

The Steep Rock VISTA

The Newsletter of the Steep Rock Association

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HOUSATONIC VALLEY ASSOCIATION ASSIGNS LAND EASEMENT TO STEEP ROCK

Steep Rock Association is pleased to report that it will soon receive a conservation easement from the Housatonic Valley Association - HVA - on ten acres of farmland along Shearer Road in Washington. The easement, which was given to HVA by developer Mark Picton when he subdivided a larger tract there in 1986, permanently protects a prime agricultural field from housing development.

HVA offered the easement to Steep Rock because as a local organization Steep Rock Association is best equipped to monitor the easement. The trustees of Steep Rock favor accepting conservation easements as a way of keeping important farmland available for agriculture as well as protecting scenic vistas, open space, and the rural character of Washington. With the help of local farmers, the association is mapping the most productive farmland in the township.

Conservation easements are recognized nationally as an effective means of protecting farmland. The state of Connecticut has a successful Farmland Preservation Program through which it purchases from farmers easements or development rights on active, commercially productive farmland. The Farmers Home Administration has also recently established farmland preservation programs using conservation easements. One such program allows farmers to reduce their debts on delinquent loans from the Farmers Home Administration by establishing conservation easements on their land.

Protecting farmland with such easements can also help to balance a town's budget. A recent study by the American Farmland Trust showed that the development of land for housing, at the cost of losing open space and farmland, can result in a net financial loss to the town. Compared to farms, residential areas tend to cost more in services than they provide in revenues.

SAVING LAND AND TAXES

Stephen Small, a tax attorney with the Boston firm Powers and Hall, has written an excellent book that discusses ways of protecting family land and saving taxes. The book, *Preserving Family Lands, A Land Owner's Introduction to Tax Issues and Other Considerations*, can be purchased for \$2.50 from Powers and Hall P.C., 100 Franklin Street, Boston, MA 02110. If you act quickly, a limited number of copies are available at the Steep Rock office.



Jim Chamberlain

STILL FISHING OVER FISHING

Last year we asked the Washington Rod and Gun Club to issue Steep Rock fishing permits to fisherfolk who didn't belong to the club and/or weren't Washington residents. The idea was to charge \$15 for permits to fish in the fly-fishing areas the club annually stocks with trout and to charge zero for permits to fish elsewhere on the reservation. This system didn't work and turned out to be more trouble than it was worth. A few - very few - people purchased permits to fish the stocked areas, but more asked for free permits and were subsequently caught poaching in the stocked stretches of the Shepaug.

So we're going back to the old system. Fishing in the areas the Steep Rock Association leases to the Rod and Gun Club and the club keeps stocked - that is, the posted stretch north of the Route 47 bridge in Hidden Valley and the posted area south of the Avenue of Pines footbridge below Steep Rock - will once again be restricted to Rod and Gun Club members and to fly-fishing. Fishing in other sections of the river in Steep Rock will be limited to Washington residents and their guests.

A LITTLE SURPRISE FROM "MODERN MATURITY"

To our surprise, the June-July issue of the magazine *Modern Maturity* contained a column on walking, "10 Winning Walks," which featured "The Greatest Country Walk I: Steep Rock, Connecticut." Under that heading the author described the walk from the horse-show ring bridge up to the top of Steep Rock, "where the view of the Shepaug River winding through the Reservation below is stunning." The walk, said the article, "is splendid in any season."

We were flattered that someone thought the walk was one of the greatest in the country, but were also dismayed. For one thing, the directions in the article were incomplete and misleading. For another, *Modern Maturity* reaches hundreds of thousands of readers all over the country, and the American Association of Retired Persons, which publishes the magazine, follows up each new issue with additional publicity about its contents. On top of that, many other magazines picked up the article or its contents. Within a few weeks, Steep Rock was nationally famous; within a few months, it was known, literally, worldwide.

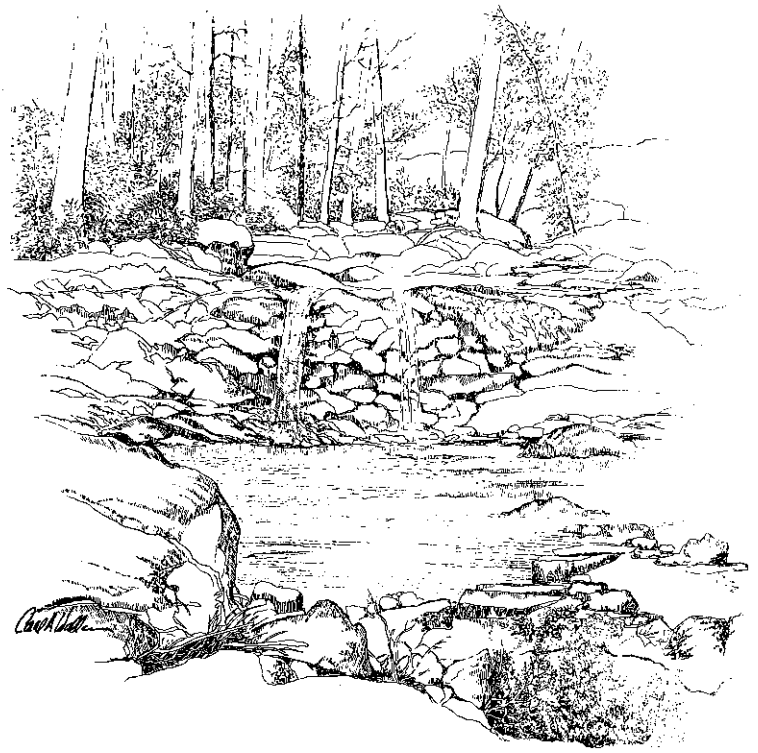
We immediately were inundated by a crowd of strangers trying to find their way. The staff and interns made maps available (the original was drawn for us by a visitor who had got lost) and quickly set up a registration stand at the "Modern Maturity Trail" head. The registration box, plus staff and trustees who conducted informal surveys on the trails, helped us try to find the answers to three questions: (1) where were our visitors coming from? (2) how many of them were there? (3) where had they heard about Steep Rock.

Our survey, conducted over the next three months, revealed that the visitors had come from at least 32 states and the District of Columbia as well as 12 foreign countries. Most were from Connecticut and New York, but a surprising number came from far-away places.

One trustee estimated that on weekends when the influx was at its height, 15 to 20 out-of-town visitors per hour headed up the Modern Maturity Trail. In all, 600 or so registered, and we have no idea how many times that number actually took the walk. Nearly half of those that registered had learned about Steep Rock directly from *Modern Maturity* and other publications. Many others said that friends had told them about it. A visitor from Brussels had heard about the reservation at a cocktail party in London!

Oh, yes, and a lot of these visitors did get lost – although, fortunately, no one stayed lost for more than a few hours. One or two went so far as to cut their own blazes in trailside trees. Others were not prepared for the steepness of the climb. A few were disappointed by the view from the top of Steep Rock. But on the whole people loved the reservation. Here's a sampling of their comments:

"A great place. Deserves all the protection it can get."...
"Please keep it natural. This is one of the very few really good places left in the state."... "Fantastic view. The climb was just right."... "Very happy that it has been kept preserved as it was 20 years ago."... "Beautiful. We will return. How about marking more of the trails?"



This illustration was drawn by Carole Wallace of Barkhamstead and is one of two found on a new card published by the Association. Boxes of the card are sold at the Hickory Stick and the Steep Rock office. Carole donated the use of the drawings for the cards. If you want to purchase one of the original drawings, Caroline Norden will be glad to put you in touch with the artist.

THE FOREST NEEDS CONSTANT TENDING

The current policy of Steep Rock trustees is to do as little forest management as possible and leave most of the work to Mother Nature. However, some active management does have to be done.

For example, many years ago the Association created plantations of red and white pine, and these have to be looked after. In 1987 we discovered red pine scale in our remaining stands of red pines in Hidden Valley. The scale had been devastating Connecticut red pines for 40 years, and we had already been forced to cut down a lot of them. In the winter of 1987-88 we began to harvest what we had left.

Wayne Horne Logging – a Goshen husband-and-wife team (Wayne's wife Dale drives the skidder) – did the job for us. They took out 12,000 linear feet of red pine – about half of what was still standing; the rest was either too small to be sawed into lumber or it had been ruined by blue stain caused by the blight. Wayne and Dale felled it anyway and stacked it in low piles that don't look very pretty now but will decompose quickly and be overgrown by saplings in a few years. The Forestry Committee, chaired by Art Potter, is helping the process along by planting white pine seedlings in harvested areas along trails and around the Hidden Valley lean-to.

Meanwhile, older white pine plantings in Hidden Valley have had to be thinned out. These dense stands contain three times too many trees for the space they occupy. In fact, they are too dense and too poor to allow us to thin them conventionally and harvest the wood, so we had to take another tack. We selected the best of the trees, and last summer and fall we girdled the pines around them. The girdled trees will die and give the healthiest trees more room and light to flourish.

BIRDS IN STEEP ROCK

The reservation is one of the premier spots in this part of the state to look for birds. It features what is called a boreal habitat, which means that we find species nesting in Steep Rock – for example, hermit thrush, goshawk, Blackburnian warbler, solitary vireo, and winter wren – that usually nest at much higher altitude or farther north. At the same time, more southerly species are also found here. On a single day at the end of May a few years ago the members of the Western Connecticut Bird Club counted more than 70 species in the Steep Rock end of the park. Very shortly the Association will print an official Steep Rock bird checklist, and we'll let you know how and where to acquire copies.

Meanwhile, however, watch for bluebirds in both Hidden Valley and Steep Rock. An enthusiastic team from Devereux-Glenholme last year built us 15 bluebird boxes (and 15 more for our neighbors in the Roxbury Land Trust), and helped us put them up. Most of the boxes were mounted on trees near the horse show ring and around the Girl Scout Area. We know of one successful nest in the horse ring meadow, and there may have been more. We'll be cleaning out the boxes in early February (and so should you clean out *your* bluebird boxes) and relocating some of them. Please be alert to bluebirds using the boxes, and let Caroline Norden or Michael Harwood know about your sightings.

The gentle bluebirds, smallest of the eastern thrushes, are often found along field edges, in orchards, and in parklands, which is where you can also spot wild turkeys. This large species – shockingly large the first time you see one – is becoming increasingly common in the Hidden Valley area, at all times of the year and on both sides of the river.

There's another large bird in Hidden Valley during the nesting season – the northern goshawk. Some of you may have met the lady goshawk, who is not particularly pleased by the intrusion of humans or horses in her nesting territory, which is in the general vicinity of the Switchback Trail above the footbridge. At a fever pitch of excitement when she has young in the nest, this lady comes barreling through the woods at about eye level with humans and horses, yelling imprecations at the intruder, and she'll keep this up until either you leave or she hits you – or both. Stay clear of her between April 1 and June 30 – for your sake, her sake, and the sake of her progeny. You'll know when you've trespassed, because she'll start calling – a loud, ringing *Cack, cack, cack, cack!* At that point, you'll do well to do an about face.

WISH LIST FOR VOLUNTEERS

Steep Rock always needs volunteers to help on the reservation and in the office. If you're willing to assist, call Caroline Norden at 868-9131. At the moment we need:

- Someone to update our list and maps of abutting properties.
- A volunteer to reorganize the archives, which includes old committee reports, correspondence, and newspaper clippings – fascinating stuff!
- People to work on a trail crew – trimming trails, preventing erosion, planting seedlings, marking trails and boundaries.

HORSE TRAILS AND RIDERS

If you ride horses in Steep Rock (or even if you don't), and you want to offer suggestions about horseback riding in the reservation, we'd like to hear what you have to say. Write or call trustee Hedda von Goeben, South Lake Street in Litchfield (06759), 203-567-0021.

Riders, please note that we have posted warning signs on trails that have proven too steep or narrow for horses, and we urge you not to ride on them. We received several reports of horses taking dangerous falls on the posted trails in 1988.

WANTED: SUMMER INTERNS

We're on the lookout for two or more interns for the summer of '89. Please contact Executive Director Caroline Norden if you know of young people who might be interested. Last summer's interns, Paul Swigart and Todd Lintner, did a variety of challenging jobs, including boundary marking, rescuing lost hikers, and sinking 60 fence posts into rock ledge on the edge of a trail.



Devereux-Glenholme students and Caroline Norden install bluebird boxes

TRAIL BLAZES ...

● **PRIME PICKNICKING.** If you're looking for a place to have a picnic, you might try the Hemlock picnic site on the west bank of the Shepaug near the old ford - site 16 on your Steep Rock map, below Mitchell's Hole (pew! you got all that?). Young Pat Callahan of Woodbury earned his Eagle Scout badge there last summer, opening up the site. (He also built a new outhouse for us, which is in place at the Girl Scout Area - at a location different from the old one, because we are moving such facilities away from the river.) ... Vinnie Forese's son Vinnie, on contract to the Association, repaired four of the stone fireplaces in the Steep Rock section of the reservation and rebuilt the vandalized fireplace beside the lean-to in Hidden Valley. We've also replaced several rusted-out standing iron grills at picnic sites ...

● **FANCY FOOTING.** As many of you know, the Trustees had hoped by now to have built a year-round footbridge across the river at the Avenue of Pines - right where the present "foot-bridge" (or often underwater walkway) is located. The bridge would be of truss design, like the one in Hidden Valley. The purpose would be to make the Avenue of Pines area and the southerly approach to Steep Rock cliff more accessible to hikers and skiers. However, the lowest bid received so far for building such a bridge at that location is \$36,000, more than three times what the Hidden Valley bridge cost. It should not surprise you to learn that the Trustees have gone back to the drawing board ...

● **COMMUNITY CONSCIENCE.** Gunnery students and faculty did maintenance jobs for us last spring. Hurray, Gunnery! Eighty of them spent a May morning trimming trails and digging diversion ditches. It was part of a community work day initiated and organized by the students ...

● **ADELGID ADDENDUM.** The hemlock wooly adelgid has not made an appearance in Steep Rock yet, thank goodness. The Forestry Committee is keeping a sharp lookout for any local signs of this pest, and it asks other friends of Steep Rock to do likewise. In case you've forgotten, the adelgid forms masses of furry and white egg sacs along twigs between hemlock needles ...

● **PARKING PREVENTION.** This spring we will close several parking areas near the river, blocking them off with large - and we hope immovable - rocks. That's to protect the riverbank from erosion and the loss of key trees. To compensate for the lost parking spaces we will open new areas on the other side of Tunnel Road.



Trustee Alan Chapin with past trustee Kathryn Hubbard at Steep Rock Picnic

Steep Rock Association Operating Income and Expense Statement Year Ending 8/31/88

OPERATING INCOME

Contributions	\$39,990
Timber Sales & Other Expenses	2,571
Sale of Books & Maps	594
Total Income	\$43,065

OPERATING EXPENSES

Forester & Exec. Director	\$28,872
Office, Postage, Printing & Dues	7,209
General Maintenance	5,985
Insurance	3,102
Summer Interns	2,362
Picnic Expenses	825
Total Expenses	\$43,335

OPERATING LOSS \$(5,290)

Note: Capital expenditures of \$23,249 (e.g. new truck, parking lot, etc.) were paid from the investment account and are not included under Operating Expenses.

The Steep Rock Association depends for its support entirely on annual contributions from its friends. If you haven't sent in your check yet, please don't forget us.

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Vinnie Forese, *Forester*

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