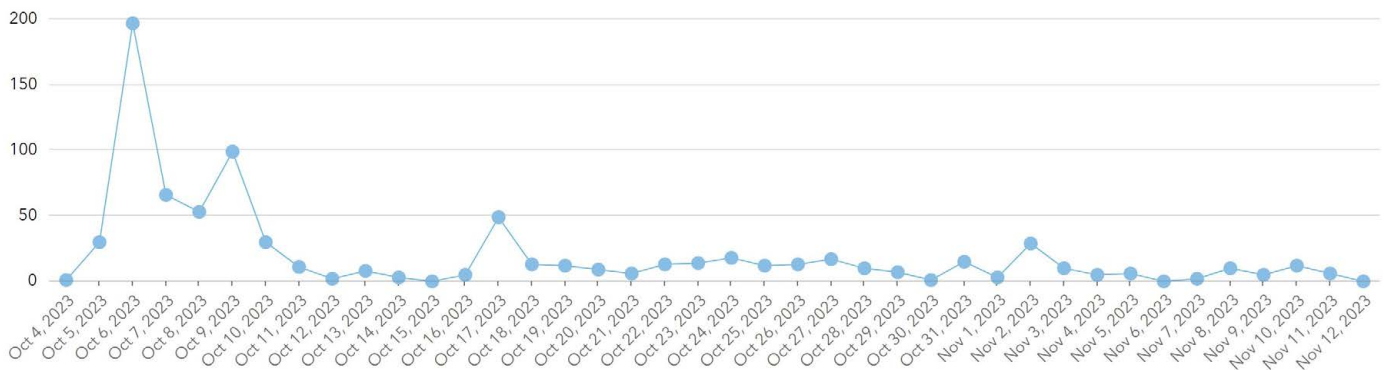
SURVEY OPEN PERIOD
**October 4, 2023 -
November 11, 2023**

A total of 802 submissions were recorded over the 39-day period that the survey was open, including 106 submissions obtained through the in-person surveying conducted at 10 different trailheads. Based on this sample size, results of this survey have a +/- 3.5% margin of error at the 95% confidence level. As one point of comparison, the 2022 survey produced by New York State DEC received 168 submissions, which corresponded with a +/- 7.6% margin of error at the 95% confidence level.

The overall completion rate of the survey was exceptionally high at 98%. In addition, the individual question completion rates ranged from 90-100%, with the exception of two open-ended feedback questions. Since none of the questions required answers, this range of individual question completion rates is significant in indicating that 90%+ of survey takers did not skip questions. The two open-ended feedback questions had a 27% completion rate, which resulted in approximately 32 pages of single-spaced text feedback as many felt the desire to elaborate on this topic or highlight their opinions.

Surveys count: 802 (total: 802)

10/4/23 - 11/12/23

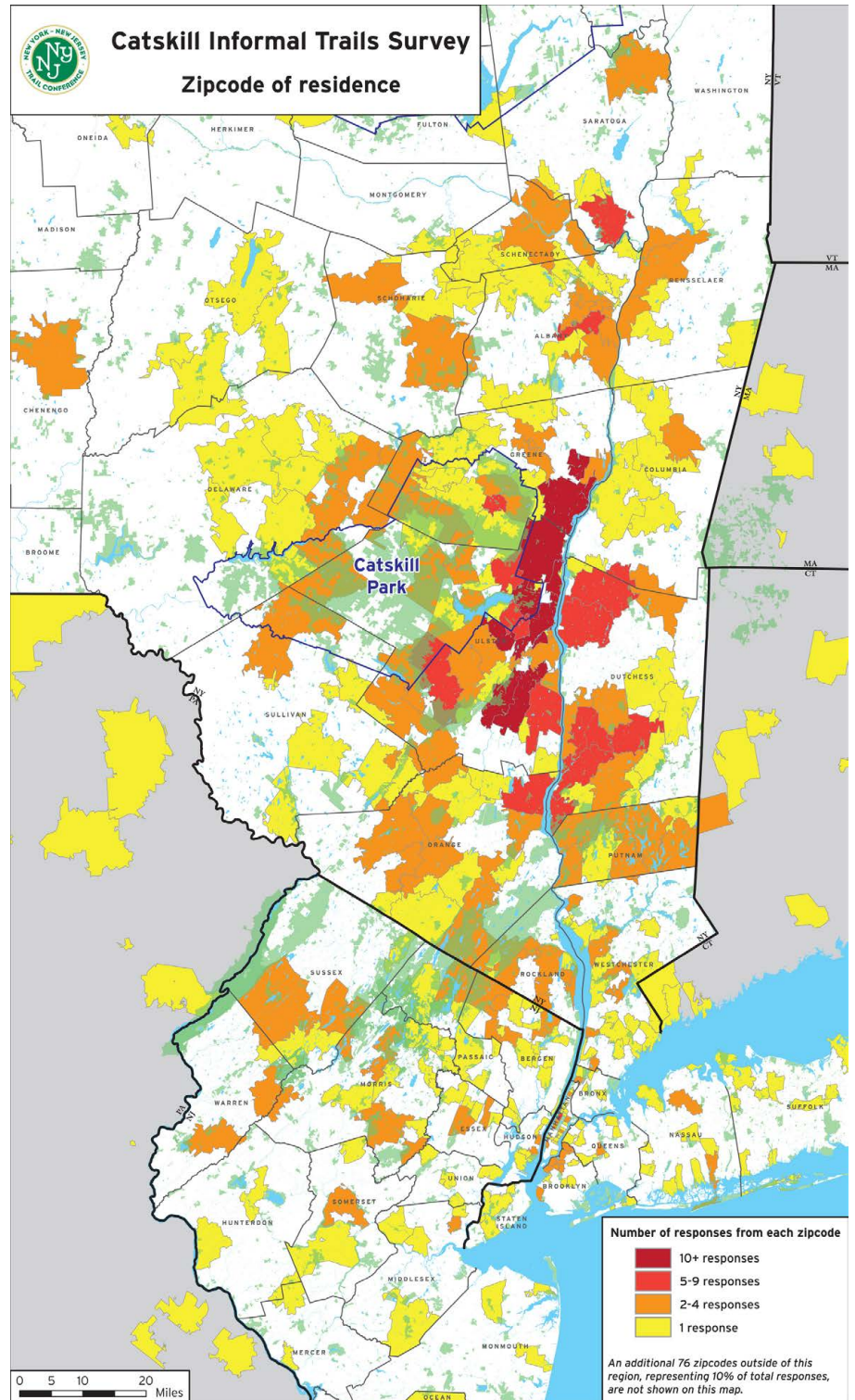


Participant Demographics



The survey asked participants a series of demographic questions to capture their zip code/place of residence, age, race/ethnicity, and gender identity. None of these questions required answers, and completion rates for these questions ranged from 96% to 99%.

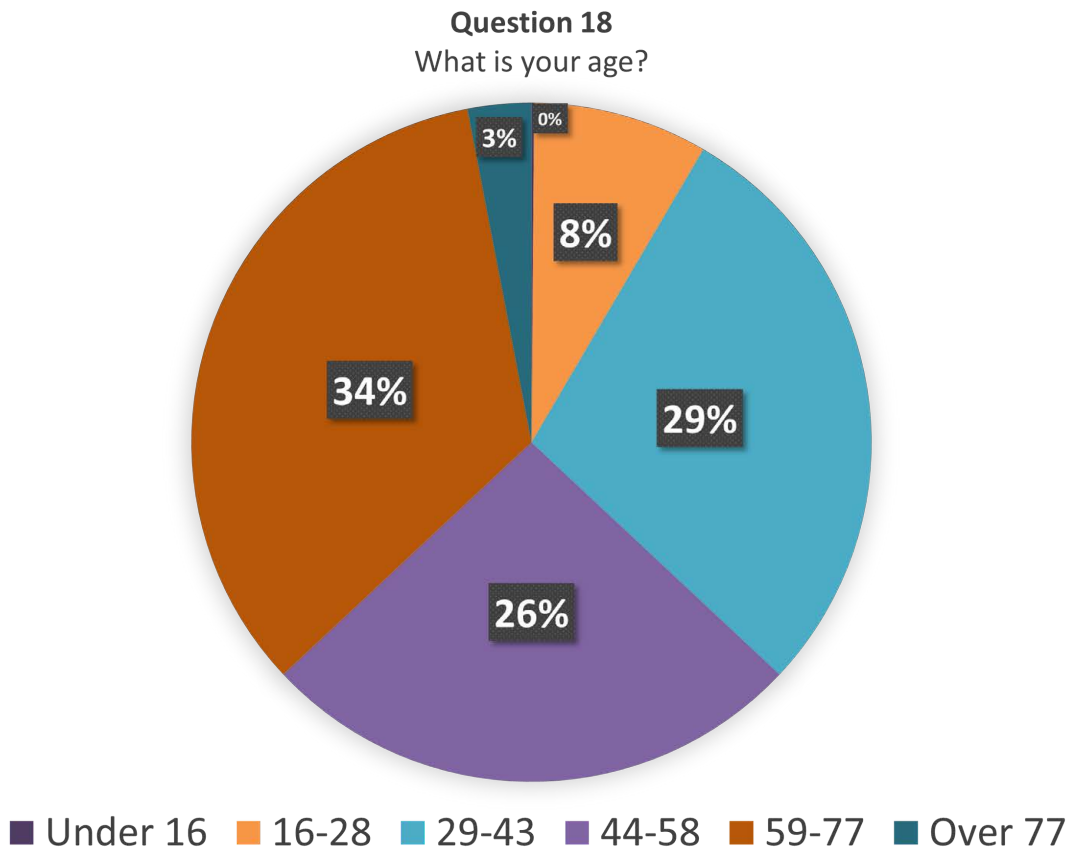
Participants were asked to provide their zip code (Question 17). A total of 450 different zip codes were recorded, and 76% of participants reside in New York. 27% of participants recorded that they reside within the 4 counties of the Catskills (Delaware, Greene, Sullivan, Ulster), while 49% reside in New York but outside those 4 counties. The remaining 24% reside outside of New York, including 14% that reside in New Jersey.



Participant Demographics



Participant ages ranged from under 16 to over 77 (Question 18). 37% were under the age of 44, 37% were over the age of 59, and the remaining 26% were between 44 and 58 years old. The in-person surveying approach did produce an age distribution that skewed younger, and this approach captured a significant portion of the 8% of participants under the age of 29. The age distribution of this 2023 survey skewed lower, as the 2022 survey had little representation (16%, or 26 participants) of visitors under the age of 40.

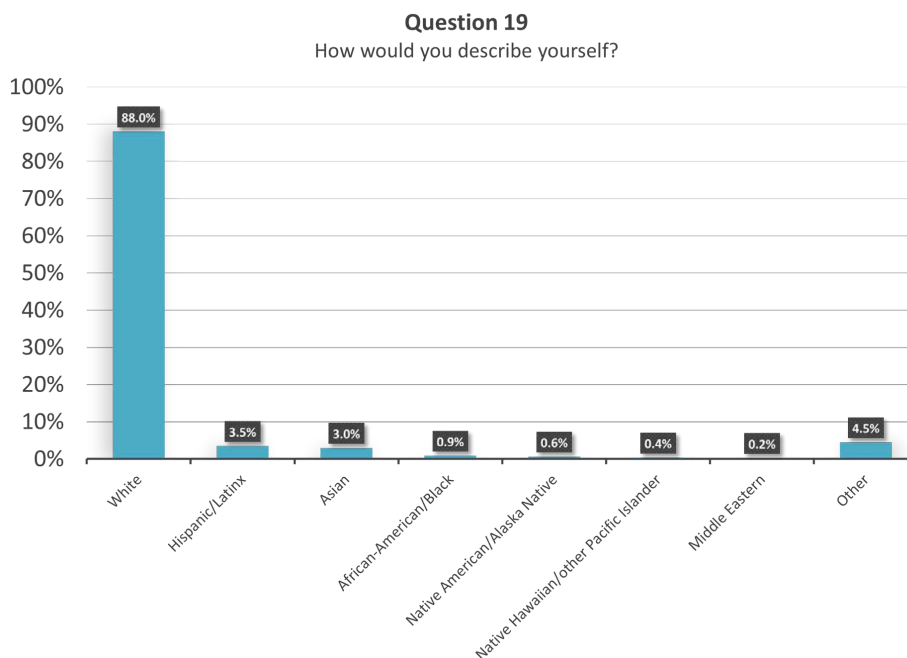


Participant Demographics



Participants were asked to describe themselves using race and ethnicity categories, either individually or combined (Question 19). The majority of participants self-identified as White (88%), with Hispanic/Latinx and Asian each accounting for 3% and other categories accounting for less than 1%. Within the 4 counties of the Catskills, the 2020 Census-derived percentages are 87% White, 12% Hispanic, 7% Black, 2% Asian, and other categories less than 1%. Recent reports from the Outdoor Foundation found that approximately 72% of those who recreate outdoors are White, 11% are Hispanic, 9% are Black, 6% are Asian, and 2% other categories, although these figures include a variety of different outdoor activities and should not be used as a direct comparison for visitors to the Catskills.

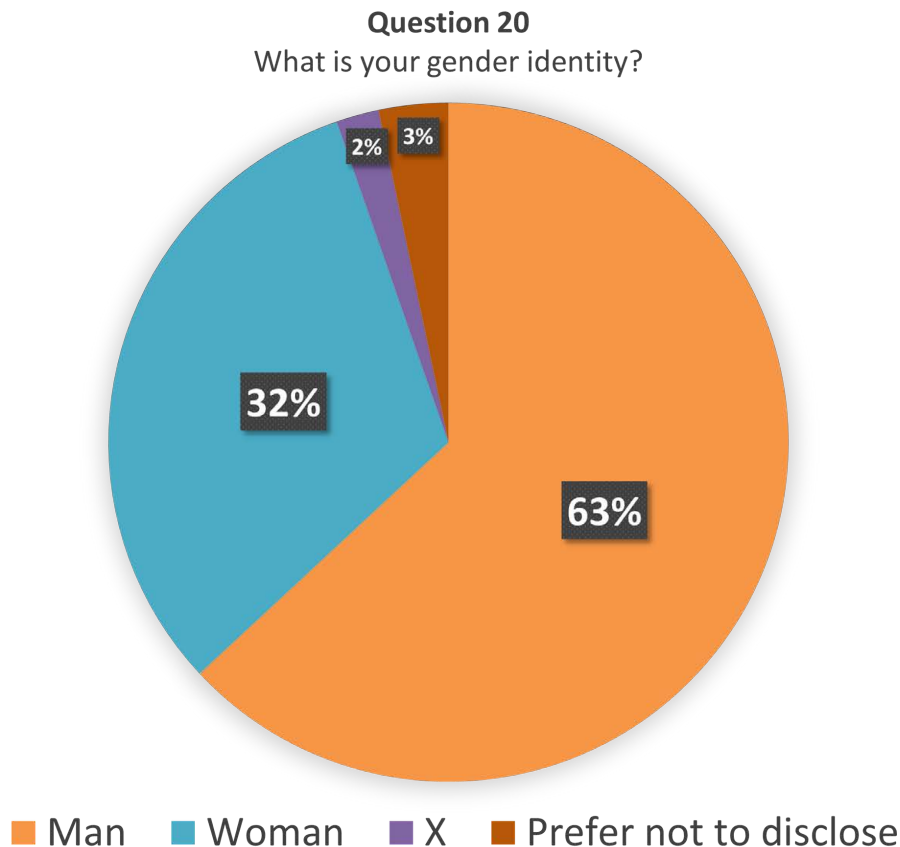
In the absence of additional target population demographic information, it is difficult to infer whether non-White visitors were underrepresented in these survey results, whether the results suggest that non-White visitors make up a smaller proportion of visitors as compared to average trends in the United States, or some combination of these two scenarios. The "Open Spaces for All: A Vision for an Inclusive, Accessible, and Equitable Open Space System in New York State" report provides a comprehensive examination of this topic with recommendations for how to make open spaces in New York, including the Catskills, more accessible to an increasingly diverse population, and management and messaging recommendations for these formerly trailless peaks should consider this report's findings. The race/ethnicity distribution of this 2023 survey was slightly more diverse than the 2022 survey, with a lower percentage of White (88%, compared to 93%) and higher percentages of all other race/ethnicity categories.



Participant Demographics



When asked their gender identity (Question 20), 63% of participants identified as a Man and 31% identified as a Woman, with 2% identifying as X (inclusive of, but not limited to gender categories such as Non-Binary, Intersex, Genderfluid and Genderqueer). Within the 4 counties of the Catskills, the 2020 Census-derived percentages are 51% men and 49% women. Recent reports from the Outdoor Foundation found that approximately 46% of those who recreate outdoors are women, although that includes a variety of different outdoor activities and should not be used as a direct comparison for visitors to the Catskills. Additional demographic information is needed to further deduce whether women were underrepresented in these survey results, whether the results suggest that women make up a smaller proportion of visitors to the Catskills in general, or some combination of these two scenarios.



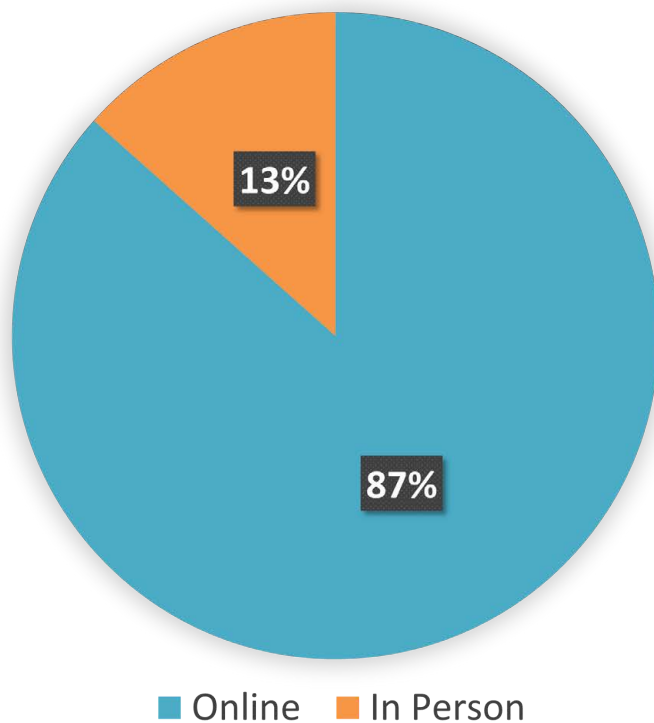
Individual Question Results



Participants were asked to indicate how they were taking the survey (Question 1). 87% took the survey online through the web-based Survey123 website, and 13% completed the survey in-person at trailheads through the Survey123 app.

Question 1

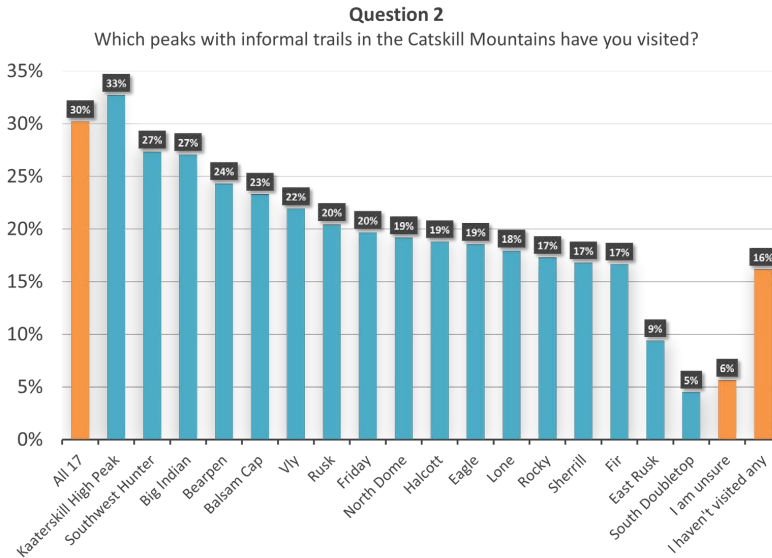
Are you taking this survey in person at a trailhead or online?



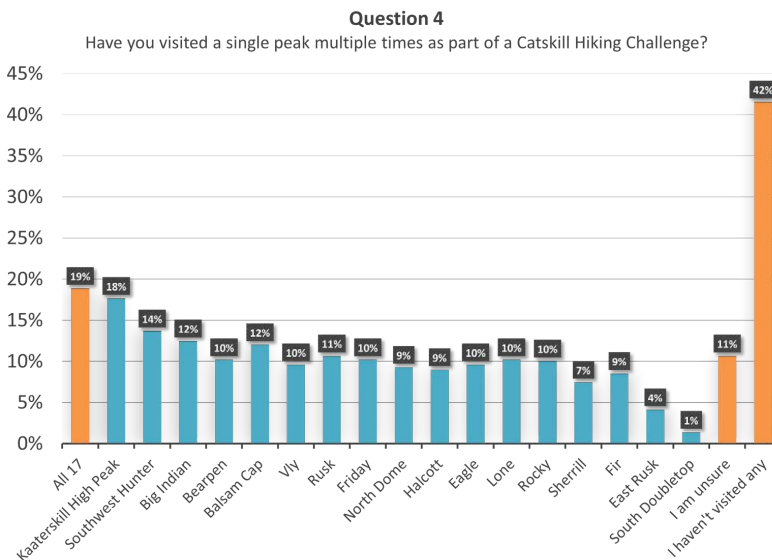
Individual Question Results



Participants were asked to identify which peaks with informal trails, if any, they had visited (Question 2). 30% indicated they had visited all 17 peaks, and 16% indicated they had not visited any of the 17 peaks. The chart below shows the relative popularity of the 17 peaks covered by this survey.



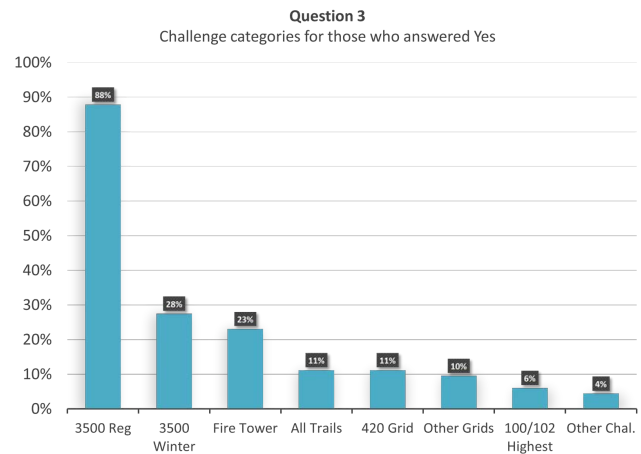
As a follow-up, participants were also asked to indicate whether they had visited any peaks multiple times as part of a challenge (Question 4). 42% indicated they had not visited any peaks multiple times, and 19% indicated they had visited all 17 peaks multiple times.



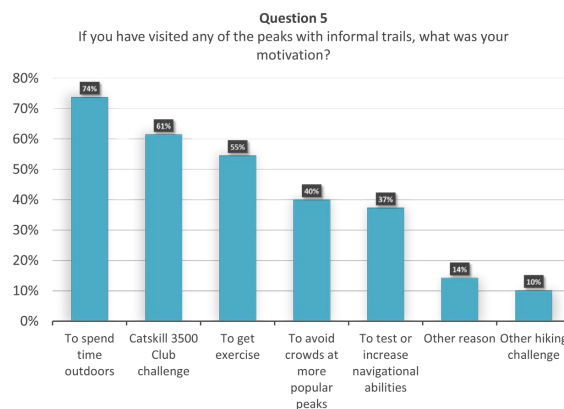
Individual Question Results



Participants were asked about their participation in Catskill hiking challenges (Question 3). 54% of participants indicated they currently participate in, or have previously participated in, a Catskill hiking challenge. Of those 54%, 88% specified regular 3500 Club participation and 28% specified winter 3500 Club participation, 11% specified the 420 Grid, and 10% noted other grid/season challenges. Of the 54%, 23% specified the Fire Tower challenge and 11% noted the All Trails challenge, which are two challenges that don't include the 17 peaks with informal trails. Lastly, 6% of the participants who participate in challenges specified pursuing the 100/102 highest peaks.



In addition, participants who had visited any peaks with informal trails were asked their motivations for visiting (Question 5). Of those who answered (85% of the total, which excludes participants who skipped the question since they hadn't visited any of the peaks), 61% specified 3500 Club participation and 10% specified participation in another challenge. Among the other reasons provided, several participants specified their use of the peaks for hunting purposes or other uses.



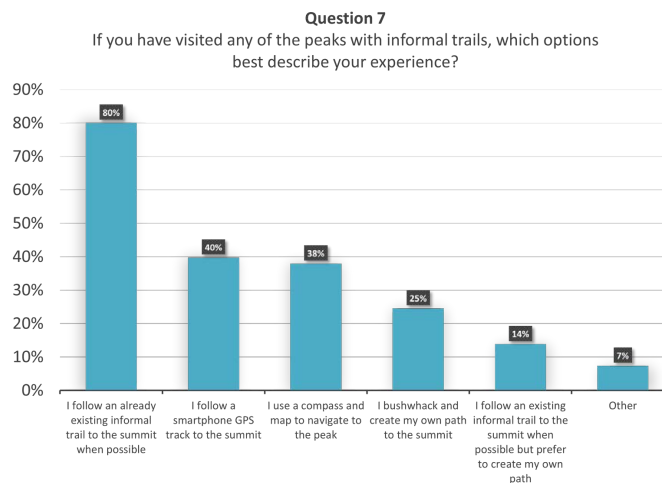
Individual Question Results



Participants who had visited any of the 17 peaks were asked to specify during which months they had visited them (Question 6). Of those who answered (82% of the total, which excludes participants who skipped the question since they hadn't visited any of the peaks), the monthly visitation ranged from 67% for October to 43% for December.



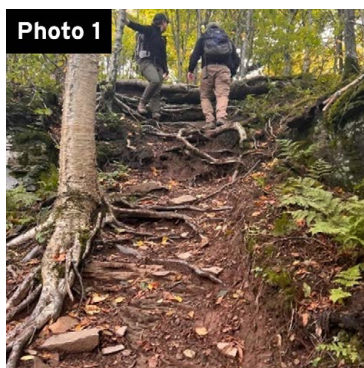
For participants who had visited any of the peaks, they were asked to describe their navigational experience with either a single option or multiple options (Question 7). Of those who answered (83% of the total, which excludes participants who skipped the question since they hadn't visited any of the peaks), 80% indicated they follow an existing informal trail when possible. 40% of those who answered indicated they follow a smartphone GPS track, 38% indicated they use a compass and map, 25% described bushwhacking their own path, and 14% described preferring to create their own path but following existing informal trails when possible.



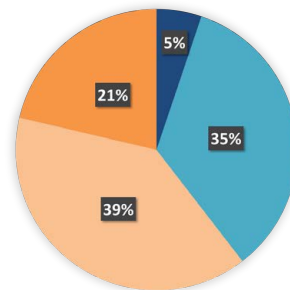
Individual Question Results



Participants were asked to provide their opinion about acceptable impacts on informal trails in the Catskill Mountains, using a series of 8 photos that showed different levels of impact on the surrounding lands (Question 8). Photos 2, 3, and 5 generally showed lesser impacts, while photos 1, 4, 6, 7, and 8 showed higher impacts. Photo 2, with the least impact, was rated as Acceptable or Very Acceptable by 84% of participants who answered. Conversely, Photo 7, with perhaps the highest impact, was rated as Unacceptable or Very Unacceptable by 79% of participants.



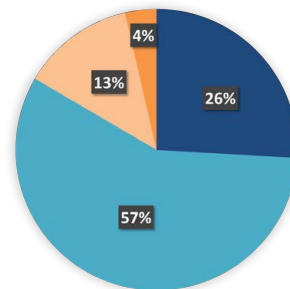
Question 8
Photo 1 - Visible impact you think is acceptable on informal trails



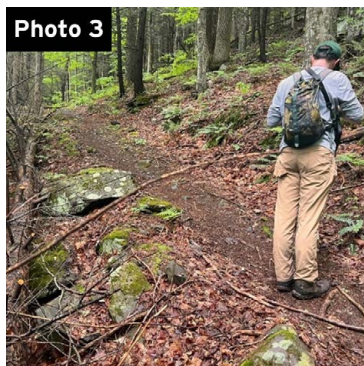
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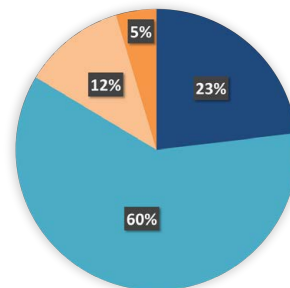
Question 8
Photo 2 - Visible impact you think is acceptable on informal trails



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Question 8
Photo 3 - Visible impact you think is acceptable on informal trails



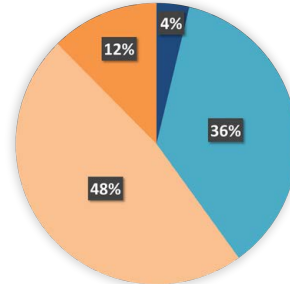
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Individual Question Results



Photo 4

Question 8
Photo 4 - Visible impact you think is acceptable on informal trails

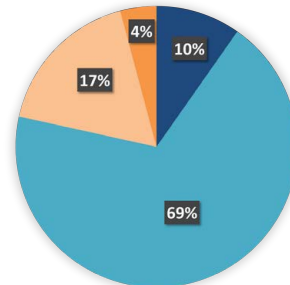


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Photo 5

Question 8
Photo 5 - Visible impact you think is acceptable on informal trails

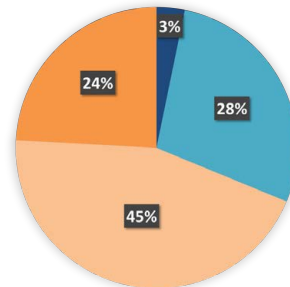


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Photo 6

Question 8
Photo 6 - Visible impact you think is acceptable on informal trails

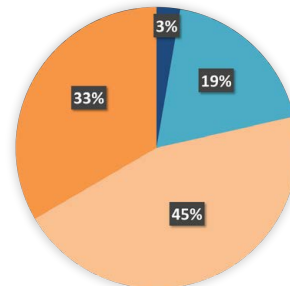


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Photo 7

Question 8
Photo 7 - Visible impact you think is acceptable on informal trails

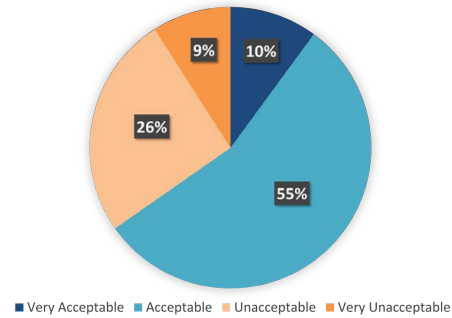


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Individual Question Results



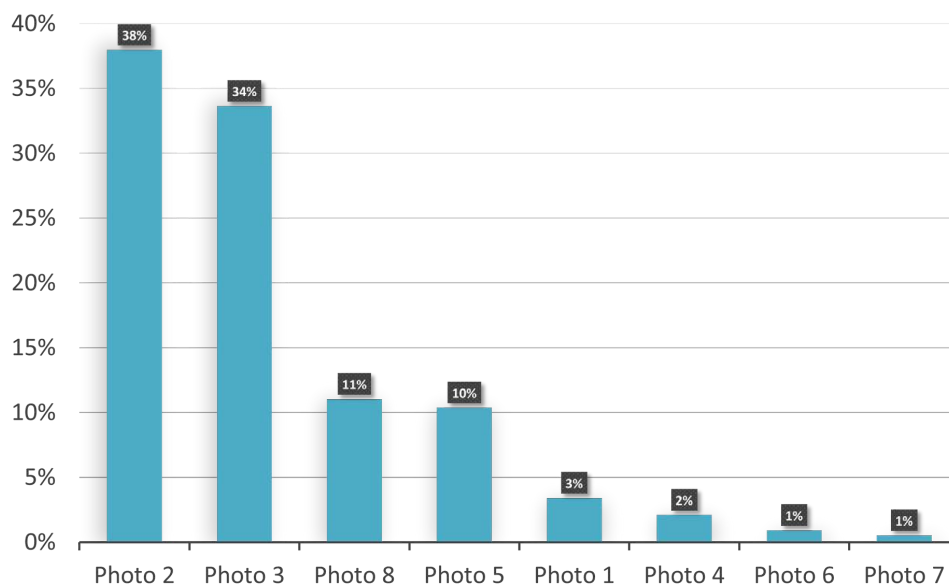
Question 8
Photo 8 - Visible impact you think is acceptable on informal trails



As a follow-up, participants were asked to single out which of the 8 photos showed the amount of impact they would prefer to see on informal trails (Question 9). 82% of those who answered indicated they preferred either photo 2, photo 3, or photo 5, which represent lesser impacts. 18% indicated they preferred either photo 8, photo 1, photo 4, photo 6, or photo 7, which represent higher impacts.

Question 9

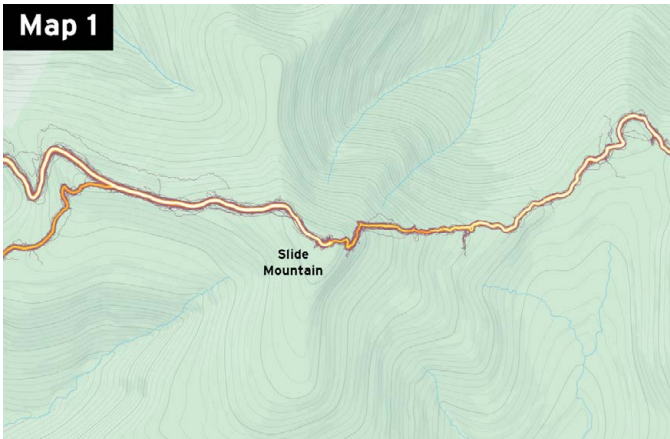
Which photo shows the amount of impact you would prefer to see on a peak with informal trails?



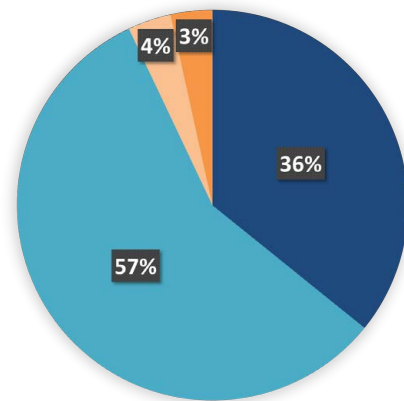
Individual Question Results



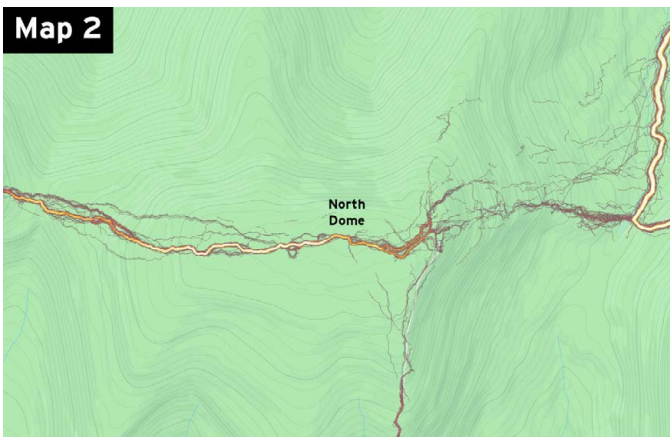
Participants were asked to provide their opinion about acceptable trail networks on summits over 3,500' in the Catskill Mountains, using a series of 4 maps showing crowdsourced GPS routes as a reflection of inferred trail networks (Question 10). Maps 1 (Slide Mountain) and 4 (Sugarloaf Mountain) showed formal trail networks, while maps 2 (North Dome) and 3 (Rocky Mountain) showed informal trail networks. Maps 1 and 4 were similarly rated by participants, with 93% of participants who answered rating these trail networks as Acceptable or Very Acceptable. Map 2 had a more split rating, with 55% of participants rating the network as Acceptable or Very Acceptable and 45% rating it as Unacceptable or Very Unacceptable. Finally, Map 3 was rated by 78% of participants as Unacceptable or Very Unacceptable.



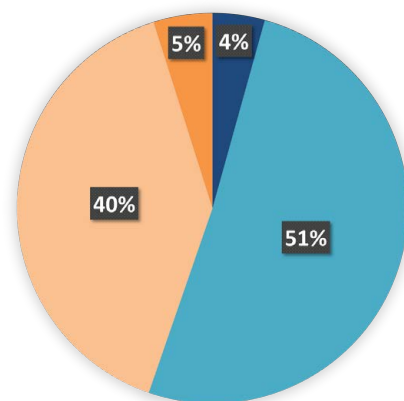
Question 10
Map 1 - What type of trail networks do you find acceptable on summits over 3,500'?



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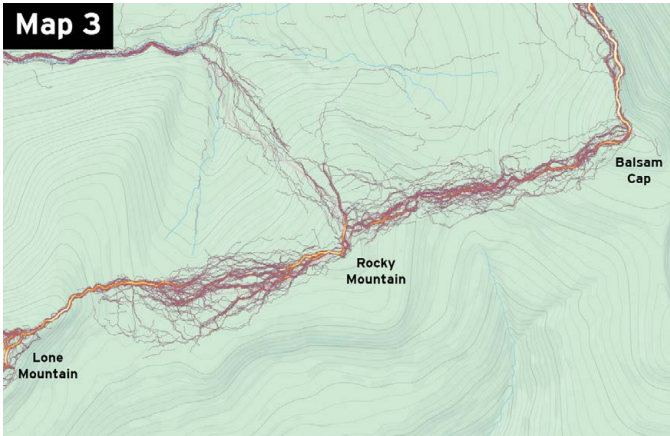


Question 10
Map 2 - What type of trail networks do you find acceptable on summits over 3,500'?

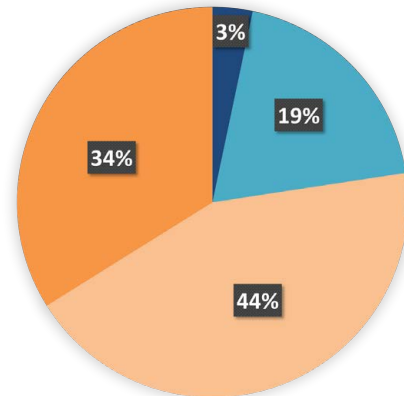


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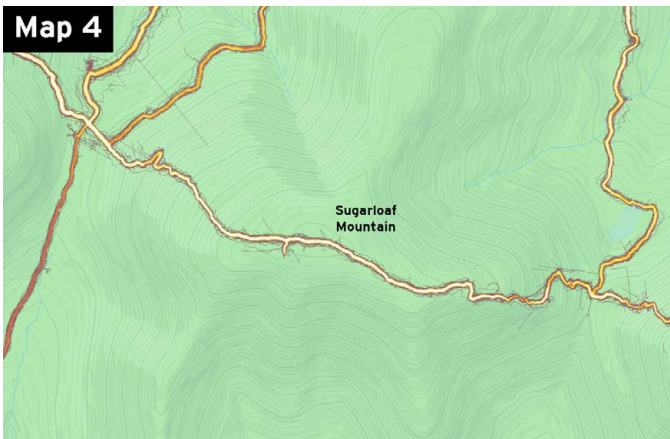
Individual Question Results



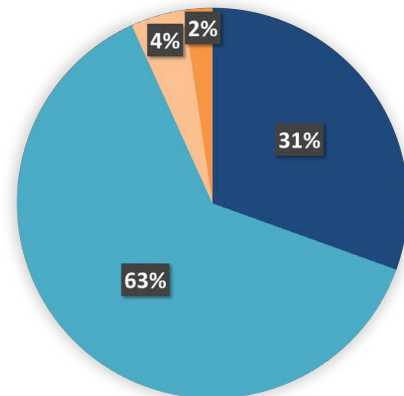
Question 10
Map 3 - What type of trail networks do you find acceptable on summits over 3,500'?



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Question 10
Map 4 - What type of trail networks do you find acceptable on summits over 3,500'?



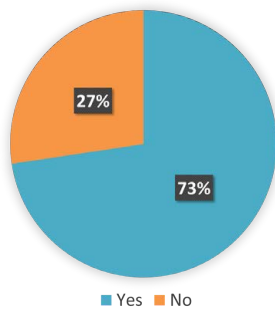
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Individual Question Results

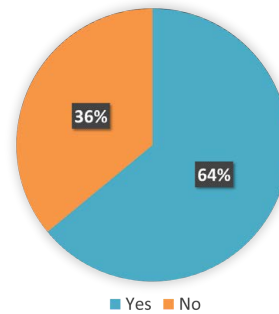


Participants were asked about their awareness of two issues related to the peaks with informal trails, one question about vulnerable plant communities (Question 11) and one question about critical nesting habitat for ground nesting birds (Question 12). 73% of participants who answered indicated they were aware of negative impacts to vulnerable plant communities, and 64% of participants indicated they were aware of negative impacts to critical nesting habitat for ground nesting birds.

Question 11
Were you aware that the peaks with informal trails are home to vulnerable plant communities that are being negatively impacted by recreational use on these peaks?

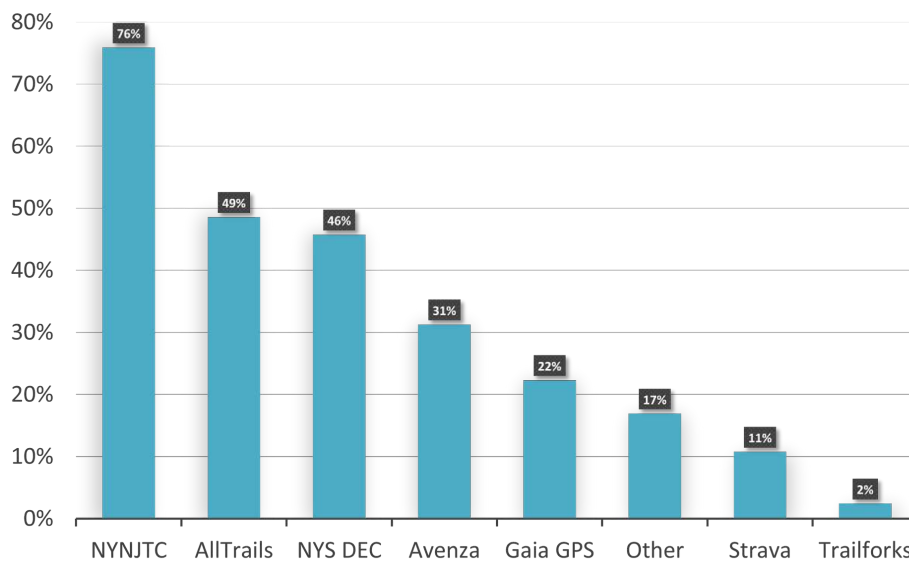


Question 12
Were you aware that the peaks with informal trails provide critical nesting habitat for several species of ground nesting threatened and/or vulnerable bird species that are being negatively impacted by recreational use on these peaks?



Participants were asked to indicate the types of resources they use while hiking or preparing to hike in the Catskill Mountains (Question 15). The most popular resource was Trail Conference maps and/or website (76%), followed by AllTrails (49%), the NYS DEC website (46%), and the Avenza Maps app (31%).

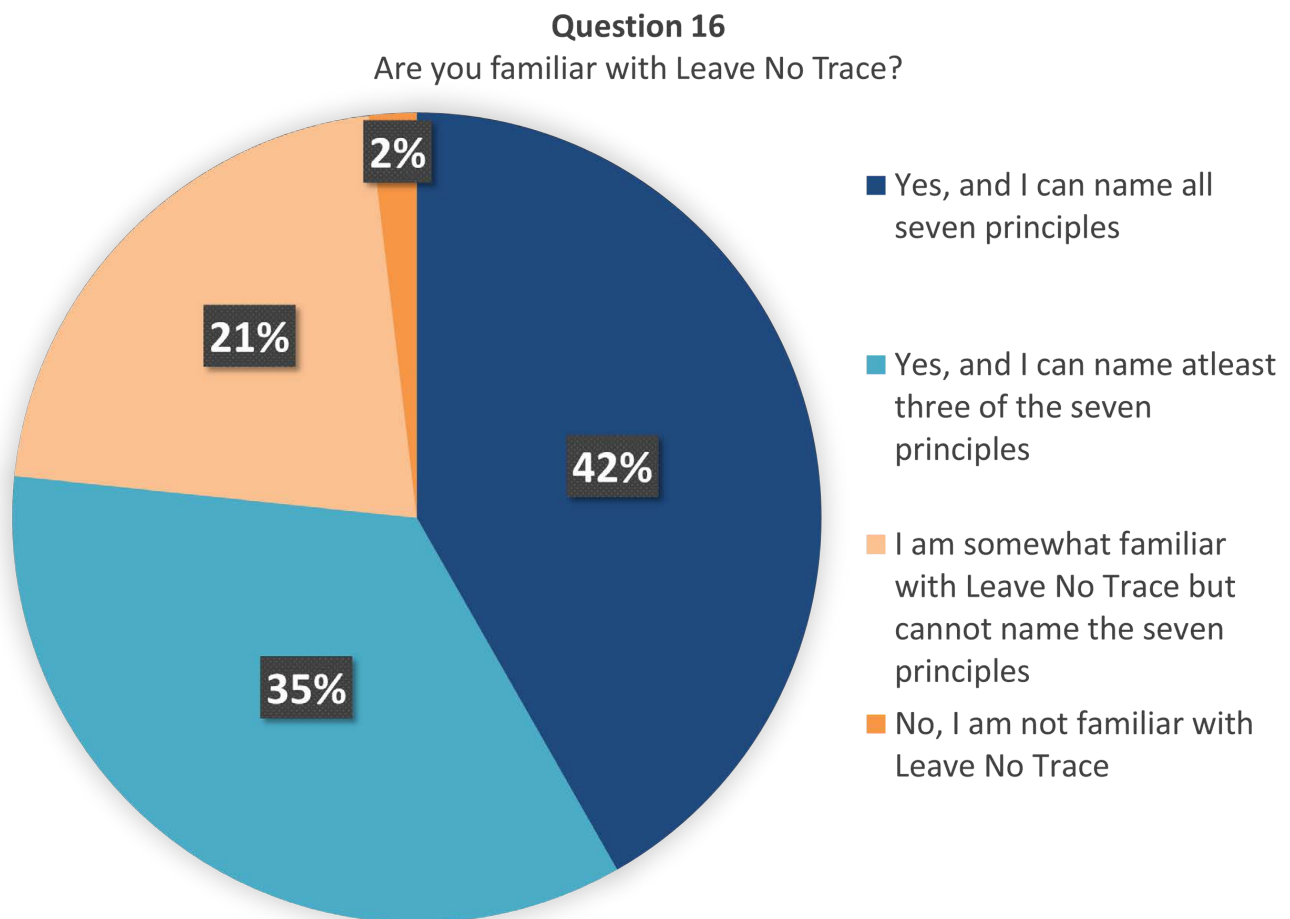
Question 15
What types of resources do you use while hiking, or preparing to hike, in the Catskill Mountains?



Individual Question Results



Participants were asked about their awareness of Leave No Trace principles (Question 16). 77% of those who answered indicated they knew at least 3 of the 7 Leave No Trace principles, 21% were only somewhat familiar with Leave No Trace, and 2% were not familiar with it at all.



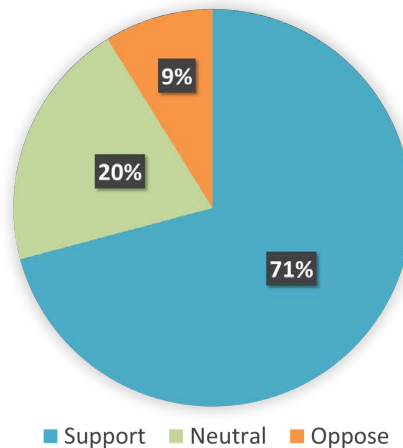
Individual Question Results



Participants were asked to indicate whether they support or oppose potential long-term management practices (Question 13). For each of 4 management practices, participants recorded whether they support the practice, oppose the practice, or are neutral about the practice.

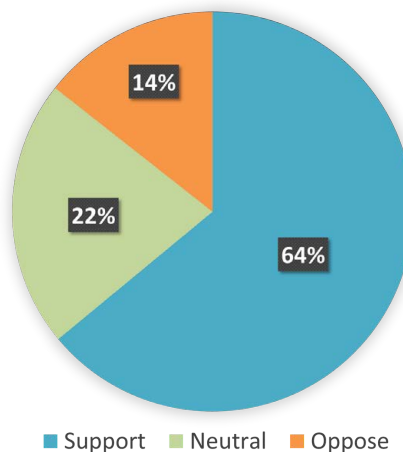
Management practice #1 was "Designate a formal trail to the summit using existing informal trails." 71% support this practice, and 9% oppose it.

Question 13
Designate a formal trail to the summit using existing informal trails



Management practice #2 was "Close unmarked trails and build a new sustainable and formal trail to the summit." 64% support this practice, and 14% oppose it.

Question 13
Close unmarked trails and build a new sustainable and formal trail to the summit

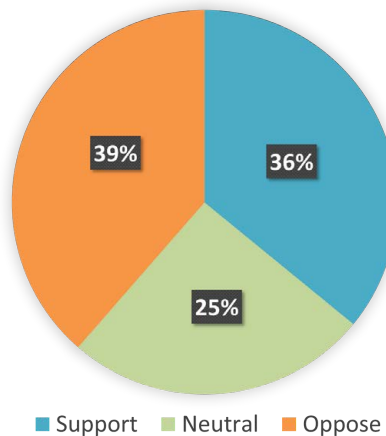


Individual Question Results



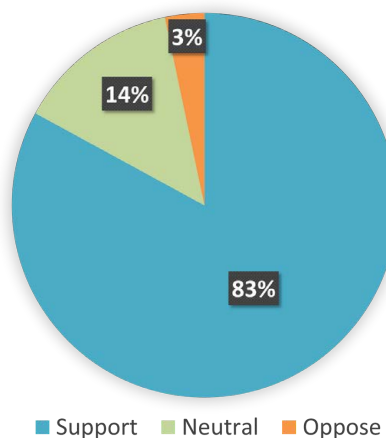
Management practice #3 was "Seasonal and/or annual permitting system to limit user access to these areas that provide critical habitat for several species of ground nesting threatened birds and/or vulnerable plant species." 36% support this practice, and 39% oppose it.

Question 13
Seasonal and/or annual permitting system to limit user access to these areas that provide critical habitat for several species of ground nesting threatened and/or vulnerable species



Management practice #4 was "Post signage at trailheads with access to the peaks with informal trails that note the presence of threatened and/or vulnerable species, Leave No Trace and Forest Preserve regulations." 83% support this practice, and 3% oppose it.

Question 13
Post signage at trailheads with access to the peaks with informal trails that note the presence of threatened and/or vulnerable species, Leave No Trace and Forest Preserve regulations



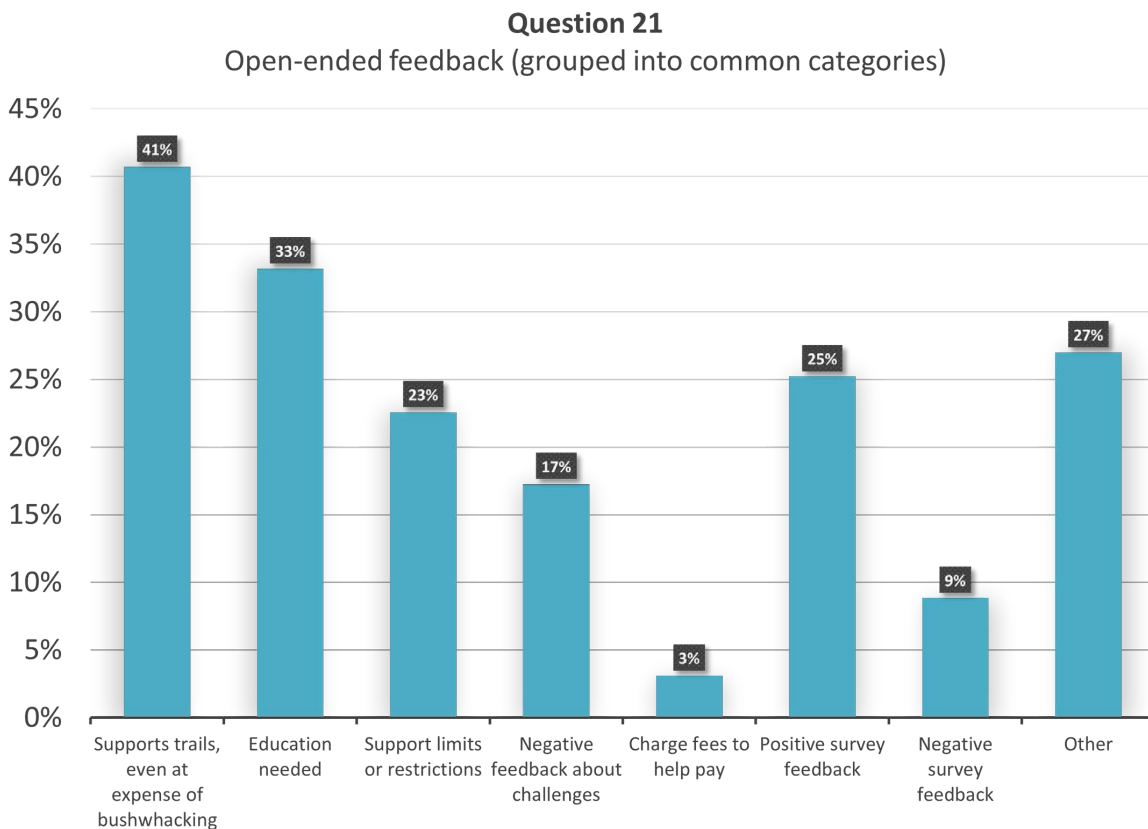
Individual Question Results



Participants were also asked an open-ended question about whether they had any suggestions for management practices (Question 14), and an open-ended question at the end of the survey for any questions, comments, or feedback (Question 21). 26% of participants answered Question 14, and 28% of participants answered Question 21. These open-ended comments take up approximately 32 pages of single-spaced text, as many participants took the opportunity to provide detailed comments.

Several common threads emerged in analyzing the comments from these two open-ended questions, and comments were categorized into any groups that they fell into. Of those who answered:

- 41% emphasized or expanded upon their support for formal trails in some way, often acknowledging it would be worth the loss of the bushwhacking experience.
- 33% emphasized or expanded upon the need for education about this topic.
- 23% emphasized or expanded upon their support for limits or restrictions in some way.
- 17% included negative feedback about hiking challenges.
- 3% included the idea of charging fees in some way to pay for improvements.



Discussion



Challenges Relationship with Peaks Visited:

Participants' participation in a Catskill hiking challenge had a strong correlation with visitation of the peaks included in this survey. Of those who indicated they did not participate in a challenge (Question 3), 11% had visited all 17 peaks and 31% had visited no peaks (Question 2). Of those who indicated they did participate in a challenge, 46% had visited all 17 peaks and 4% had visited no peaks. When asked about visiting peaks multiple times (Question 4), the differences were similar. Of those not participating in a challenge, 4% had visited all 17 peaks multiple times and 50% had visited no peaks multiple times. Of those participating in a challenge, 26% had visited all 17 peaks multiple times and 21% had visited no peaks multiple times. Several open-ended comments included negative feedback about hiking challenges, or support for challenges that focus on marked/formal trails, so recommendations should address hiking challenges in some way.

Peaks Visited Relationship:

By cross-tabulating responses about which peaks participants had visited (Question 2) and support or opposition to potential management practices (Question 13), participants who have visited all peaks were more likely to oppose a permitting system, and participants who had not visited any of the peaks were more likely to support a permitting system. For those who visited all 17 peaks (30% of participants), 48% opposed the permitting practice and 26% supported it. Conversely, for those who had visited none of the peaks (16% of participants), 54% supported the permitting practice and 16% opposed it. So this management practice had the lowest percentage of overall support among the 4 potential options at 36%, but opposition was even stronger among participants who had visited the peaks.

Leave No Trace Awareness Relationships:

In cross-tabulating responses about awareness of Leave No Trace (Question 16) and support or opposition to potential management practices (Question 13), participants who are more familiar with Leave No Trace principles were less likely to be neutral while participants with no awareness were more likely to assert a neutral position. In examining differences with each practice in question 13, the biggest difference among these two groups relates to the seasonal and/or annual permitting system. Participants with more Leave No Trace awareness were more likely to oppose this practice (40% oppose, 36% support), and participants with no awareness were more likely to support permitting (53% support, 7% oppose). Reasons for this difference may stem from the above correlation between participants who have visited all 17 peaks and opposition to the permitting practice.

Discussion



Age Relationships:

By filtering results by age groups (Question 18), several differences were found which may provide guidance for management and messaging recommendations. Participants under 28 years old indicated less awareness about negative impacts to plants and birds (Questions 11 and 12) by 15% and 10%, respectively, as compared to all other age groups. Both the youngest (under 28) and oldest (over 59) age groups of participants were less likely to indicate participation in a hiking challenge as compared to the other ages (Question 3), by 11% and 14%, respectively. Use of AllTrails as a resource decreased with age (Question 15), from 63% of participants under the age of 28 indicating their use of AllTrails (the most popular resource for that group) down to 35% of participants over the age of 59 using AllTrails (the 3rd most popular resource for that group). In terms of potential management practices (Question 13), support and opposition to each practice was similar regardless of age.

Gender Relationships:

Using gender identity (Question 20) to filter results produced some useful differences. Due to the low number of entries for the category of X, these responses were not used for cross-tabulation. Men and women were very similar in terms of awareness about negative impacts to plants and birds (Questions 11 and 12). Women were slightly more likely to participate in hiking challenges, with 59% indicating they participate in a challenge compared to 51% of men. While 3 of the 4 potential management practices had similar percentages of support and opposition for men and women, the potential practice of a permitting system did have a difference. 45% of women support this potential practice (28% oppose), and 33% of men support it (43% oppose).



Discussion



Need for Education:

When asked to provide opinions about acceptable impacts on informal trails (Question 8), an average of 39% of participants found several of the higher-impact photos (photos 1, 4, 6, 7, and 8) to be Acceptable or Very Acceptable.

When asked to provide opinions about acceptable trail networks (Question 10), 23% of participants indicated the inferred dispersed trail network on Rocky Mountain in Map 3 was Acceptable or Very Acceptable. This question did receive limited negative feedback about some participants being confused by how to answer.

Lastly, when asked about their awareness of impacts to vulnerable plant communities (Question 11) and critical nesting habitat for ground nesting birds (Question 12), 27% of participants were not aware of negative impacts to vulnerable plant communities and 36% of participants were not aware of negative impacts to critical nesting habitat for ground nesting birds.

Taken in combination, the results from these 4 questions suggest that education about the impacts to these sensitive habitats is lacking, so educational opportunities should be pursued as part of management solutions. It is important to point out that some of these impacts are less-tangible accumulated impacts that individual visitors may not notice themselves while out hiking, and much of the negative impact has only occurred more recently with increased traffic that has crossed a threshold in some locations where dispersed paths are no longer beneficial to the habitat.

Educational Signage Support:

Participants noted support for signage (Question 13), with 83% of participants supporting trailhead signage. In addition, 33% of open-ended comments emphasized support for more education. As some comments noted, signage alone is not sufficient, but it is obvious that it should be one important component of the solution. While the wording of question 13 directly referenced "trailhead signage," several open-ended comments provided support for considering other kinds of signage, including signage within the sensitive habitat itself. So any educational signage recommendations should be sure to consider the full range of options beyond just the trailhead.

Discussion



Support for Formal Trails:

The two potential management practices of “Designate a formal trail to the summit using existing informal trails” and “Close unmarked trails and build a new sustainable and formal trail to the summit” (Question 13) received support. Overall, 71% of participants support the first option and 64% support the second option. In addition, 41% of the open-ended comments emphasized support for the practice of formalizing trails. Some open-ended comments in support of formalizing trails did highlight that they’d be supportive of this being an option to consider for each peak on a case-by-case basis, rather than offering broad support for formalizing trails on all 17 peaks.

Winter Use of Peaks:

While winter months were the least popular time of the year to visit these peaks (Question 6), 43% visited in December, 47% visited in January, 45% visited in February, and 48% visited in March. There may be numerous reasons why participants visit the peaks in these winter months, but visiting the peaks during these colder and snowier months may make less of an impact to the habitat as compared to the other months of the year. These results should be considered in connection with the consideration of any potential management practices, especially any permitting or seasonal limitations. 8% of open-ended comments referenced support for seasonal closures or restricting visitation of these peaks to be winter only, even referencing the current rules about no camping above 3500 during non-winter months as well as seasonal closures that are in place on other DEC-managed lands.

Opposition to Permitting System:

The potential management practice of “Seasonal and/or annual permitting system to limit user access to these areas that provide critical habitat for several species of ground nesting threatened birds and/or vulnerable plant species” (Question 13) was the least popular management practice. Overall, 39% of participants oppose a permitting system, but among those who have visited all the peaks, 48% oppose this potential practice. Several open-ended comments specifically noted opposition to permit systems, with some making reference to systems in the Adirondacks that they do not support, and others suggesting that permitting or restricting access should be a last resort only after other solutions have been exhausted. Several open-ended comments also referenced impacts to hunters, and how permitting or seasonal closures would affect user groups beyond just hikers.

Discussion



Acknowledgement of Survey Bias

The primary purpose of this survey was to investigate the public perception of informal trail networks, natural resource conditions, management preferences, and the quality of the overall visitor experience on formerly trailless peaks over 3,500' in the Catskill Mountains. The survey was conducted in-person and online in an effort to reach a diverse and representative selection of visitors. However, it is important to acknowledge that sampling methods may have introduced biases into the survey results.

While the target population for this survey was everyone who uses public lands in the Catskills, it is possible that survey respondents were more likely to belong to a subgroup of public land users who could be considered avid hikers. Since in-person surveys were only conducted at trailheads with access to the formerly trailless peaks rather than at a random selection of trailheads and parking areas with access to diverse recreational opportunities, the in-person respondents were more likely to have some hiking experience. Advertising for the online version of the survey was conducted by the New York State DEC and the Trail Conference, along with partners including the Catskill 3500 Club, Catskill Mountainkeeper, The Catskill Center, and the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition. Promotion took various forms, such as press releases, newsletter e-mails, and social media posts on Facebook and Instagram. Social media posts were made throughout the survey period by approximately 18 different organizations and community groups with a collective social media following of more than 200,000 followers. Increased participation rates by the social media followers for these organizations may have introduced some sampling bias weighted towards both frequent users of social media and members of the hiking community. As such, the survey results should be interpreted with caution as it may not be representative of and/or generalizable to the target population. While the target population may not have been reached in this survey effort, the results are still useful in showing support or opposition for certain management actions, particularly among members of the hiking community.

One suggestion for future research is the integration of predictive modeling (e.g., regression, structural equation modeling) analysis into additional survey work to reveal more detailed and nuanced patterns, variations, and relationships between study variables. Finally, the data presented here represent an initial inquiry. When designing future surveys, potential biases in question design and questionnaire administration will be taken into consideration.

Lessons Learned



Positive Feedback:

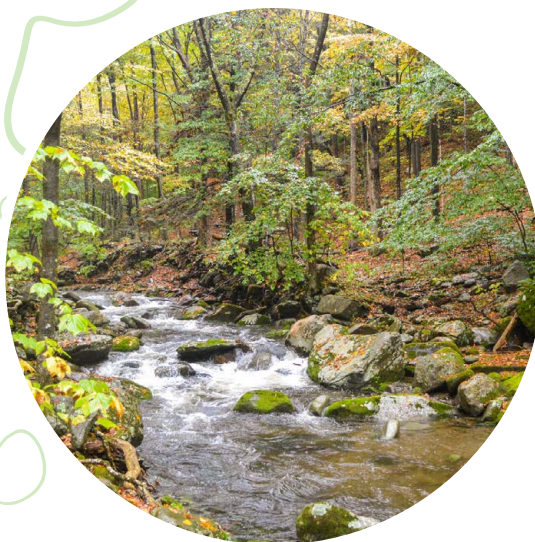
Of the 27% of participants who answered the two open-ended questions, 25% mentioned positive survey feedback. Much of the positive survey feedback include notes of appreciation and thanks, including being thankful for providing the public with this opportunity to make their voices heard, and others commented on how well the survey was made or how informative it was. This feedback, combined with an exceptionally high overall survey complete rate, very high completion rates for individual questions, and lengthy and numerous expanded comments, helps highlight the importance of providing the public with a trusted form of participation to ensure their voices are heard.

Negative Feedback:

Of the 27% of participants who answered the two open-ended questions, 9% mentioned negative survey feedback. Some of the negative survey feedback mentioned confusion or issues with certain questions, especially the photos and heatmaps questions, the survey being too long, or not providing enough support for the science behind the language about negative impacts. Each of these issues was carefully considered during the survey design phase, as proper visitor perception surveys require striking a balance between providing lengthy descriptions and being short and concise enough to be easily completed by as many as possible. Since only 20 participants out of 802 (2.5%) submitted negative survey feedback, and more than double that amount submitted positive survey feedback (7%), it can be inferred that the proper balance was achieved.

Importance of In-person Surveying Approach:

Due in part to less than ideal weather conditions during the in-person surveying holiday weekend as well as high numbers of online survey takers, the number of participants who took the survey in-person at a trailhead made up 13% of the total, but the types of participants from the in-person component had several impacts on demographic and experience representations. The in-person participation saw slightly higher percentages of women and certain racial groups compared to the online participation, and as noted previously, in-person participation contributed significantly toward representation of visitors under the age of 29. In addition, in-person participants were less motivated by hiking challenges (36% participated in challenges, compared to 56% of online participants), and less experienced with visiting the peaks noted in the survey (27% indicated they had not visited any peaks, compared to 14% of online participants; 13% noted they had visited all 17 peaks, compared to 33% of online participants).



Conclusions

Survey participants indicated support for educational signage. Participant responses to several questions suggest education about impacts to these areas is lacking, and several open-ended comments further emphasized the need for education. Messaging recommendations should address trailhead signage, but also other forms of signage or education.

Survey participants indicated support for the designation of formal trails to summit peaks. It is important to note that participants were instructed to provide their support or opposition based on each potential practice being considered for each peak, so it should not be inferred that there is broad support to designate formal trails to all 17 peaks covered by this survey.

Survey participants, especially those who have visited the peaks covered by the survey, indicated opposition to the establishment of a seasonal and/or annual permitting system to limit access to these peaks. However, seasonal restrictions such as limiting access to winter months does have some support.

The number of responses to this survey, the high completion rate, extensive open-ended comments, and overall positive survey feedback all illustrate the importance of public participation in this process, so it is important to ensure opportunities to participate in this process moving forward. With a statistically significant representation, the results of this survey should be referenced in producing recommendations related to management and messaging, recommendations related to volunteer and ambassador programs, and the production of virtual training opportunities.



Thank You!

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The Catskills Visitor Center

Partners who helped distribute the survey, including the Catskill 3500 Club, Catskill Mountainkeeper, The Catskill Center, New York State DEC, and the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition (NYORC)

Additional Trail Conference staff who assisted throughout the process



Sources Referenced:

- [Outdoor Foundation 2021 & 2023 Participation Trends Reports](#)
- [Economic Valuation Study for Public Lands in the Central Catskills](#)
- [2020 Census](#)
- [Open Spaces for All Report](#)