

## No place for bigotry on Vermont's trails

In its early years, people flocked to Vermont's Long Trail and the mountains it traversed, to escape war worries and the pressures of everyday life. While the worries may be different today, many of us have found peace and solitude in Vermont's forests and trails during the pandemic. I have personally benefited from getting out to hike the many Long Trail side trails this season and recognize how privileged I am to have access to these resources. The fact that the Long Trail is a free, open resource is one of the reasons that it has become a popular, world class recreation destination since its founding 110 years ago. Unfortunately, it is also a fact that not everyone has equal access to or feels welcome on the Long Trail.

The Green Mountain Club maintains over 60 overnight sites and shelters. Each has a logbook where hikers can share observations or leave messages for other hikers. Recently, one of my staff shared an entry from a backcountry shelter logbook:

"We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children"

Some reading this might be surprised by the bigotry shared in a Long Trail shelter logbook.

But for the dozens of GMC staff that care for the Long Trail and live, work, and spend their downtime in the backcountry each summer, the logbook entry is not an isolated incident. It fits into a pattern of racist, sexist, and otherwise offensive remarks, graffiti, and writings found on the trail system this year.

Nature may not see color, but the humans moving about in nature certainly do, and societal biases and prejudices don't just disappear once you hit the trail. For some, racism and bigotry aren't something that can be separated from the trail experience. For them, it is the trail experience.

The mission of the Green Mountain Club is to make the mountains of Vermont play a larger role in the life of the people –I take this to mean all people. Until non-white lives are valued and respected in Vermont and American society at large, non-white outdoor recreationists may not feel safe venturing into our mountains.

The GMC is committed to making the mountains of VT open and available to everyone, but we also recognize that demographically, we are a mostly homogenous organization and that our staff, Board, and members may not fully represent the diversity of trail users. Not everyone may feel welcome or see themselves in GMC either. As an organization, we can't achieve our mission unless we do the necessary internal work to make our organization more open and inclusive.

We start with internal dialogue and learning: sharing and learning from voices and perspectives from those different than us. Then, we look at our business and operations and identify steps to

be more inclusive, equitable, and diverse: Including reviewing and updating policies, communications and language, leadership recruitment, hiring materials, and practices.

We don't have all the answers and have much work to do. But we can start with being clear that bigotry has no place on the Long Trail and as an organization, we are committed to identifying and dismantling racism and making our organization and the resources we manage as open, welcoming, and inclusive as possible.

In 50 or 100 years, when someone looks back at the Long Trail and the Green Mountain Club, I don't think it will be the global pandemic or racial injustice that defines us, but rather how we responded and changed. I hope what defines us is how the club embraced and engaged the next generation of hikers, trail stewards, and club leaders. I hope what defines us is how we committed to the work of diversifying our community, making the necessary changes within our organization, and making the outdoors truly open to everyone.

Mike DeBonis