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Pisgah in peril?

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Draft assessment gives area parks, including Pisgah, lowest priority status

**By Anika Clark
 Sentinel Staff**

Published:
 Monday, June 22, 2009 12:33 PM EDT

Since 2007, a small portion of Pisgah State Park has been harvested for timber, generating revenue for New Hampshire's state parks and state forests.

Now Pisgah faces a different kind of cut — the potential axing of its state park status.

Whether this or any of several other potential changes lies in store for the more than 13,300-acre expanse of wilderness in Chesterfield, Hinsdale and Winchester remains to be seen.

Its future has been made uncertain by a recently released draft plan that lands it in the lowest of three categories for state priority and funding.

Ted M. Austin, the director of the state's Division of Parks and Recreation, described the draft of the "Strategic and Capital Improvement Plan" as a first step toward developing an overarching strategic plan for New Hampshire's park system.

As part of this — according to the draft — the parks and recreation division plans to identify properties that "are surplus to the state's needs."

The draft, which can be viewed online, hails New Hampshire's parks as its "crown jewels."

But it decries the weaknesses of a self-funded system plagued by operating deficits.

"(M)any parks and historic sites show serious signs of neglect ... disappointing visitors and wasting revenue opportunities," the draft says, quoting findings of an earlier state report.

Ranked in the favored "A" group are the park system's powerhouses, including Mount Washington, Hampton Beach, Franconia Notch, Monadnock and Greenfield state parks.

Properties such as Miller State Park in Peterborough and Fitzwilliam's Rhododendron State Park fell into Category B — properties that "somewhat meet" the core criteria.

And then there are the Category C properties, such



Old growth hemlocks reach for the sky at Pisgah Park in May 2007. Pisgah is on the state's draft list of low-priority parks that may get cut from the budget. A meeting on the draft will be held in Peterborough Tuesday.

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as Pisgah State Park, the Chesterfield Gorge Natural Area and Rindge's Annett Wayside Park, which either don't meet the criteria or "fall sufficiently short."

The plan recommends devoting state resources and energy to "A" properties while considering "alternative management strategies" for most of those in Category C.

These strategies run the gamut from transferring the properties to another state agency, a municipality or an outside organization to decommissioning them or leasing them out (see graphic).

But several people in the Monadnock Region are scratching their heads over Pisgah's bottom-of-the-barrel branding.

Among them is Kathryn T. Thatcher, president of the Friends of Pisgah, a group that's donated money and time to help keep up the park.

"To me, Pisgah doesn't belong in Category C," Thatcher said. "My real gut reaction is the self-funded parks are in Category A."

Austin wouldn't elaborate on exactly why Pisgah landed so low on the park pecking order, but said financial return is equal in consideration among many factors.

Still, Thatcher is hardly alone in her confusion.

"I just find it difficult to believe that it wouldn't have a much higher ranking," said Rep. William Butynski, D-Hinsdale.

Rep. Timothy Butterworth, D-Chesterfield, echoed him.

"I've lived next to Pisgah park for a long time and it's a wonderful park. ... Lots of people get lots of benefits from it and it's well loved in the neighborhood," he said.

"This is recreational for a lot of local people and recreational in the best sense," he added, "It recreates our souls."

Meanwhile, Rep. Henry A.L. Parkhurst, D-Winchester, summed up his reaction to Pisgah's low ranking as follows: "I was furious."

When Pisgah became a state park in the 1970s, "My feeling is the state came and more or less took the land," Parkhurst said, describing how the area then stood as a "great wilderness."

But now, "It seems the powers that be ... want to do nothing over here whatsoever on this side of the state," he said.

Parkhurst, Butterworth and Butynski recently joined with Rep. Daniel P. Carr, D-Winchester, to sign a letter challenging Pisgah's low ranking. They sent the letter to Johanna Lyons, New Hampshire's state park planning and development specialist.

The legislators' appeal describes the area's scenic beauty in its numerous ponds and views of soaring raptors. And it speaks of the dams and cellar holes that stand as silent reminders of the land's past. (The area's rich history was recently documented in the local film project "Pisgah: A Place Apart.")

Meanwhile, Laurel M. Powell, chairman of the Friends of Pisgah's history and education committee, said it was important for Pisgah to remain a state park to "preserve what was once there."

The park's visitor's center has a wealth of information about the land and people who used to make Pisgah their home, according to Powell.

"People had these wonderful lives there," she said, "and then the state came, bought the land and destroyed all the buildings."

In their letter to Lyons, the legislators also referenced Pisgah's scientific value. It is something David Foster, director of the Petersham, Mass.-based Harvard Forest, has experienced first-hand.

The Harvard Forest — an ecological research site of Harvard University — owns a tract of land in park.

"Its real value is as an unmanaged wild landscape," available both for research and recreation, Foster said.

In New Hampshire and adjoining states, he explained, "there are very few big areas that aren't managed. Pisgah represents a huge reference point for understanding all that."

Studies at Pisgah also produced significant research papers in the early 1940s and 1970s, according to Foster, which helped change the way researchers and foresters perceived natural disturbances and disasters.

"Those are papers that figure into the way almost all forest ecologists in the United States think about (forests)," Foster said. "The studies at Pisgah were some of the earliest studies showing that these (disturbances) are actually part of nature and that the trees and the forests and the animals all adapted to living with these kinds of dynamics."

Antioch University New England Professor Thomas K. Wessels similarly described Pisgah's ecological significance.

"I don't know how the state missed it in its ranking but Pisgah does preserve both unusual scientific and historic areas in (the) western half of the park," he wrote in an e-mail. "That is the area that was never opened for agricultural use and holds the largest contiguous block of forest land of this type in the entire region of central New England. ..."

The research in Pisgah has had big impacts in our understanding of forest dynamics," he continued. "If that doesn't make it scientifically and (historically) unusual I don't know what does!"

Yet another group with an interest in the area is the Keene-based Monadnock Conservancy.

The nonprofit organization has completed about one-third of its goal of protecting the California Brook Natural Area — a about 3,500-acre wildlife corridor between Keene's Horatio Colony Nature Preserve and Pisgah State Park, according to Executive Director Ryan M. Owens.

Rich in wetlands, the corridor is also important to a number of animals, including black bears, moose, fishers, bobcats, deer and foxes, Owens said.

These animals, he said, "need big areas in which to move from one place to another. ... They need these connected pieces of conservation land."

While he'd been anticipating the draft plan's release, Owens said, "I wasn't expecting the future of Pisgah to be so seemingly threatened."

Still, Pisgah State Park isn't on the chopping block yet.

After the public comment period concludes next month, the Division of Parks and Recreation's Austin said the plan will be finalized and sent to N.H. Department of Resources and Economic Development Commissioner George M. Bald.

Bald will then have the opportunity to tweak the plan before forwarding it to the Legislature for consideration.

Meanwhile, Austin said, easement and deed terms may make it difficult to unload some parks.

Regardless, Rep. Butterworth said that as state officials eye Pisgah's future, they must consider some key questions:

"What role does a wilderness have in New Hampshire anymore?" he asked. "Is it something we value, and how are we going to preserve that?"

u The Strategic and Capital Improvement Plan can be found online at www.nhstateparks.org/planning-development/development-plan.aspx.

A public information session will be held Tuesday, June 23, 4-7 p.m., Peterborough Town House, 1 Grove St. Public comment can be submitted until July 11 via fax (271-3553), e-mail (johanna.lyons@dred.state.nh.us), or mail (P.O. Box 1856, Concord 03302).

Anika Clark can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1432, or aclark@keenesentinel.com.

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