



Conservation Corps

TRAIL STEWARD REPORT

Croton Gorge Unique Area, May - October 2021



A PROGRAM OF THE
New York-New Jersey Trail Conference

REPORT PREPARED BY CREW LEADER
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INTRODUCTION

The Trail Conference is taking a leadership role in coordinating stewardship efforts to keep up with growing threats to natural spaces and outdoor recreation areas. To educate users and help mitigate the negative impacts from increased use, the Trail Conference has partnered with land managers to begin a multi-phased approach at the Croton Gorge Unique Area. We believe the most effective way to advance change is through user education, public participation, and sustainable, on-the-ground solutions. Our Trail Steward program is an integral part of our response to these threats. When used responsibly, trails protect both the people who use them and the environment that surrounds them. But without education, trail lands are subject to mistreatment and misuse. Trail Stewards provide outreach and information about park regulations, hiker safety, preparedness, and other best practices. In addition to readying hikers, Trail Stewards help discourage and mitigate the misuse of trails and the surrounding lands through education and public relations work.



CROTON GORGE UNIQUE AREA

STATISTICS

TOTAL STEWARDING DAYS:

48

TOTAL VISITORS TO THE UNIQUE AREA:

2,518

TOTAL VISITORS TO THE OLD CROTON AQUEDUCT TRAIL:

1,010

BUSIEST DAY:

July 18th

84 visitors to the
Unique Area

LOST HIKERS HELPED:

10

INJURED HIKERS HELPED:

2

GARBAGE BAGS PROVIDED TO VISITORS:

112

AVG HIGH:

77°F

AVG LOW:

61°F

DAYS WITH RAIN:

9

After having the task in 2020 of needing to explain to potential visitors to the Croton Gorge Unique Area that it was closed due to COVID and habitat restoration, it was exciting to steward the Unique Area this year now that it is open. However, this location now required an entirely different approach to stewarding. The main goal of the Trail Stewards being at the Croton Gorge Unique Area was to encourage visitors to enjoy the area, but to do so responsibly. Often, this meant alerting visitors to take extra time and care when descending the small, eroded trail down to the riverside and warning them about potentially dangerous swimming conditions in some portions of the river. Additionally, Stewards were tasked with relating the regulations of the area to visitors, such as the forbiddance of various items including grills, fires, and campsites. Another major issue Stewards were asked to tackle this season was helping mitigate the amount of trash visitors would leave in the area. Through conversations with visitors and providing trash bags, Stewards attempted to communicate why it was important for visitors to pack their trash out of the Unique Area and how litter was harmful to both the visitor experience and the health of the surrounding natural area.

To accomplish the tasks above, Trail Stewards were present at the Unique Area from May to October on weekends (Saturday and Sundays) and on any holidays that fell within the season. When the number of visitors to the area increased in the late-summer, additional stewarding days were added on some Thursdays and Fridays to respond to the uptick in usage. The Steward Program relied on similar flexibility when it came to stewarding start and end times in order to identify when stewarding might be most useful based on visitor usage. The Stewards experimented with new configurations for the main Trail Steward station this season. For much of the beginning and middle of the season, three Trail Stewards were stationed along the Old Croton Aqueduct (OCA) Trail near the path leading down to the Unique Area, giving them the opportunity to greet the visitors and provide them with necessary information. In this configuration, the Stewards would also make regular visits to the riverside to interact with visitors on land and with others passing by in the water on kayaks and on stand-up paddleboards. When the Steward station was located alongside the OCA, Stewards were also able to function as Aqueduct Ambassadors, providing hikers with directions and answering questions about the history of the Aqueduct.

CROTON GORGE UNIQUE AREA

At the beginning of the season, local historians generously provided an intensive day of training to the Stewards so they would be well-versed in and ready to share the local history involving the Croton Dam, the OCA, and the various industries that were in operation at the riverside to take advantage of the available water power.

As the season went on, the Trail Stewards saw the number of visitors to the Unique Area grow each weekend as word spread that the location was open again. Consequently, as litter amounts and visitor numbers started to increase in the late-summer months, the Stewards tried stationing themselves down along the riverside instead of on the OCA. While this meant Stewards weren't able to interact with hikers on the OCA as easily, it did give the Stewards more of a chance to interact with people attempting to enjoy the natural beauty of the Unique Area. Being by the riverside also gave the Stewards more of an opportunity to pick up trash, which in turn allowed for more conversations with visitors about how litter can affect a natural area and why it was important to clean everything up. This method of "leading by example" when it came to waste was surprisingly effective, and the amount of litter (which had increased exponentially for a couple of weeks) started to dwindle down again. On a few occasions, some visitors even helped the Stewards pick up the trash and haul it out of the Unique Area because they said they loved the area and were so appreciative of the efforts to keep it clean!

The Stewards found that a majority of visitors have been very receptive to the regulations and requests to keep the area clean and safe for all to enjoy. The Stewards found that visitors came to the area from a wide range of locations, including Ossining, Yorktown, the Bronx, Brooklyn, New Jersey, and as far away as Pennsylvania to picnic, swim, fish, and enjoy nature. Though the Unique Area is not an expansive state park or preserve like our other stewarding locations, the enthusiasm visitors have for the area shows the benefits of public access to natural lands. Unfortunately, because the area is a smaller one that is sandwiched between private properties, the Stewards were often faced with the complicated task of being responsive to the local neighbors who remember the past difficulties of the Unique Area and are not hesitant to express their opinions. While some of these opinions were ill-informed or off-putting, one goal of the Steward program is to improve conditions in the Unique Area to eventually lessen any harsh feelings about public access to the area.



CROTON GORGE UNIQUE AREA

Part of this work includes also coordinating an educational approach with the occasional presence of DEC Forest Rangers, and with County Police stationed along the roadside on weekends to assist with any issues that could arise, especially in the small parking area near the Unique Area. One large issue the Unique Area seems to continue to face is the appearance of large amounts of garbage overnight, outside of Stewarding hours (as most groups seem to be very receptive to keep the area clean at the Steward's request when they are there). Over time, perhaps a love for the area combined with Trail Stewarding efforts will help contain some of this behavior and contribute to a more environmentally-conscious, sustainable, and engaged type of recreation in the area.

In many ways, the Croton Gorge Unique Area presented challenges that were very different from the difficulties the Stewards faced at the other locations in the Lower Hudson Valley. Though the number of visitors were much lower, the type and length of conversations Stewards were required to have with neighbors, OCA hikers, and Unique Area visitors were often much more in-depth, requiring a level of thoughtfulness, tact, and understanding that was not always needed in every interaction at other Stewarding locations. While this sometimes presented challenges for the Stewards mentally and emotionally, it also created the potential for some of the most rewarding stewarding interactions. When speaking to thousands of visitors a day, it is easy to get lost in the "script" of reciting hiking routes and the necessary supplies for a hiker. At the Unique Area, the Stewards had to take the time to ask visitors what they hoped to do that day, and to provide relevant information, warnings, and requests. In these personalized engagements, however, there was also the opportunity to talk to people about why they came to an area, why they liked it, and what incentive they might have to keep the area beautiful for future use.

The Stewards also engaged in a variety of trail maintenance efforts on the OCA and at the Croton Gorge Unique Area specifically. Early in the season, when there was a lower number of hikers and visitors to the area, the Stewards were able to spend some time focusing on removing hundreds of pounds of garlic mustard – a prevalent invasive plant in the area that was preparing to drop its seeds! In the fall, stewarding efforts shifted to focus on removing hundreds of pounds of Japanese Stilt Grass, another prevalent invasive plant. In both instances, this invasive plant removal was a targeted effort coordinated by Diane Alden, an on-site mentor and consultant, who identified the most productive time of year to remove the invasive plants in order to have the most impact and mitigate as much spread as possible.

Before and after photos of invasive Japanese Stilt Grass removal along the Old Croton Aqueduct





Trail Steward Jen Meikle picks up trash on the riverside, photo by Lily Gelfars



Before and after disassembling an illegal fire ring at the shore of the river, photos by Alex Benedetto

TRAIL MAINTENANCE

STATISTICS

TOTAL MAINTENANCE DAYS:

41

CREW WORK HOURS:

193

UNIQUE TRAIL SECTIONS WORKED:

27

TRAILS BLAZED:

32.9 miles

TOTAL DISTANCE COVERED:

93.6

Another part of the Trail Steward position was trail maintenance, two days a week. Trail maintenance provided the Stewards with a great opportunity to learn more about the stewarding locations, explore lesser known trails, and achieve a better understanding of some of the core work and mission of the Trail Conference.

The Hudson Valley Stewards largely spent Thursdays with Andy Garrison, who is a volunteer trail maintainer with the Trail Conference and was also an amazing resource for the Steward's education throughout the season. While working with Andy, Stewards focused primarily on maintaining the Long Path; this included general clipping and clearing of trees and plants as well as blazing and re-blazing trails when necessary. The Stewards also had the opportunity to work on a big reroute project with Andy in the Bashakill Falls area. On this project specifically, the Stewards worked with Andy to move a section of the Long Path that required road-walking off of the road and onto a new section of trail that the Stewards were able to carve completely from scratch.

On Fridays, the Stewards received assignments from park managers and employees in Hudson Highlands and worked on various trails in the Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve and in Fahnestock State Park. Some of the tasks there included covering graffiti (especially on Breakneck Ridge), clipping and clearing overgrown foliage, and blazing and re-blazing trails. One high-impact project the Stewards got to work on in Hudson Highlands centered on an area just outside of the visitor center. The Stewards worked with the park team to extend visitor recreation spaces near the park office by clearing a bunch of brush, bushes, and invasive plants to make room for more picnic tables and a better view of the river. That experience was a great, immediately tangible project to end the season on!

Along with regular trail maintenance, the Hudson Valley Trail Stewards also did some additional trail maintenance projects with Trail Conference volunteer teams. Some of these included: a small crew working in the Turkey Mountain Nature Preserve doing trail maintenance/clearing and some basic rock work; working with a volunteer team at High Point State Park to remove barberry from a historic farm wall; and working again with the same team later in the season to remove invasive plants such as barberry, multiflora rose, and oriental bittersweet along a trail near Lusscroft Farms.





Trail Stewards clearing an area outside the Visitor Center at Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve, photo by Noelle Hedgcock



Jen Meikle blazing at Breakneck Ridge, photo by Rose Eid



Building bog bridges at Sam's Point, photo by Myra Romano