

This article was published in the World, the journal of the UIAA (International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation) in 2003. It was the text of a PowerPoint presentation made at the UIAA Access and Conservation Symposium in October 2002 by Glenn Hoagland, Executive Director of the Mohonk Preserve, with the assistance of Hank Alicandri, Director of Land Stewardship/Head Ranger.

Home to the Gunks - a Climber's Paradise...



Known as the "Gunks" to climbers from around the world, the signature stark-white cliffs of the Shawangunk Mountains (pronounced Shon-gums) are located just a two hours' drive north of New York City. Owner of the famous Gunks cliffs, the Mohonk Preserve is the largest member and visitor supported nature preserve in New York State, receiving 150,000 visitors a year. Climbers account for one-third of its annual visitation - or 50,000 climber days annually. Up to 800 climbers visit on the Preserve's busiest days. The Mohonk Preserve is one of the few models of a private, NGO-run climbing area, open to the public 365 days a year.

Due to its rich biodiversity, the Shawangunks have been designated by The Nature Conservancy as one of the Earth's Last Great Places. The Preserve's mission is to protect the fragile ecosystem of the Shawangunk Mountains while accommodating low-impact, recreational use.

Extending from New York to Pennsylvania, the Shawangunks are part of the longer Appalachian Mountain chain, which extends south to Georgia along the eastern seaboard of the United States. The cliffs, summits and plateaus harbor a wealth of plant and animal life - 1,400 known species in all, including 29 rare plant and animal species, three rare insects, and over 2,000 acres of dwarf pitch pine, representing the best example of a ridge-top dwarf pine barrens in the world.

Featuring a rich tapestry of forest and cliffs, open fields, lakes and streams, the Shawangunks are a crucial greenway for the 40 million people in the New York City metropolitan area.

The Preserve offers some of the best climbing in the northeastern U.S. Most of the well-known "Gunks" cliffs are located on the Preserve - ranging from the well-traveled, Trapps cliffs, to the lesser-known, backcountry cliffs of "Lost City," which offer even the most experienced climbers a special discovery experience in the Gunks. Climbers have full access to over 1,000 climbing routes and to five linear miles of cliff face.

A traditional climbing area, the Gunks contain the greatest concentration of high-quality beginner and intermediate climbs to be found anywhere in the world. According to many climbers, the climb High Exposure is considered the best route in the world for its 5.6 level of difficulty. The dramatic cliffs of the Gunks are made of a hard, durable, quartzite conglomerate - about an "8" on the hardness scale, compared to a diamond at "10" - reliable for climbing, with thousands of cracks and ledges providing perfect handholds and with overhangs offering a range of climbing challenges.

... However, it is more than a place to climb

The Mohonk Preserve is a multi-use area, providing visitors with access to over 100 miles of carriage roads and trails for hiking and biking, cross-country skiing and horseback riding. The ridge is also an economic engine, generating an estimated ten million in tourism dollars annually for local communities. In addition, it is a multi-faceted, conservation organization, with a Research department, Ranger staff, Environmental Education services, and a Land Protection program.

The Preserve's Research program has the longest ecosystem record in the region - including over 70 years of natural history records and over a century of weather data informing scientists across the country and supporting the on-site research of over 50 Research Associates annually from 30 institutions. Ranger staff guide and inform 150,000 visitors a year perform cliff and wilderness rescue and maintain over 60 miles of trails, carriage roads and boundaries. An award-winning Environmental Education program serves over 30 schools and provides nature education and information to over 10,000 adults and school children annually. The Preserve's Land Protection program identifies and protects important adjacent parcels for their historic value or to preserve remote and rugged backcountry lands or open fields and scenic view sheds.

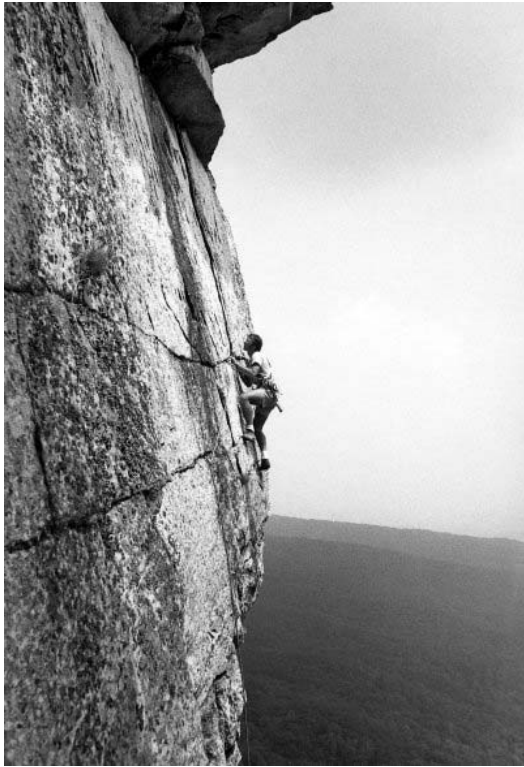
Partnering with Climbers

As a small, private climbing area, the Preserve is a model of climber - agency cooperation, having always had close relationships with the local climbing community. The Gunks have been a Mecca for rock climbers for over 50 years. Gunks' climbing was discovered in 1935 by Fritz Wiessner, who had set the standard for expert, technical climbing in his early years in Germany. Wiessner - along with his partner Hans Krauss - led a growing climbing community, which had established hundreds of climbs in the Gunks by the early 70's. This included the McCarthy Wall - a series of difficult climbs in the Trapps (the Preserve's most-heavily frequented climbing area). Most of the climbs in the McCarthy Wall were put up by Jim McCarthy in the 60's. (Jim McCarthy is presently Honorary Vice-President of the UIAA). By the 70's and 80's, top climbers from around the world gravitated to the Gunks - renowned for bold leads, high quality rock stiff grades, and a dedicated climbing community, committed to a low-impact ethic.



From the Mohonk Preserve's beginnings in the early 60's up through today, climbers have played a direct role in creating, modifying and delivering an excellent climbing program. From the Preserve's ranger staff - advising climbers and performing rescues - to climbers directly involved in the development of Preserve policy.

Because of its size and close relationships with the climbing community, the Mohonk Preserve is able to quickly develop and adjust its climbing policies to meet climber needs, accommodate the needs of its other visitors, and protect the resource. The Preserve's climbing management program is effective



because it's an integral part of the Preserve's overall Land Management Plan. The Plan's goal is to minimize, monitor and mitigate visitor impact. The Land Management Plan divides Preserve lands into high- and low-access zones. Cliff areas are included in both zones - such as the key climbing areas, easily accessible from a trailhead, and the more remote talus fields, where sensitive natural communities are protected from heavy visitor impact.

The Land Management Plan draws its strength from its direct link to both research and education. Research staff work closely with land management staff to inventory natural communities, such as the cliff and talus habitat, to investigate the status of a particular, sensitive species (such as the peregrine falcon, which is endangered in New York State), and to monitor impact. Through climber education, the Preserve informs visitors of steps they can take to help protect the resource.

Actively implementing UIAA Summit Charter Principles

The Preserve's multi-faceted climbing program addresses access and conservation challenges through a range of strategies that implement UIAA Summit Charter principles.

"Principle #1: Ensuring responsible affordable access"

The challenges: Dramatic increase in climber visits and climbing program costs

The Preserve has experienced a dramatic increase in number of climber visits over the past 40 years. In the 1950's, "crowded" was defined as 50 people on a busy day. That figure has now escalated to between 500 and 800 per day. We know that our climbing visitors come more frequently than other Preserve visitors (over 20 times per year). In addition, bouldering is on the increase.

Meanwhile, the cost of the Preserve's climbing management program has increased significantly. With growing climber visits and increasing access by less-experienced climbers, the Preserve is seeing accidents increase, which drives up cost and increases demand on staffing.

As a private NGO, about 50% of the Preserve's revenue comes from memberships, day fees, and contributions. The Preserve receives very little federal, state, or local government support. Climbing memberships and fees only account for 8% of our annual operating budget needs.

The Preserve's strategic response: Ensuring affordable, responsible access

The Preserve allows full access to all climbing routes and facilities, while respecting the carrying capacity of cliffs. The Preserve allows climbing guide services, but restricts the number of services to four and also limits the number of people they can guide per day. The prime climbing areas are located right near parking lots accommodating more than 400 vehicles, with sanitary facilities nearby. (Thanks to support provided by the Access Fund, the Preserve is installing a new vault toilet in the Trapps, the main climbing area of the Preserve.) The Preserve works to ensure adequate camping facilities - maintaining a small, climbers-only tent campsite until the Appalachian Mountain Club opens a larger, permanent campground currently planned for nearby.

The Preserve actively communicates to climbers that access is both a right and a privilege that they have to protect through responsible climbing and through their active support of the Preserve. The Preserve's Climbing Policy affirms climber freedom of access and choice of routes within limits set by fragile terrain and by other visitor needs or safety. The policy also asserts climber personal responsibility - both for a low-impact ethic, and for the role climbers can play in giving their time and financial support to keep this a safe, open, and accessible climbing area.

The results: Stable access fees and increasing support

The Preserve has managed to keep its access fees stable over time. Climbing memberships have stayed the same for the past five years, and day access has only increased by \$1. And climbers have responded strongly to the plea for support: during the same five-year period, there's been more than 55% increase in funds raised through climbing memberships and a 34% increase in climber contributions.

"Principle #2: Engaging climbers in resource protection"

The challenge: Heavy climber impact

Controlling climber impact on and around cliffs is a top resource management challenge. Such impact includes cliff base soil compaction, trees damaged by repeated rappelling, erosion, and root exposure in talus slope woodland - also caused by climbers' and boulderers' needs to explore the talus slopes. With more people rappelling, impact at the tops of cliffs has decreased. In many cases, this has simply shifted the impact to the base of the cliffs. However, cliff-base impact is easier to mitigate, through trail maintenance and climber education.

Strategic response: Promoting a low-impact ethic

The Preserve encourages a low-impact ethic through its Climbing Policy and Climbing Instruction Policy, which forbid trundling rocks, chipping holds, affixing new holds, cutting trees, and placing new bolts and pitons. The policies further discourage rappelling off trees, and encourage climbers to limit chalk use. Fixed anchors are maintained at tops of many popular pitches. The anchors were originally placed by climbers, but are now maintained by the Preserve, which has replaced over 40 dangerous, unsightly anchors with safe, unobtrusive ones. The use of fixed anchors minimizes damage to vegetation and limits visual clutter.

The Preserve effectively manages visitor volume and impact by maintaining and promoting use of approach trails through talus fields, by preventing the creation of new routes in sensitive areas, and by occasionally restricting access. To monitor impact, rangers collaborate with our researchers to use the Cliff and Talus Survey and species inventories as a baseline, so that impact can be documented over time. In addition, the Preserve conducts visitor use surveys to determine where visitors are traveling and to measure traffic volume in high use areas.

The results and where we're headed - A carrying capacity for the cliffs

Through implementation of this Land Management Plan monitoring program, the Preserve is working towards establishing a carrying capacity for the land - and for our climbing areas. The Preserve's challenge will be to find ways to promote visitor redistribution, so that more climbers visit during off-peak times - to protect the resource, and to provide each climber with a peaceful and high-quality cliff experience.

"Principle #3: Limiting landowner liability"

The challenge: Private areas are closing

Many private climbing areas are closing down - especially because of the burden or risk of liability. Other potential climbing areas prevent climbing for this reason - such as on the Sky Top cliffs on the grounds of the nearby Mohonk Mountain House resort hotel. This is an issue of great concern to the Preserve, as our liability insurance costs skyrocket.

Strategic response: Reducing risk and injury

Through signage, on our web site, and through liability releases, the Preserve advertises that climbing is a high-risk activity, and clarifies that the Preserve is not responsible for maintaining the cliffs. The Preserve's media policy also discourages any coverage filmed on our lands that sensationalizes the sport. The Preserve further reduces risk through its fixed anchor program. Maintained at the top of pitches, the fixed anchors increase climber safety, but are not put in for running protection, only for belaying or rappelling.

By having a highly trained, vertical rescue team, the Preserve also reduces the severity of climber injuries. The Preserve carries out between 40 - 50 rescues each year. All rangers are highly experienced in search, rescue, and victim extrication. Rangers conduct weekly safety and rescue training, and annually, rangers are trained in mountain and high-angle rescue. Our rangers also train others. Preserve rangers have performed demonstrations of safe cliff rescue for and with such groups as the British Military Academy, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the U.S. Military Academy. The Preserve also conducts interagency training exercises with air ambulances and New York State governmental agencies.



The Preserve further ensures climber safety by restricting guide services to those that are accredited by the American Mountain Guides Association, have a New York State guiding license, are certified in first aid, and carry liability insurance.

The result: No lawsuits

This liability-prevention program has resulted in no climber lawsuits against the Preserve in the last 40 years.

The Mohonk Preserve welcomes climbers from all over the world...

An active partner in climbing access and conservation, the Preserve works on a regional scale to ensure freedom of access on private, NGO lands. Visit the Preserve's web site at www.mohonkpreserve.org. Come for a virtual visit and support one of the worlds most accessible and established climbing areas!

With nearly 20 years' experience in non-profit land conservation, Glenn Hoagland joined the Preserve as Executive Director in 1993. Mr. Hoagland oversees all activities and programs, manages land acquisition and supervises the Preserve's seven departments and over forty staff. Glenn has a Masters in Rural Planning from the University of Guelph, Ontario. Hank Alicandri, Director of Land Stewardship/Head Ranger, has been a Ranger on the Shawangunk Ridge for 16 years. He has climbed in the "Gunks" and elsewhere worldwide for over 25 years

