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The primeval forests of Mount Sunapee

By STEVE RUSSELL Jul 28, 2018



COURTESY

“Mount Sunapee contains as much as 10 percent of all the known ancient forest in New Hampshire, and the great majority south of the White Mountains.” – Chris Kane, June 30, 2018

In a walk through time into a forest never logged or otherwise affected by human endeavors, Chris Kane, conservation ecologist, led our small group of hikers last weekend into Mount Sunapee State Park’s primeval forest. Over the course of a three-and-a-half-hour journey, we hikers heard this naturalist identify and interpret the complexity of Sunapee’s ancient forests.

Though the temps reached 90 degrees that day, we were cooled by the deep shade of the lush forest. Taking a little-known path that branches off the Williamson Trail, Kane led us into areas of Mt. Sunapee State Park rarely visited by the public. There, he pointed out yellow birch trees in excess of 300 years old, towering arrow-straight red spruce, and sugar maple, many well past the two-century mark. He pointed out a 5-inch-tall hemlock which appeared to be a sapling but was in fact 20 years old, patiently waiting for its turn in the sun to take its place among the ancient trees surrounding it. Standing next to a tree he first encountered over 20 years ago, Kane marveled at the resiliency of the forest and quietly extolled the miraculous nature of the primeval environment whose conditions have been unaltered by man and self-regulated by nature since it emerged from the last ice age thousands of years ago.

Chris Kane's place in the history of Mount Sunapee was established over 20 years ago because of his rediscovery of the mountain's ancient forest. This forest, first documented in the "Manual of Mt. Sunapee" in 1915, had receded in memory and become forgotten. Kane's rediscovery of Sunapee's rare forests in 1997 prompted the interest of the State of New Hampshire's Natural Heritage Bureau, which over the course of the next 20 years documented and classified much of this unique forest matrix. The culmination of their work is the 484-acre Exemplary Natural Community System (ENCS), which represents the absolute best of what is left of New Hampshire's biodiversity.

So how rare are Mount Sunapee's forests? Consider the statewide percentage of forests unaltered by human activity stands at one tenth of 1 percent. Then consider that up to 10 percent of that one tenth of 1 percent is within Mount Sunapee State Park. Kane further stated, "The full extent of Mount Sunapee's rare forests has yet to be documented; there's more to be discovered."

The naturalist also spoke of Mount Sunapee's establishment as a publicly accessible reserve dating back to 1911 when the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests created a 656-acre forest reservation with trails open and free to the public. To achieve this goal, funds were raised by locally concerned residents to purchase the area in order to protect the ancient forest from being logged into extinction. Conservationist Herbert Welsh, who led this community effort, was so drawn to the beauty of Mount Sunapee that he would walk over 400 miles from his family home in Pennsylvania to Sunapee every summer.

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So, like those who were drawn to Sunapee's rare forests over a century ago, we emerged from the forest with a new appreciation for the uniqueness of this special part of Mount Sunapee State Park and with an understanding that these forests represent the last vestige of wilderness in this region of New Hampshire: they are what make Mount Sunapee State Park unique, and we should do everything we can to ensure that they are permanently protected.

Steve Russell is the president of Friends of Mount Sunapee.