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THE COLLEGIATE SOURCE

ESF outdoors club helps clean Adirondack trails
By Lindsay Beller

Aaron Rinehart gave sound advice to seven members of the Bob Marshall Club standing before him at a trailhead in the Adirondack Mountains on Saturday morning.

"Walk straight through the puddles," said Rinehart, a senior environmental studies major at State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. "You're going to get wet and dirty anyway."

As the school outing club's trip leader, Rinehart wanted to ensure that the group wouldn't undermine its mission -- to clean a trail while minimizing the impact they made walking on it. As volunteers for the Adirondack Trails Day Project, an Adirondack Mountain Club-sponsored annual event held after foliage season, they aimed to improve the trail, not to cause more damage.

"You want to walk where it's worst," said Rinehart.

Stepping around puddles not only enlarges them, but also leads to soil erosion and trampled vegetation.

The group took those words to heart as they slogged nearly three miles up Algonquin Mountain in the cold, rain, sleet and snow to repair one of the most used trails in the high peaks region of the Adirondacks. Algonquin, which stands at 5,114 feet, is the second highest peak in the range.

Armed with hazel hoes, a forestry tool that has a long wooden handle attached to a wide blade, the students drained water off trails flooded by fallen foliage. They scraped away mud, rocks and other natural debris into canals so water could run through them, off the trail and down the mountain.

Wes Lampman of the Adirondack Mountain Club said a combination of factors causes damage to the trails. A lot has to do with the existing soils, and the poor slope and design of trails that can't handle the kind of traffic they get, he said.

The high peaks region, which includes 46 mountains over 3,800 feet, attracts thousands of people each year for challenging hikes and great views. A club called the Adirondack Forty-Sixers even exists, consisting of hikers who have reached the summit of every peak.

Considering this high amount of trail use, maintenance is done several times throughout the year to minimize the impact of the hikers, said Lampman.

"Closing the trails isn't really an option," he said. "So stabilizing them with trail work is necessary."

The event drew about 50 people from New York and Canada who helped work on six trails, although this was less than expected, Lampman said.

While bad weather kept others away, it failed to stop the Bob Marshall Club, whose members take frequent hiking, backpacking and camping trips to the Adirondacks, from helping out.

"You finally give back to the trails after using them all year round," Rinehart said.

The group continued to work as temperatures dropped and the elevation increased. When the ground hardened under a blanket of snow, making it difficult to spot and scrape out drainage areas, they decided to turn around. But the hard work bothered no one.

Aaron Cushing, a senior environmental and forest biology major, said, "It's a labor of love."

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As they trekked down the trail, the sky squeezed out one final downpour before brightening up with a hint of sun. Back at the High Peaks Information Center, junior environmental studies major Brett Kelly laughed at a sign posted on the wall as he tried to warm up and dry off.

It read "Mountain weather may be unpredictable."

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