



SingleTracks

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Trail Partnerships Thrive in the Blue Hills

by Joe Sloane

When Maggi Brown, Supervisory Ranger for the DCR's South Region started work at the Blue Hills Reservation in 1992, one of her first assignments was to manage the formation of a volunteer group of mountain bike riders who had said that they wanted to be helpful in the Blue Hills. Their peer education concept was the brainchild of a few NEMBA members who suggested that they had a creative way to communicate the state's new mountain bike policy directly to riders on the trails.



On a heavily eroded section of the Wildcat Notch Trail, these FBH volunteers helped create a tight base layer of rock that was carefully filled and covered with gravel and dirt. photo by Dexter Robinson

Over the years, Maggi has expanded her volunteer group's original focus to include all Blue Hills trail users. Through her persistence and a constant urging that volunteers balance the park's interests with their own, the TrailWatch program has fifty dedicated members and has become a model for volunteer programs in other parks.

For decades, participation in trail work in the Blue Hills has been an important activity of various volunteer groups. In the 1970s and 1980s, Robert Romeri and others coordinated trail work projects for the Friends of the Blue Hills. In addition to wearing their TrailWatch hats, many SEMASS NEMBA members have also helped to plan and implement trail work projects, including bringing the IMBA's Trail Care crews' instruction and insights to the Blue Hills. The Boy Scouts of America organization has assisted with many Eagle Scout trail projects, demonstrating to young people the need for planning, coordination and follow-through. The DCR staff also gets valuable trail work assistance from their strong relationships with local corporations including REI and non-profit organizations such as Boston Cares who seek to involve groups of enthusiastic volunteers in local projects.

The DCR also relies on grants and state funding to contract with trail crews from the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Student Conservation Agency who have brought their specific skills and equipment to projects such as granite step reconstruction along the Skyline Trail.

Regardless of who has organized any particular trail work project in the Blue Hills, the assembled group of volunteers on any given work site typically includes people from many different user groups and



The Friends of the Blue Hills crew working on a typical Blue Hills culvert replacement project along Border Path. Photo by Dexter Robinson

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organizations. From Maggi Brown's perspective, it is the shared respect for the Blue Hills that brings these diverse park enthusiasts together and it is on the trails where their motivations interconnect. "This melding of interest and energy brings a wealth of talents, experiences and perspectives that is especially valuable to us as park managers," says Maggi.

As Forestry Assistant/Natural Resources Specialist for the DCR's South Region, Alexandra Echandi must balance trail maintenance and improvement projects with wildlife and plant inventories, invasive species removal, and endangered and rare species protection. "I know that completing these tasks in over 8,000 acres and over 150 miles of trails is impossible for one person, so I must rely on partners and volunteers for support in these efforts", says Ale.

In the Blue Hills, Ale has been instrumental in bolstering the Friends of the Blue Hills' tireless trail crew and their Adopt-a-Trail program. Early in 2008, the Friends hired Steve Cobble, NEMBA's SEMASS President to help with a grant-funded project to plot GPS coordinates of all Blue Hills trails and make detailed notes on trail conditions. With the additional input of hikers and mountain bikers, Friends member Dexter Robinson processed the raw data and created an impressive online database highlighting the Reservation's trails and their conditions. Trail crews now have the ability to file updates on the condition of each trail via online work reports. This database is used by both the Friends and DCR to track trail maintenance progress and additional trail needs.

Since its inception in 2006, over thirty individuals have enrolled in



Most Blue Hills trail projects involve moving around lots of rocks. This load was headed for a project along Base Path. Photo by Joe Sloane

the Adopt-a-Trail program, taking personal responsibility for many miles of trails. In addition to encouraging and supporting trail adopters, the Friends' trail crew sponsors many volunteer trail maintenance events to brush back trails, replace damaged culverts and restructure existing water bars, ditches and rolling grade dips. In just a few short years, this Blue Hill's trail crew has made a huge contribution to the trail network.

One of Ale Echandi's toughest responsibilities is implementing aspects of the state's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program that directly relate to the Blue Hills. This means balancing trail maintenance goals with state and local rules regarding species and habitat protection. Negotiating the challenging maze of permits that are typically required before a trail maintenance project can proceed is a strong skill that Echandi has brought to the DCR's South Region.

Challenges must also be expected when volunteers with wide ranging experiences converge at a trail work site, as expectations and technical approaches can vary considerably. Trail repairs and improvements that seem to make sense in the summer could be challenging or unsafe to winter skiers. Water bars that are well-suited for hiking trails high in the White Mountains may not be appropriate for trails that serve beginner-level bike riders in a suburban park.

Understanding these challenges, Friends of the Blue Hills members Bob Flagg and Dexter Robinson attended NEMBA workshops and trail work sessions and carefully studied AMC and IMBA trail work publi-

cations as well as those published by state and federal agencies while planning their Adopt-A-Trail program. Based on an Appalachian Mountain Club model, the Friends have written an Adopt-a-Trail Handbook for the Blue Hills program. Technical instruction at trail work events consistently emphasizes the fact that a wide spectrum of trail users can always be found along the hundreds of miles of trails in the Blue Hills.

Communication and cooperation among the many various user groups and stakeholders in the Blue Hills Reservation is more important now than ever as the DCR is in the process of assembling a long-awaited Resource Management Plan for the Blue Hills. The DCR and the Friends have held public information sessions to gather public comment from park users on the draft RMP which is due out by the end of January. John Sheehan, NEMBA member and Chairman of the Friends of the Blue Hills Advocacy Committee has pointed out that ongoing trail usage and maintenance issues relative to all of the reservation's visitors will be addressed in this plan. Once the draft RMP is available, the Advocacy Committee will be meeting with various user groups to be sure that their interests are fully represented as the RMP proceeds from draft to final form.

Just as the TrailWatch program has become a model for a broad based volunteer program focusing on park user's interactions, the current trail work program implemented by the Friends of the Blue Hills is a gold standard for any effective trail maintenance program that finds its strength in partnerships.

In an effort to expand the Adopt-a-Trail program and overall trail work efforts, the DCR and the Friends of the Blue Hills have invited NEMBA to enhance its role as a trail maintenance and improvement partner in the Blue Hills. "With NEMBA's assistance, we look forward to working and sharing ideas, skills and knowledge on how to improve all users' trail experiences in the Blue Hills while protecting reservation resources", says Ale Echandi.

Having seen firsthand the results of many NEMBA trail work projects across Massachusetts and the role that NEMBA has played in educating DCR staff on sustainable trail maintenance practices, the Blue Hills staff is eager to bolster NEMBA's trail work presence on the trails.

According to Maggi Brown, "We all know that sharing the trails is the key to a safe and enjoyable park experience. Synthesizing the opinions of a variety of park users and then galvanizing those ideas with a mix of hard work, dirt and sweat is the ultimate expression of a shared commitment. Through hands-on trail improvements and commitment to shared goals, these cooperative organizations have joined forces to create a lasting contribution to the park and the environment."

For many years, NEMBA members have participated in many trail maintenance projects in the Blue Hills. SEMASS NEMBA leadership believes that this new invitation is a great opportunity to strengthen our working relationships with the DCR, the Friends of the Blue Hills and all of the many partners that contribute to an impressive trail work program in the Blue Hills.

For more information on trail work efforts in the Blue Hills, visit www.friendsofthebluehills.org

