



ANDREW M. CUOMO
Governor

ROSE HARVEY
Commissioner

**AGENCY DECISION
AND
STATEMENT OF FINDINGS**

Adoption of a Master Plan for Taconic State Park

Designation of a Bird Conservation Area and a Natural Heritage Area

The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has prepared a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Final Master Plan, dated June 27, 2018 for Taconic State Park.

By the authority vested in me in State Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation Law, I do hereby adopt the Final Master Plan for Taconic State Park, and also designate the entire Park, as detailed in the Master Plan, a Bird Conservation Area and a Natural Heritage Area.

My decision is based on the attached Findings Statement and the content of the FEIS, which have been prepared according to the provisions of Part 617, the regulations implementing Article 8 of Environmental Conservation Law - the State Environmental Quality Review Act.

Rose Harvey
Commissioner
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation

Date

7/24/18

**State Environmental Quality Review
FINDINGS STATEMENT
Taconic State Park
Master Plan**

July 16, 2018

Pursuant to Article 8 (State Environmental Quality Review Act – SEQRA) of the Environmental Conservation Law and 6 NYCRR Part 617, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), as lead agency, makes the following findings:

Title of the Action:

Adoption and Implementation of a Master Plan for Taconic State Park

Location:

Taconic State Park is located in the Towns of Copake and Ancram in Columbia County, and Town of North East in Dutchess County.

Description of the Action:

The Master Plan for Taconic State Park provides long term guidance for the development and management of the Park and protection of its resources as summarized below.

Date of Completion of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS): June 27, 2018

These findings consider the relevant environmental impacts, facts and conclusions disclosed in the Final EIS; weigh and balance relevant environmental impacts with social, economic and other considerations; provide a rationale for the agency's decision; certify that the requirements of 6 NYCRR Part 617 have been met; and certify that consistent with social, economic and other essential considerations from among the reasonable alternatives available, the action is one which avoids or minimizes adverse environmental impacts to the maximum extent practicable, and that included within the plan are those mitigation measures that will avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts to the maximum extent practicable.

Findings:

1. The Final Plan was subject to a complete Environmental Impact Statement process including a public information meeting and a public hearing. The Final EIS contains a chapter on responses to comments on the Draft EIS. This chapter contains clarification of issues raised during the review of the Draft EIS. It also provides information that has been used in the preparation of the Final Plan.
2. Taconic State Park is located along 16 miles of the Taconic Mountain Range in eastern Columbia and Dutchess Counties. From north to south, portions of the Park are within the towns of Copake and Ancram of Columbia County, and the town of North East in Dutchess County. Along its eastern border, the Park is adjacent to the Towns of Egremont, MA and Salisbury, CT.
3. Taconic State Park was established in 1924, when local landowners Francis and Ella Masters donated land to New York State. A year later, the Taconic State Park Commission was created to assume administrative responsibility of the Park. Taconic State Park opened to the public in 1927 on approx. 2,600 acres of land around Copake Falls, NY. In 1926, New York State purchased the land and remaining structures of the Copake Iron Works that represent a significant cultural resource within Taconic State Park. The Rudd Pond area in the Park's southern section was acquired by the state in 1928 and opened to the public in 1931. The Park

was initially developed through the use of the Civilian Conservation Corps, and has grown substantially over the decades to its current size of 6,183 acres.

4. Taconic State Park contains a wealth of natural resources and rich biodiversity. The flora of TSP includes species typical of forests and fields of the region, as well as less common species that occur in more unique habitats such as the talus slopes, fens, and rocky summit ridgetops. Over 90 percent of the Park is in natural community types with forests being the dominant land cover. The lower elevational sections of the Park have been historically used for farming and still contain considerable acreage in agriculture.
5. Taconic State Park has nine natural community types, covering most of Taconic State Park, that are considered ecologically significant from a statewide perspective. All four of its dominant forest cover types, the Appalachian Oak-Hickory Forest, Chestnut Oak Forest, Hemlock-Northern Hardwood Forest, and Maple-Basswood Rich Mesic Forest are significant. Adding to the diversity of biota and scenic interest are the interspersions of smaller patches of less common community types including Acidic Talus Slope Woodland, Pitch Pine-Oak-Heath Rocky Summit, Rocky Summit Grasslands, and two types of rare calcareous wetlands known as fens.

Additionally, Taconic State Park supports eleven species listed as rare, threatened or endangered in NY State, including nine plants and two animal species. The Park also supports a number of species such as red-shouldered hawk, prairie warbler, four-toed salamander, several bats, New England cottontail, the American eel, and others that NYS DEC has identified as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) in the State Wildlife Action Plan.

TSP is known to support eighty-six (86) species of Neotropical migratory songbirds during the spring and fall months. This count does not include other migrant birds such as raptors. There is a Hawk Watch in Massachusetts, across the border from TSP, indicating that the area is an important corridor for migrating raptors. One hundred and sixty (160) native species of birds (and three non-natives) have been recorded in or near TSP. Of the 160 native species, some of which nest in the Park, thirty five (35) are listed as NYS Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Of the non-breeding birds recorded in or near the Park, one (1) is listed as NYS Endangered, four (4) are listed as NYS Threatened, ten (10) are listed as NYS Special Concern. One hundred and fifteen (115) species of birds are reported as breeding based on seasonally timed observations, including resident populations with small local migrations.

6. Taconic State Park has several ponds, streams, waterfalls, and wetlands within its boundary. Several of the water bodies are natural and others are man-made, and all provide both habitat and recreational opportunities.
7. The recreational activities offered at the Park include hiking, camping, swimming, picnicking, fishing, biking, cross country skiing, paragliding, and hunting. In 1972, the former Harlem Division rail line began its transformation to the Harlem Valley Rail Trail. Today, several completed sections run through or near the Park and serve as picturesque trails for public recreation. There are also numerous historic resources in the Parks. There are several CCC era structures, including the Bash Bish Cabins. In 2007, the Copake Iron Works and 18 surrounding acres were listed on the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places, then in 2016 designated as a Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area Site.
8. The master plan identifies vision statements and goals for Taconic State Park. The vision will continue to provide protection of an extensive upland contiguous forest within New York's Taconic region while providing numerous year-round recreation opportunities, will continue to offer passive recreation while providing critical open space protection and habitat for native and rare flora and fauna, and will continue to connect people to the unique history of the Harlem Valley. The overall goal is to provide a diversity of high quality recreation opportunities balanced with stewardship of the Park's natural and cultural resources.

9. The plan presents a series of “preferred alternatives” for future development and operation of the Park. Status quo alternatives were evaluated for each element of the plan as well. The Status Quo Alternative consists of the current facilities, programs and practices. The various preferred alternatives were combined to create a single preferred alternative for recreation development and resource protection into one that best met the goals for the Park. This alternative represents the Final Master Plan. Cumulatively, the actions described in the plan present the long-term vision for the rehabilitation and enhancement of public use facilities and the protection and preservation of the cultural and natural resources at the Park.
10. The plan considers the historic, cultural, natural and recreational resources of the Park and responds to the needs and safety of Park patrons, protection of natural, cultural and scenic resources, and the principles of sustainability. The plan also recognizes that the initiation of each specific action will be determined by the level of funding available to OPRHP in future years.
11. Article 11 - Title 5 - Section 0539 of the NYS Environmental Conservation Law allows for the dedication of state-owned lands with rare species and/or significant natural communities as Natural Heritage Areas (NHA). These lands must meet certain criteria identified within the law. Based on an evaluation of these criteria the entire acreage of Taconic State Park will be designated as NHA. Designating the Park as a NHA provides additional recognition of the significant ecological communities and rare species within a Park. The NHA designation does not preclude existing or future land use proposals, nor should the designation prohibit Park development or operational needs.
12. The Bird Conservation Areas program is established in Environmental Conservation Law Section 11-2001, and authorizes the designation of BCAs in order to integrate bird conservation into agency planning, management and research projects within the context of the agency mission. The Park meets two BCA criteria for designation: migratory bird concentration area and diverse species concentration site criteria. The entire acreage of Taconic State Park will be designated a BCA. The designation itself does not preclude existing or future land use proposals, nor should the designation prohibit Park development or operational needs.
13. In addition to the above designations, the Master Plan will provide protection of natural resources through several means including preparation of an invasive species management plan, actions to protect summit communities and rare and endangered species habitats, manage aquatic vegetation in Rudd Pond, and conform management of TSP’s agricultural lands to forthcoming statewide guidelines.
14. The Master Plan calls for improvements to recreational facilities at the Park including:
 - Generating a Site Plan for Copake Falls day use area to provide sport courts and fields, a group fire ring, ice skating opportunities, and the existing playground to include a tot lot.
 - Building a new camping loop at Copake Falls to decrease campsite density and include ADA sites, installing new camping infrastructure, and providing a dog run for campers.
 - Improving the Iron Worker cabins, Bash Bish cabins, and Greenwich cottages while safeguarding these significant historic resources; repurposing some Greenwich cottages to provide new opportunities for programmatic expansion at the Park.
 - Improving the Copake Iron Works in cooperation with OPRHP’s Division of Historic Preservation and the Friends of Taconic State Park.
 - Improving the Rudd Pond day use area following the proposed Site Plan developed by OPRHP’s Taconic region.
 - Changing the Rudd Pond campsite layout to provide more privacy while keeping campsite numbers the same.

- Continuing guarded swimming at Rudd Pond and exploring alternatives to maintain swimming in the future.
 - Improving the environmental and cultural interpretation and education at the Park.
 - Designating new group campsites at the Park's developed areas.
 - Building a backcountry campsite south of Brace Mountain.
 - Providing additional fishing access to Roeliff Jansen Kill; and exploring ADA fishing access at Odyssey Farm Pond.
 - Exploring changes to hunting rules to increase recreational hunting opportunities.
15. The Trails Plan for the Park provides guidance for the upgrade and maintenance of the trail system so it can accommodate a variety of year-round recreational uses and provide for educational and interpretive experiences. Key components of the trails plan include
- Increased trail opportunities and connections throughout the Park's trail systems as well as external connections to trails on adjacent lands and surrounding communities.
 - Hiking and snowshoeing on all existing, improved, and proposed trails.
 - Improvement of trail signage and wayfinding including trailhead and trail intersection signage throughout the Park to enhance visitor experience and increase patron safety.
 - Enhancement of interpretation of natural, cultural and historical resources along trails.
16. Park operations, maintenance and infrastructure will be improved under the Master Plan, including:
- Improving picnic areas and pavilions at Copake Falls and including ADA compliance.
 - Developing a Site Plan for Copake Falls day use area to accommodate a wider diversity of uses.
 - Improving Copake Falls comfort stations and the shower house; renovating the Ore Pit Pond bath house; and building a new shower house and septic for the campground loops.
 - Improving the Bash Bish shower house; once each Bash Bish cabin has upgraded bathrooms, converting the Bash Bish shower house into an ADA compliant cabin.
 - Adding electric and water service at select Copake Falls campsites.
 - Relocating the Copake Falls dump station.
 - Moving the Park's maintenance facility to a new location.
 - Providing wi-fi hotspots at Copake Falls and Rudd Pond.
 - Remodeling the Rudd Pond bath house to a picnic pavilion with a comfort station and remodeling the existing Rudd Pond comfort station into a staff work station.
 - Upgrading the Rudd Pond water distribution system as well as the Rudd Pond campground shower house and bathroom.
 - Upgrading parking and circulation at Rudd Pond.
 - Identifying, monitoring and protecting TSP's scenic vistas.
 - Facilitating new signage internal to the Park, as well as better wayfinding for Copake Falls and Rudd Pond.
 - Exploring and incorporating green infrastructure.

- Formalizing a mutual aid agreement with Massachusetts' Department of Conservation and Recreation.
 - Improving or modifying parking at many trailheads, such as Bash Bish trailhead and Rudd Pond trailhead, along Under Mountain Road and Quarry Hill Road, and the Harlem Valley Rail Trail by the Park office; as well as creating parking for the proposed trail at Kaye Road.
17. Impacts associated with the implementation of the plan and corresponding mitigation measures identified are as follows:
- The plan will result in some physical change to the land where new recreation facilities and trails will be constructed or where existing facilities will receive rehabilitation. Most projects will involve construction in the same footprint of existing use areas. There will be improvements to parking areas, most of which will be accomplished through formalizing or restriping existing areas. Pervious pavements will be used wherever possible. Erosion control and stormwater management techniques will be in accordance with the New York State Stormwater Design Manual and will be incorporated into site specific designs for all construction projects that will disturb soils.
 - New trail construction will include review of final trail layouts in the field by appropriate agency staff to ensure consistency with trail standards and protection of sensitive resources. The policy and guidelines for trail building that have been established by recognized trail organizations and governmental agencies will be followed. The goal of all trail work in the Park is to have trails that provide access to the resource without adversely affecting it.
 - Master Plan implementation is expected to have minimal impact on water resources. These impacts will be mitigated through the use of Best Management Practices. Some existing trails may be causing some water quality impacts and will be assessed on a case by case basis to determine the best course of action to minimize impacts. All new facilities, including trails, will be designed to ensure that adequate vegetative buffers are maintained between facilities and adjacent water resources.
 - Direct impacts to biological resources are expected to be minimal since most projects will be sited in areas with previous development, limited environmental sensitivity, and which generally possess accessibility to, and use of, existing infrastructure. This includes those projects that are within existing development footprints, as well as the projects which will be built in currently undeveloped areas. Existing sections of trails that align near sensitive natural areas, water resources or significant ecological communities will be assessed on a case by case basis to determine ways that impacts caused by recreational use can be mitigated.
 - The Master Plan calls for the preparation of an invasive species management plan for the Park. It also calls for additional monitoring of rare, threatened or endangered species that exist in the Park, as well as for the review of agricultural land management at the Park in order to conform to the forthcoming statewide OPRHP guidelines.
 - The Master Plan recognizes the important historic and archeological resources within the Park and calls for continued cooperation with OPRHP's Division of Historic Preservation and the Friends of Taconic State Park to preserve, improve, and interpret these resources.
 - The scenic character of the Park is a significant resource of the Harlem Valley. The plan includes continued maintenance of existing scenic viewpoints and designated vistas along trails. Any new construction or renovations to existing structures will be designed to complement their surroundings and will not be visually intrusive.

- Implementation of the Master Plan will result in substantial beneficial recreation and open space impacts. The plan provides for a wide variety of new and improved recreation facilities and visitor amenities. Implementation of the Trails Plan will result in a better trails system which will accommodate a variety of uses including hiking, biking, cross country skiing, and snowshoeing.
 - The plan proposes limited changes to traffic circulation at Rudd Pond day use area for the safety of patrons, and proposes no changes to traffic circulation or access elsewhere at the Park. Current capacity is expected to meet the proposed needs. Health and safety of patrons and staff will continue to be a priority. Overall, the additional amenities are not expected to significantly increase visitation of the Park.
 - Sustainability principles and energy efficiency will be incorporated into the design of all proposed construction. Master Plan implementation may result in some temporary increases in noise during construction. Construction is generally scheduled for periods of low Park use to minimize impacts to Park visitors.
18. The plan describes the process for supplemental environmental review. The plan also provides for guidance as to when additional environmental review may be required and identifies the types of actions that are likely to require additional review. These include new actions not addressed in the plan that are not Type II actions within Part 617, any change from the preferred alternative for recreational and facility elements of the Plan that would result in significant adverse environmental impacts not disclosed in the plan, and any leases, easements or other agreements between OPRHP and other entities that would affect resources in a manner that is not adequately addressed in the plan.

Several items discussed in the Master Plan have been identified as likely to require additional review under SEQR, as the scope of work for these projects is not known at this time. Specifically, site design and new location for the maintenance facility at Copake Fall, proposed new camping loop at Copake Falls, updated campsite layout at Rudd Pond, proposed new trails, improved parking at many trailheads, and the backcountry camping site are not being reviewed as part of the Master Plan and will likely require supplemental review when these projects are designed and implemented.