

**Green Mountain Club
Former Champion Lands Hiking Corridor Management Proposal**

**Phase I Abstract
Unknown Pond and Middle Mountain**

January 2007

Green Mountain Club, working to become the designated Corridor Manager for hiking trails on the former Champion Lands, has developed a two phase proposal outlining a network of day and multi-day hiking trails. A complete summary of the proposed plan can be found in the Green Mountain Club Former Champion Lands Hiking Corridor Management Proposal (or, The Proposal). This document provides a detailed outline for the development of trails in Phase I of the proposed hiking corridor system.

The area accessed by trails in Phase I is located approximately ten miles north of Island Pond in the Unorganized Towns of Warrens Gore and Averys Gore in northern Essex County. The mountains of the region form the northwestern rim of the circular Nulhegan River basin and consist of Bluff Mountain (elevation 2789 feet), Middle Mountain (elevation 2947 feet) and Gore Mountain (elevation 3332 feet). For the purposes of this proposal however, Phase I applies only to those corridors (woods roads, skid trails and footpaths) that provide access to Unknown Pond (elevation 2526 feet) and Middle Mountain. This area is bounded to the north and west by Norton Pond and Vermont Route 114, to the east by the Gore Mountain massif, to the southeast by the Lewis Pond and the Nulhegan River basin and to the south by the Bluff Mountain Ridge.

From The Proposal, Phase I seeks to develop:

“a loop trail from VT Route 114 (near the Hurricane Road) to Unknown Pond and over Middle Mountain to the lower Gore Mountain Trail - linking the existing but unimproved Unknown Pond Trail with the lower portion of the well-established Gore Mountain Trail”.

These trails will complement the subsequent phase of the Hiking Corridor Proposal on Bluff Mountain (Phase II) by providing both destination day hikes and remote multi-day backpacking opportunities.

Specifically the proposal involves:

“1) formalizing and maintaining an existing route to Unknown Pond, 2) establishing a new route over Middle Mountain and 3) improving a short trail link between the Gore Mountain Trail and Middle Mountain.”

GMC will develop Phase I trails in an orderly fashion, however the sequence of trail development will be dictated by field preparation, landowner agreements and Agency

recommendations. As such Phase I may not follow a linear progression, rather it will likely involve (in order of priority) the gradual improvement of existing trails, the development of short trail connections, and lastly the creation of new trail corridors as necessary. For the purposes of this proposal, however, descriptions of Phase I trail development will follow the sequence described above (east from Vermont Route 114 to Unknown Pond and north to Middle Mountain and the lower Gore Mountain Trail).

Unknown Pond

From The Proposal,

“The development of the Unknown Pond Trail would include improving the existing route from VT Route 114 (following portions of an existing log road, footpath and snowmobile trail) to reduce erosion and relocating, where necessary, upper portions of this route to a more permanent and stable corridor that minimizes conflicts with timber harvesting and snowmobiles while providing an optimal connection with the Bluff Mountain and Middle Mountain Trails.”

The Unknown Pond Trail (approximately 2.0 miles) is located on lands owned by Ronald and Gerald DeVost and the Essex Timber Company and encumbered by public access easements secured through the Forest Legacy program (on former Hancock Timber lands) and the Champion Lands purchase. The lower trail (approximately 1.0 mile) is located on DeVost lands and includes approximately 0.8 miles of existing log roads/skid trails and 0.2 miles of existing but heavily eroded foot trail. The upper section (also approximately 1.0 mile) includes a section of large improved timber haul road (used in the winter by VAST) with approximately 0.4 miles owned by DeVost and 0.5 miles owned by Essex Timber. A short segment of trail (less than 0.1 mile and also on Essex Timber land) accesses Unknown Pond on an abandoned skid trail, likely used historically to cross the pond in the winter. Additionally, a 0.4 mile section of older, unimproved skid trail bypasses much of the haul road trail on the DeVost property (providing an alternative route to the VAST trail in winter) and re-connects near the DeVost/Essex Timber boundary.

The unimproved skid trail was historically used by local snowmobilers and camp owners to access Unknown Pond prior to the construction of the larger and better maintained timber haul road (current VAST trail). Following the construction of the new route, the old trail fell into disrepair and is used only periodically (although signs of light maintenance is still evident in cleared brush and paint blazes).

Trailhead and Parking. The Unknown Pond Trail begins on Vermont Route 114 from an existing, large log landing located directly across 114 from the ‘Hurricane Road’. This area is easily accessible, suits a large number of cars, and is located on gravel soils imported during previous logging operations.

Lower Trail. The development of the lower Unknown Pond Trail from Route 114 will involve clearing blowdowns and clipping brush on the existing skid road, placing additional earthen waterbars (many currently exist from previous logging operations), and installing signs and blazes to direct hikers. The short section of trail located on the existing but eroded foot-trail (much narrower than the skid trail) will require significant stabilization as it

now serves as a seasonal stream and is incised approximately 12-18 inches. Relocating this section of trail to higher ground is the most practical solution.

Upper Trail. As it exists currently, the upper section of the Unknown Pond Trail, the improved timber haul road, requires no additional maintenance other than occasional brush and blowdown clearing and the installation of periodic trail markers/blazes.

The unimproved skid trail, that could bypass the upper trail in winter, appears to be poorly drained and unsuited for summer hiking. It would, however, serve as a favorable winter route as it avoids much of the busy section of VAST trail. This skid trail connects with the haul road just before the spur route to Unknown Pond.

While both of these routes provide an immediate link between the lower Unknown Pond Trail and Unknown Pond itself, GMC would prefer to locate the trail away from this corridor to avoid conflicts with winter snowmobile use and timber activities. This could be accomplished by establishing a parallel route that climbs to the Bluff Ridge and, turning north, approaches Unknown Pond from the south. Such an alignment achieves two important goals, 1) it provides a more remote hiking experience within the closed canopy of the forest and 2) it approaches Unknown Pond from the south and intersects the existing haul road perpendicularly – creating an optimal alignment that minimizes conflicts, reduces line-of-sight concerns, and consolidates hiking traffic from the south. As a result, the Unknown Pond and Bluff Ridge Trail junction will be located away from the Pond and haul road (most likely just a short distance south).

Spur To Unknown Pond. From the large haul road/VAST trail it is a short distance (less than 0.1 mile) to the shore of Unknown Pond. This section of abandoned skid trail is located within the 200-foot Special Treatment Buffer Zone around the Pond and represents the most ecologically sensitive section of the proposed GMC trail network. The existing way leads to the gravelly shoreline and avoids the three lease camps located on the pond.

Middle Mountain Summit Route

The Proposal describes the Middle Mountain segment of Phase I as follows:

“The Middle Mountain Summit Trail would climb northward from Unknown Pond and follow the southeastern crest of Middle Mountain. It would highlight the mountain summit, and one or more scenic lookouts, before descending, at times on existing ways, the northern ridge and connecting with the lower Gore Mountain Trail.”

GMC has conducted substantial scouting work on the northern portion of this route and moderate to extensive reconnaissance on the southern and eastern sections. The following ‘control points’ will be used to lay out portions of the Middle Mountain route;

- Consolidate access points at Unknown Pond to create a single junction connecting routes to Middle Mountain, Unknown Pond, Route 114 and Bluff Mountain.
- Respect the one-acre exclusion area surrounding the lease camp located on the western shore of Unknown Pond (‘Headwaters Camp’),

- Provide a 'summit experience' on Middle Mountain, including the opportunity for vistas from its southeast facing ledges,
- Utilize existing sections of game trails and skid/logging roads,
- Access a scenic boulder lookout on Middle's northern flank,
- Develop an existing trail junction at the northern base of Middle Mountain, where the proposed hiking trails and an existing log road currently meet – this is also a critical boundary area between the Essex Timber and Heartwood Forestland Fund properties.
- Create an ideal alignment with the currently flagged connector trail linking the lower Gore Mountain Trail and the Middle Mountain routes.

Middle Mountain South End. The route used to access the Middle Mountain summit from Unknown Pond will be carefully developed to avoid the one-acre camp exclusion area at Headwaters Camp and to minimize environmental impacts on the steep southern slopes of the mountain. The proposed route will gain the summit by following existing logging roads and new trail construction to climb gradually up the mountain's eastern flank. This route will take advantage of dry soils and utilize sidehill trail construction to ascend the mountain, using switchbacks where necessary to reverse course and moderate the slope of the trail. (Details of sidehill techniques and switchback construction can be found on pages 50-66 of the Appalachian Trail Conference's Appalachian Trail Design, Construction and Maintenance, Second Edition, 2000.)

Middle Mountain Summit. Once on Middle Mountain's summit ridge (there are three summits on Middle Mountain), the trail will follow existing skid paths through the open forest on the mountain summit and avoid areas of thick regeneration. GMC prefers to develop at least one scenic vista, taking advantage of the mountain's steep southeastern face and providing views towards Gore Mountain and the Nulhegan Basin. A well-marked route for new trail construction has been identified from the eastern summit down the north ridge.

Middle Mountain North End. From the eastern summit, the route descends gradually through open woods to a lesser summit on the eastern point of the mountain and then further down out of the spruce-fir forest onto the 'plateau' that makes up the northern ridge of the mountain. Multiple skid trails are located on this northern ridge, traversing the area along generally level grades and passing a scenic boulder lookout where a vista provides local views of Gore Mountain's western slope and the Brousseau Mountain cliffs in the distance to the northeast. Development of this route will involve clearing brush and blowdowns, preparing the treadway and installing blazes.

From the plateau, a well-flagged route descends to a woods road located near the Essex/Heartwood boundary. This route will involve the construction of switchbacks and sidehill segments and follows generally rocky terrain where materials are readily available in the long-term for the construction of waterbars, steps and retainers. Here the proposed Gore Mountain Connector Trail would depart the woods road north-northwest to the lower Gore Mountain Trail.

Gore Mountain Connector Trail. The connector trail linking the proposed Middle Mountain trail with the existing lower Gore Mountain Trail is located on Heartwood Forestland Fund lands in Avery's Gore. The route, approximately 0.5 miles, meanders through young mixed hardwoods and joins the Gore Mountain Trail at an existing junction. GMC has received preliminary approval to develop this route and conducted extensive scouting. The corridor, marked with flagging tape, will require new trail construction including extensive brushing and some drainage work. The lower Gore Mountain Trail is a well-established route that is maintained annually by local volunteers and members of the NorthWoods Stewardship Center's Northeast Kingdom Conservation Service Corps (Kingdom Corps). The Gore Mountain Trail was established in 2000 and follows much of the historic jeep road leading to the former fire lookout station on the Gore Mountain summit. It is one of two existing foot trails adjacent to the Champion Lands (the other is located on the low summit of Bluff Mountain in Island Pond).

These proposals are located within active timber management areas and, in fact they follow a number of logging trails that may be used in the future. As noted in earlier correspondence with Wil Merck of Essex Timber, GMC recognizes the primacy of timber management, and when timber harvest activities occur, GMC will post trails accordingly to notify and educate hikers. Such action will follow the recommendations of Essex Timber and FPR Staff and may result in short-term closure of trails. Timber management in the former Champion Lands is part of the hiking experience, and trail postings should remind hikers of this component of the public/private settlement and foster an appreciation for northern Vermont's working forest.

Development and Maintenance

GMC has indicated that it will follow a 'go slow' approach to developing trails on the former Champion Lands. Currently GMC volunteers have invested hundreds of hours in the field – planning and scouting routes not only for Phase I of its proposal but also Phase II as well. The development of Phase I trails will be done in a manner that creates first, trails on existing corridors (the trail to Unknown Pond), second, trail connections linking existing trails (the Middle Mountain Gap/Low Route) and lastly, new trail segments that will further link the trail network (the Middle Mountain Summit route).

GMC will develop trails in consultation with FPR, Essex Timber other landowners, based on existing field resources (staff and volunteer time). GMC will notify both FPR and landowners in advance of planned trail building activities and will report annually on its efforts (per The Proposal).

Maintenance activities will be carried out by GMC volunteers. Trail construction, as funding permits, will be largely undertaken by the local Northeast Kingdom Conservation Service Corps with support from GMC Field Programs and volunteers. All trail building and maintenance activities, unless otherwise noted, will adhere to the standards described in the ATC Appalachian Trail Design, Construction and Maintenance, Second Edition 2000. Standards for placing signs and blazes, developing trailheads and parking, distributing maps, closing trails, and addressing management, maintenance and resource damage

needs is further elaborated in The Proposal. This abstract was developed by GMC Northeast Kingdom President Luke O'Brien. GMC points of contact are Luke O'Brien and Director of Field Programs, Dave Hardy.