

Mount Washington Commission Master Plan Public Comment on the Visitor Experience

Larry Garland, May 2, 2022

The summit of Mt Washington is a unique, globally rare environment on the highest peak in Northeast.

Because of this exceptional distinction, hundreds of thousands of people visit the summit each year, in addition to the administrative, scientific, and commercial [communications] personnel that operate summit facilities. Visitors have a range of interests and expectations such that facilities and operations are challenged to provide safety, comfort, and enjoyment for everyone while protecting and preserving the rare and unique character of the environment.

To prevent undue stress and degradation of both the natural and built environments, the visitor experience must necessarily be managed within the physical constraints of the summit. To assure that visitors enjoy a positive experience, visitation should not exceed the pre-determined capacity of the summit facilities, and operational plans for limiting visitorship should be established and implemented should the need occur. Over-capacity demands should not drive unfettered expansion of infrastructure, understanding that there may be times when capacity is strained, but that the facilities are not over-built for the times that maximum capacity is not actually needed.

- Amenities should be contained within existing footprints such that the entire 'summit circle' does not become a sacrifice zone.
- The attraction is the natural environment; amenities should be designed and maintained so as to appear to 'belong' in the physical setting. Amenities should not be presented as an amusement or distraction from the native character.
- Responsible stewardship requires that there be no wandering or dispersal where it is not allowed and designated. 'Dispersal' of visitors should make efficient use of existing infrastructure rather than invite sprawl that creates additional impacts. All walkways should be clearly delineated with impediments to unfettered roaming.

Intrinsic to the visitor experience is appreciating the significance of this unique environment AND understanding that human activity, both physical visitation as well as climate induced, can have detrimental impacts on the health of the ecosystem. Educational information and programming should be primary aspects of the visitor experience. Preservation of the environment for future generations begins with learning about the alpine ecosystem, understanding the direct threats and impacts of climate, and accepting responsibility for protecting and stewarding the resource.

Shelter

All visitors should have access to shelter in the event of inclement or severe weather. Respecting the physical limitations of the Sherman Adams building, provisions for windbreaks or refuge in other areas with existing footprints may be appropriate. Interior, heated shelter could be pay-based as long as alternative (unheated) shelter is also available.

Restrooms

All visitors should have access to sanitary facilities. Temporary (portable) facilities or secondary outbuildings may be necessary to augment indoor restrooms in order to manage peak demand, and would serve to restrain the need for additional capital infrastructure sized for maximum load.

Food Service and Waste Management

Food service should be available in a manner appropriate to the location. How food is served is an important factor – and educational lesson – on stewarding the environment. Recyclable materials should be used if they can and are truly recycled; otherwise, the washing of dishes may be more environmentally friendly than collecting, transporting, and disposing ‘soft’ plates, bowls, and utensils that are not purposefully recycled. [Many materials are stamped with recycling emblems yet if no market exists to process them, they end up in landfills.] Messaging should encourage visitors to Carry-In Carry-Out rather than dispose their trash on the summit.

Enjoyment

Every visitor should leave the summit with a positive experience, regardless of the current weather or facilities. Through various channels of education and messaging, visitors should have the opportunity to learn about alpine ecology and understand how the health of the environment depends on how we treat it. Passive displays, interpretive signage, recorded audio tours, access to podcasts, museums, and on-site docents and naturalists can all contribute to a visitor’s appreciation and enjoyment, provided such mechanisms do not interfere with those who prefer an ‘unassisted’ experience.