

Mt. Major: A Community Asset Worth Protecting

--Findings from the Mt. Major Visitor Use Management Study--

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Introductions

- **Carrie Deegan- Forest Society**
 - VP for Recreation Management & Public Engagement
- **Matt Scaccia- Forest Society**
 - Recreation & Community Relations Manager
- **Mike Ferguson- Outdoor Research Insights**
 - Principal and Founder



Mt. Major Progress and Investment Timeline

Key Forest Society milestones, 2013–2025

2013–15



"Everybody Hikes MM" campaign

2020



Phase 1 main trail restoration

2022



Volunteer Trailhead Outreach Program (VTOP) launched

2024



Phase 2 main trail restoration

2016–17



Paved parking lot, portable toilets, and Mt. Major Outdoor Classroom

2021



New pavilion and information kiosk

2023



Parking lot purchased from NHDOT

2025



Comprehensive visitor use study



A decade of stewardship, access, infrastructure, and visitor use management investments.

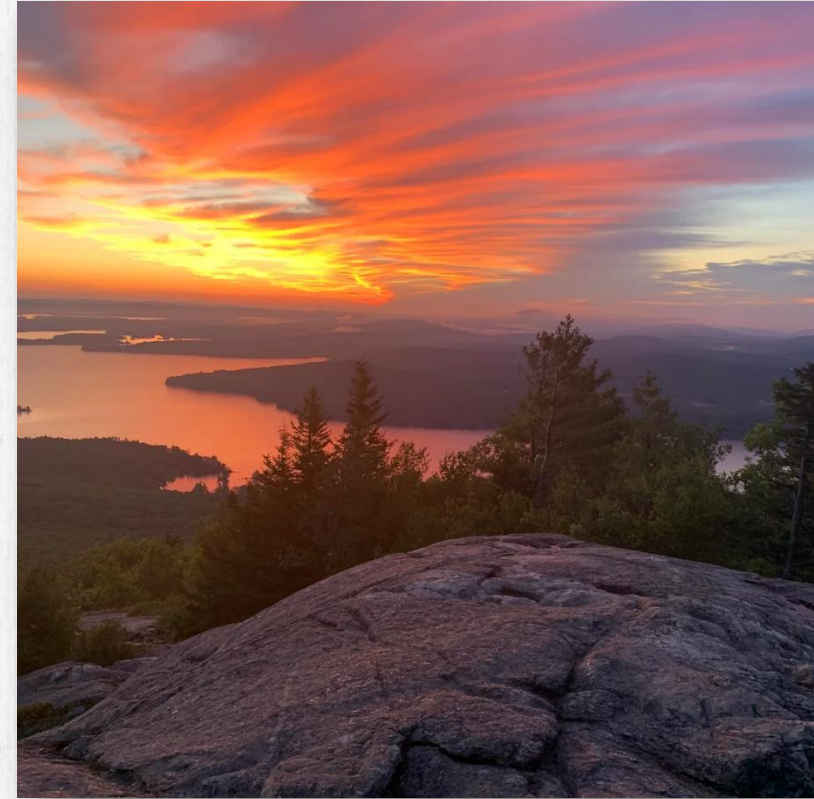
Presentation Outline

- Study background
- Topline findings
- Visitor voices
- Stewardship & engagement
- Summary and conclusions
- Q+A and open discussion
- *Full report: Today's presentation highlights the key findings from the MM VUM study; the technical management report is available through the Forest Society upon request



Why This Study Was Needed

- **Growing demand:** MM is one of NH's most iconic and heavily visited hiking destinations, serving both local residents and visitors from throughout New England
- **Information need:** FS wanted reliable data about who visits, how visitors prepare, what they experience, and how they perceive current conditions
- **Study goal:** Provide a foundation for protecting visitor experiences, supporting stewardship, and informing careful, data-informed decisions



Mt. Major: A Long-Term Stewardship Investment

- **Past investments:** The FS and partners have supported trail restoration, parking improvements, portable toilets, a pavilion, kiosk, and visitor info
- **Volunteer support:** VTOP and other volunteers help welcome visitors, share information, and support responsible recreation at the trailhead
- **Study investment:** This visitor study represents another stewardship investment: listening directly to visitors and community members to guide future care



What We Studied

- **Visitor profiles:** Who visits MM, where they come from, how often they visit, and how visitor groups differ
- **Experience quality:** How visitors evaluate satisfaction, safety, welcomeness, parking, crowding, trail conditions, signage, and facilities
- **Planning & stewardship:** How visitors prepare, what info sources they use, what they expect, and how they may connect with the FS



Study Approach

- **On-site survey:** Trained researchers administered exit-use intercept surveys from June - October 2025 across summer, fall, weekdays, and weekends
- **Strong participation:** Researchers approached 717 visitors and completed 566 surveys, producing a 79% response rate
- **Applied analysis:** Results included visitor profiles, open-ended comments, and comparisons among local, non-local, first-time, repeat, and younger visitors



Who Visits Mt. Major?



The “Average” MM Visitor

- **Established visitors:** Regular, long-term users
- **Small groups:** Typically small groups averaging 2.8 people
- **Strong experiences:** High satisfaction and loyalty



Who they are

- Female (51%)
- Age 25–34 (30%)
- White (80%)
- College educated (43%)
- Household income \$200,000+ (21%)



Where they come from

- Primarily from NH or MA
- Drives about 1.5 hours
- Nearly always reaches the summit (99%)



Typical MM visitor



How they visit

- Repeat visitor (59%)
- About 5 visits per year
- About 11 total years visiting MM
- Group size of about 3
- Does not bring a dog (83%)



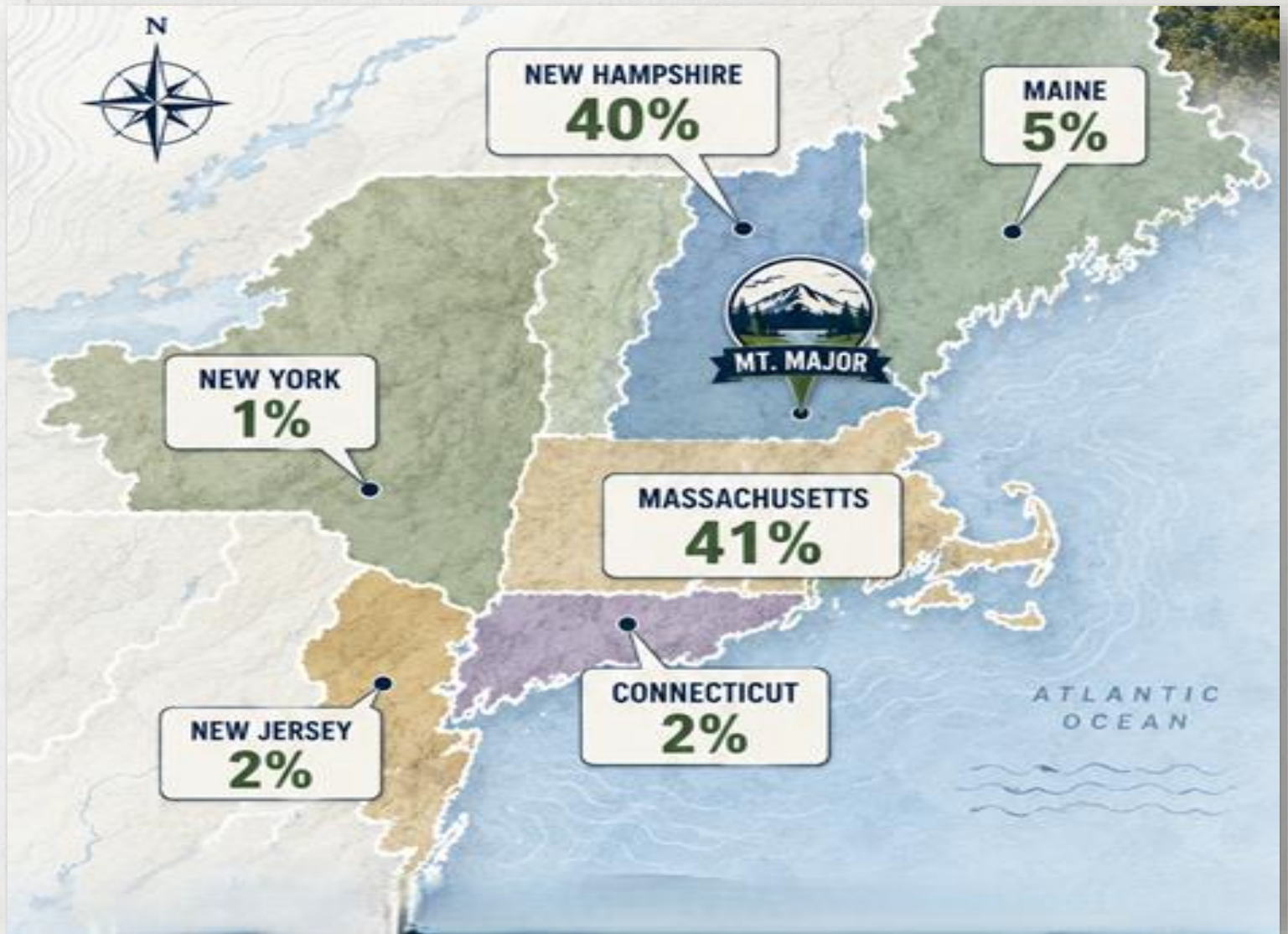
How they feel

- Overall satisfaction: 6.5/7.0
- Intention to return: 6.4
- Feels safe: 6.8

A Regional Destination

- **Regional destination:** MM increasingly attracts visitors from across New England
- **Travel commitment:** Visitors drove an average of approximately 1.5 hours
- **Dual role:** MM serves both destination visitors and loyal repeat hikers

“Overall great hike. Would return regularly if I lived closer.”



Mt. Major Benefits the Broader Community

- **Regional draw:** MM attracts visitors from across New England, with influence well beyond Alton and the immediate Lakes Region
- **Economic connections:** Visitors support local restaurants, lodging, shops, businesses, and other local services during their trips
- **Community asset:** MM provides accessible outdoor rec while contributing to community health outcomes and quality of life



*"The community of Alton,
the people, and the view!"*

*"Beautiful and accessible!
We had a great time and will be back."*

A Loyal Visitor Base

- **Repeat use:** 59% of visitors had previously visited MM, while 41% were first-time visitors
- **Frequent use:** Visitors averaged 5 visits the previous year
- **Long-term connection:** Repeat visitors showed higher sat, intention to return, and attachment

“Always great. Hiked it about 70 times.”



Visitor Segments Snapshot

- **First-time vs. repeat:** Repeat visitors reported higher SAT and stronger return intentions
 - **Local repeat visitors:** 34% of all visitors, avg 6 visits/yr, been visiting for 12 yrs, with a 45 min avg drive time to MM
 - **Non-local repeat visitors:** A notable 24% of all visitors, avg 3 visits/yr, been visiting for 8 yrs, with a 2.3 hr avg drive time to MM
- **Younger visitors:** Adults ages 25–34 were especially digitally oriented, more than half using AllTrails

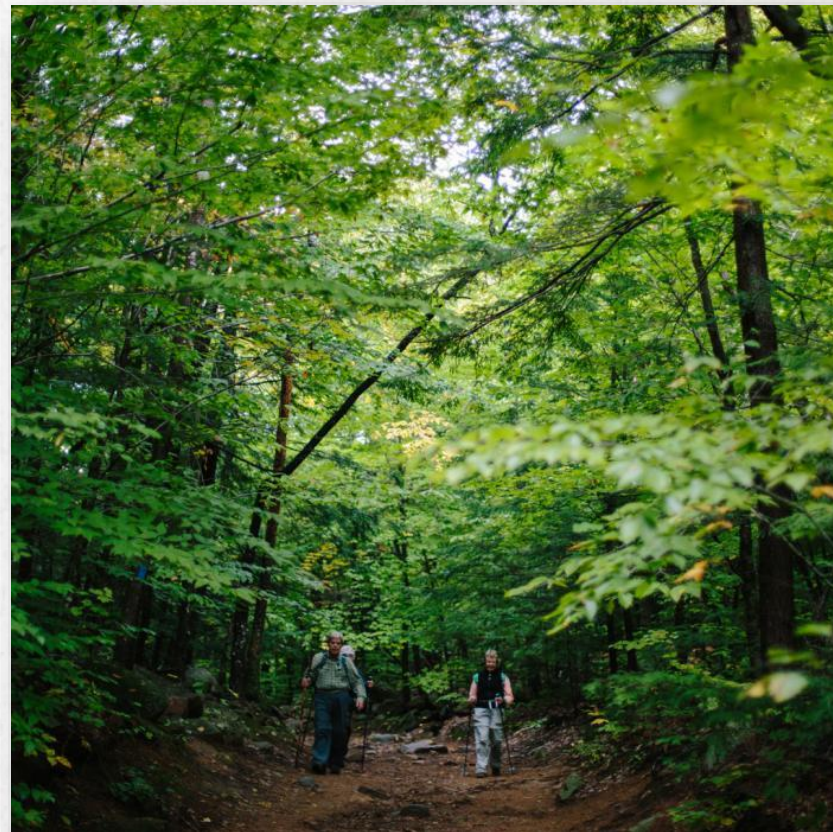


How Visitors Plan, Prepare, & Stay Safe



How Visitors Plan Their Trip

- **Digital planning:** AllTrails was the most common pre-trip information source (45%), followed by Google searches (38%)
 - **Digital audiences:** *First-time, non-local, and younger visitors* relied especially heavily on online trip-planning tools; 54% of visitors ages 25–34 used AllTrails
- **Social connections:** Word-of-mouth remained important, informing nearly 1 in 3 visitors (31%)



Visitor Preparedness

- Nearly all visitors brought *water* and most brought *food*
- Visitors often carried *digital trail info*, *bug spray*, and *extra clothing*
- **First aid kits* and *rain gear* were less common

***“It’s a hike.
Come prepared.”***



Visitor Safety & Search and Rescue

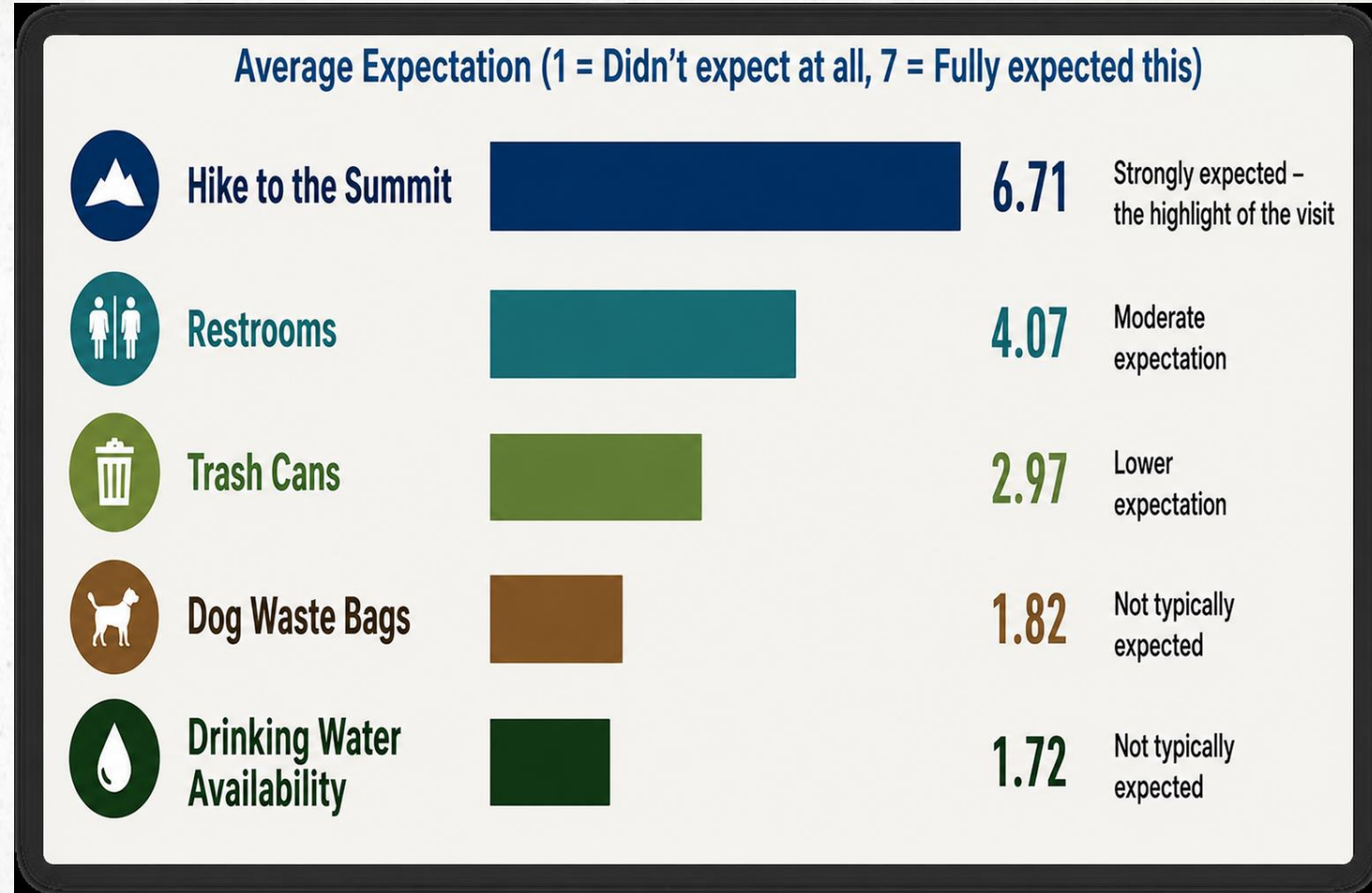
- **Safety:** Visitors felt very safe while hiking MM (6.8/7) and rated trail signage very positively (6.0)
- **Generally prepared:** Most visitors brought necessities, but lacked in first-aid kits and rain gear
- **Exposure:** Nearly all reached the summit (98%), 42% were 1st time visitors, groups averaged only 3 people, and fewer than half carried trail information or maps
- **Recognition:** Strong safety conditions at MM are supported by prepared visitors and dedicated response from NHFG, Alton/Gilford Fire, and Lakes Region SAR



Visitor Pre-Trip Expectations

- **Summit:** Overwhelmingly defined the visit (6.7/7.0)
- **Services:** Didn't expect extensive services or highly developed amenities
- **Facility expectations:**
Restrooms are expected (4.1) while less for *trash cans* (2.9), *dog waste bags* (1.8), and *drinking water* (1.7)

“Keep it simple & natural — less is more.”



The Mt. Major Visitor Experience



Mt Major Is Working Exceptionally Well

- **Exceptional experience:** Visitors reported very high satisfaction (6.5/7.0), return intention (6.4), and recommendation intention (6.6)
- **Safe & welcoming:** Visitors felt welcome (6.8), safe while hiking (6.8), and positive about interactions with others (6.7)
- **Central challenge:** MM is functioning exceptionally well; the priority is protecting the experience that already exists

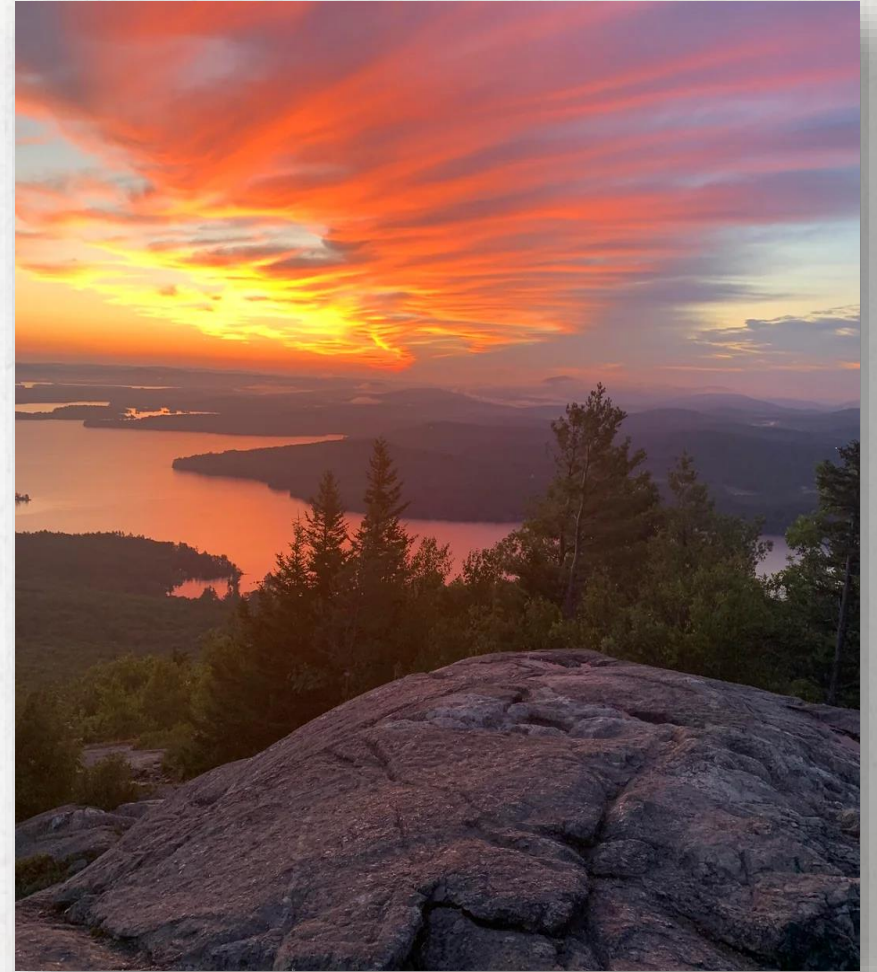
*“Natural beauty and nice change of scenery.
Feels very safe.”*



What Visitors Love About Mt. Major

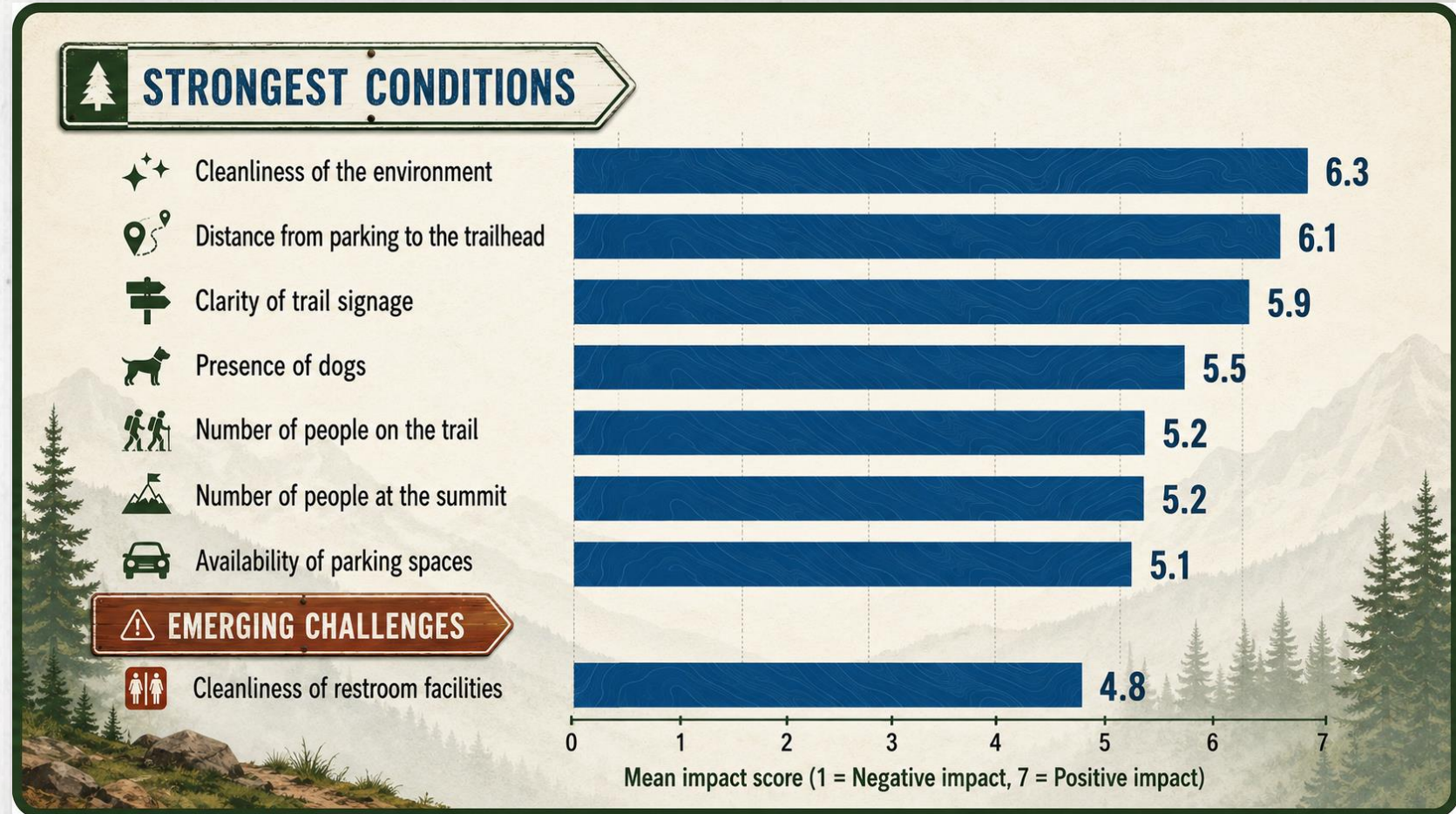
- **Scenic setting:** Visitors most often highlighted summit views, lake scenery, panoramic vistas, and natural beauty
- **Quality experience:** Visitors emphasized the hike itself- challenge, exercise, accessibility, and positive interactions
- **Natural character:** Visitors repeatedly valued MM's *simple, informal, and nature-based* feel

“Quality hike because it is simple and not overdeveloped. Felt quite natural.”



Impacts of On-Site Conditions

- **Strongest conditions:**
Cleanliness, access,
and signage
 - **Emerging pressure:**
Crowding and parking
 - **Primary weakness:**
Restroom cleanliness
- “Well maintained trails,
clean, good signage.”*



Visitors Notice Trail Stewardship

- **Visible improvements:** Trail quality, maintenance, and wayfinding were among the most common visitor experience themes
- **Trail investment:** Visitors appreciated trail signage, stairs, lower-trail improvements, and restoration work
- **Positive feedback:** Comments frequently connected visible trail work with a better hiking experience

“New steps on blue trail are awesome, excellent work!”



What Visitors Told Us in Their Own Words



EXPERIENCE

*"Short hike for a
5-star view... Remarkable."*



COMMUNITY

*"The community of Alton,
the people, and the view!"*



ACCESS

*"Beautiful and accessible!
We had a great time and
will be back."*



CHARACTER

"Please keep it wild!"



Visitors love Mt. Major- So, Who Helps Protect It?



Visitors Love MM — But May Not Know Who Protects It

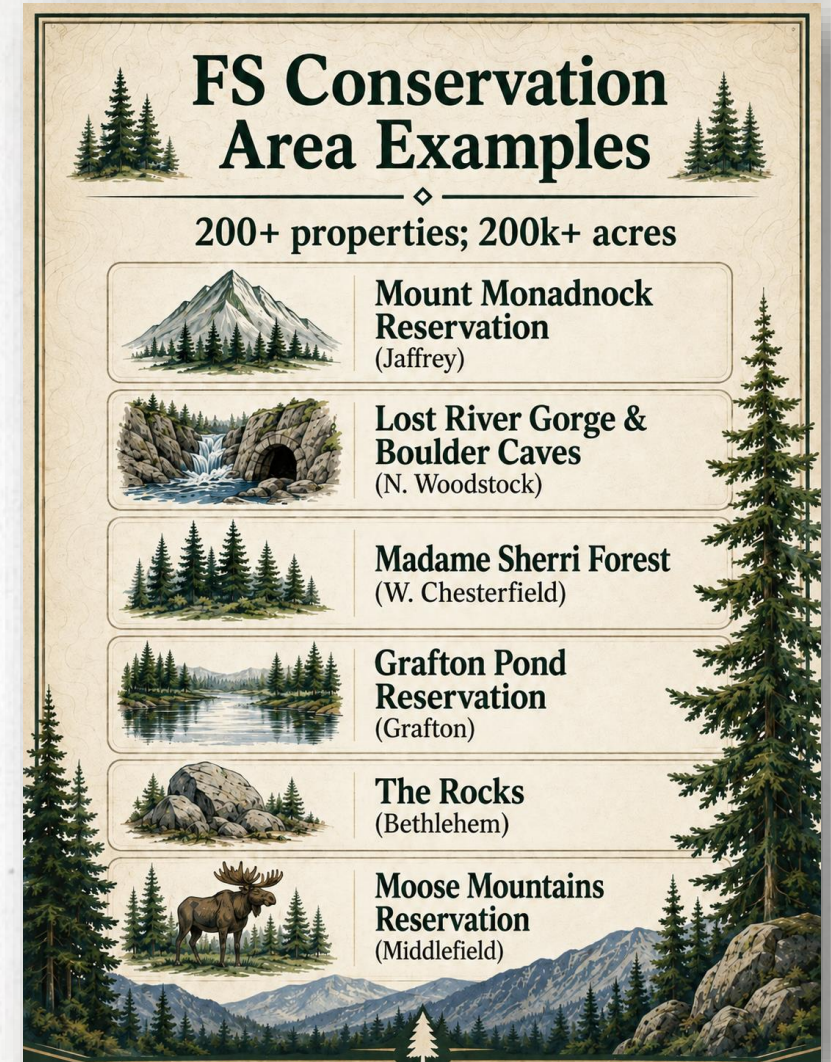
- **Strong connection:** Visitors overwhelmingly want to return (6.4/7) and recommend MM to others (6.6)
- **Limited familiarity:** Familiarity with FS was lower (3.5/7), and only 4% identified as current members
- **Opportunity:** The visitor experience people already love can be more clearly connected to FS's stewardship work

*“I would like to learn more about it.
I have not heard of it but have donated and
joined similar things.”*



The NH Forest Society

- **Who they are:** A nonprofit land conservation organization founded in 1901
- **Statewide impact:** Protects 200k+ acres, manages 200+ properties, and helps care for 400+ miles of trails
- **People-powered:** Supported by 10k+ members and 400+ volunteers across NH
- **Big picture:** FS works to conserve forests, protect special places, and provide opportunities for people to enjoy and care for NH's outdoors



The NH Forest Society at Mt. Major

- **Long-term stewardship:** FS protects MM and leads ongoing trail, infrastructure, conservation, and visitor outreach efforts
- **Shared effort:** VTOP volunteers, trail crews, community partners, and local orgs contribute time, expertise, and on-the-ground support
- **Visitor appreciation:** Nearly two-thirds of open-ended comments reflected *gratitude, positive experiences, or appreciation for ongoing stewardship*

“Thank you for continuing to maintain this beautiful area and trails.”



VTOP: A Hands-On Way to Help

- **Volunteer Trailhead Outreach Program**
- **Welcome visitors:** VTOP volunteers provide a friendly, visible presence at the MM trailhead
- **Share info:** Volunteers help communicate trail information, preparedness tips, responsible recreation practices, and FS messages
- **Protect the experience:** VTOP helps visitors enjoy MM while building awareness of the work required to care for it

“The volunteers were amazing... their suggestion made the hike more enjoyable.”



Help Protect Mt Major & Get Involved

- **Become a member:** Support FS conservation and stewardship across NH (including MM) for \$45/year
- **Donate:** Help sustain trail stewardship, visitor facilities, education, conservation, and long-term care of NH's outdoors
- **Volunteer:** Get involved through VTOP, stewardship projects, visitor outreach, and other opportunities
- **Spread the word:** Help others understand that maintaining the MM experience depends on conservation, volunteerism, and community support

Member→



Donate→



Volunteer→

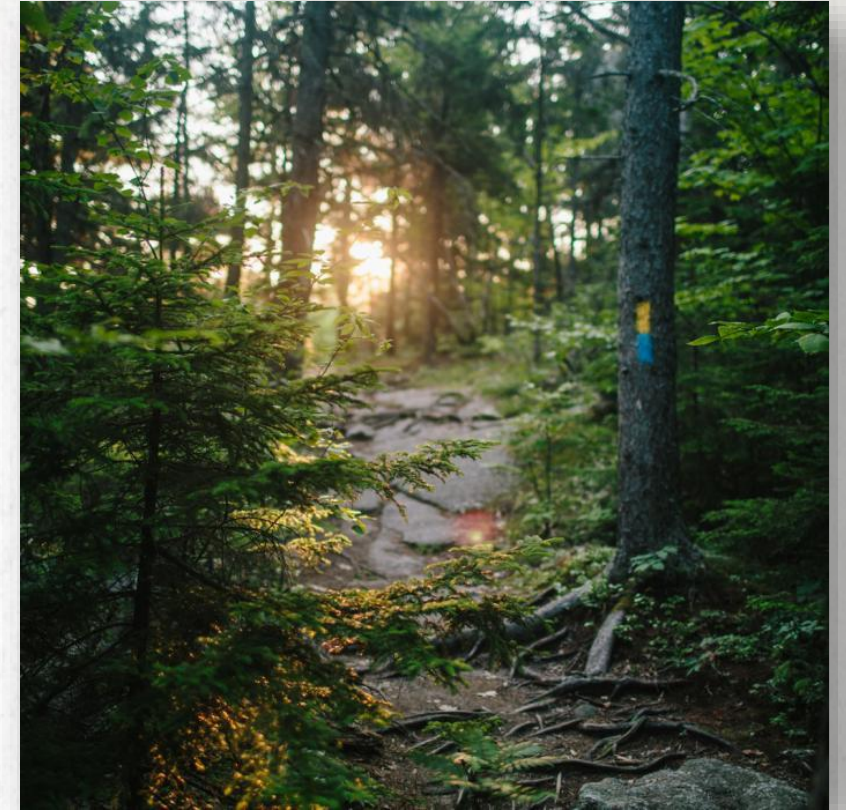


Summary & Discussion



Summary: The Big Picture

- **Remarkable asset:** MM is both a treasured community recreation resource and an important regional destination
- **Strong foundation:** Visitors are generally well-prepared and report exceptionally positive experiences centered on safety, scenery, trails, and welcome
- **Shared stewardship:** The experience people love reflects years of FS, partner, volunteer, and community investment- continued stewardship will help protect it.



“I love that NH is focusing on our keeping natural areas accessible for people.”

Thank You! Questions? (Up next- Open discussion)



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Discussion

- **What do you value most about MM?**
 - What makes the experience special to you or to the broader community?
- **What is working well?**
 - What stewardship, trail, volunteer, or visitor-support efforts do you think are having the greatest positive impact?
- **How could FS improve MM?**
 - Are there practical ways FS could improve the visitor experience, communication, stewardship, or community connection?
- **How can the community stay involved?**
 - What are the best ways for residents, visitors, businesses, volunteers, and partners to help care for MM moving forward?