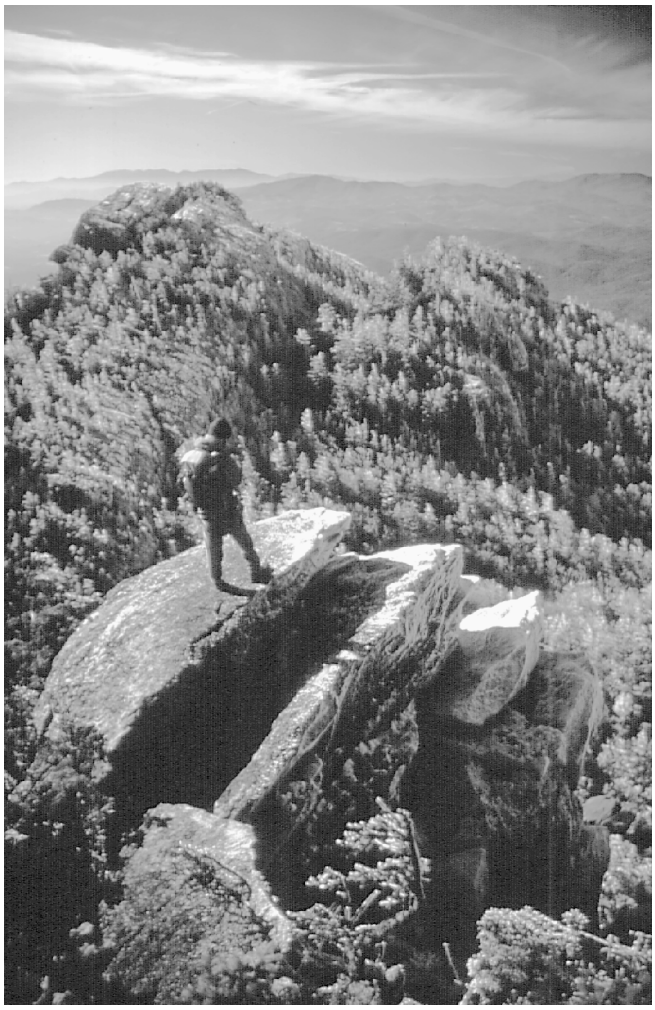
GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN—
A Private U.S. Wilderness Experiment

BY RANDY JOHNSON



A winter camper stands on a promontory rock outcropping on Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina. (Photo by Randy Johnson.)

IN 1978 THE LOFTIEST, MOST SPECTACULAR peak in the southern Appalachian range of the Blue Ridge Mountains was on the verge of having restricted access to the growing hordes of hikers on the mountain's summit ridge. "Carolina's Top Scenic Attraction" boasted awesome views and eventually an "Environmental Habitat" exhibit of subtly enclosed black bears, cougars, deer, and once-wounded flightless eagles.

Like thousands of hikers lured to the woods by the 1960s and 1970s backpacking boom, I discovered Grandfather Mountain while searching the southern Appalachians for scenic grandeur. I drove up the summit road, but instead of traversing the tourist bridge, I was lured across the alpine crest of the peak on the Grandfather Trail, romantically dubbed the "Trail of Thirteen Ladders" for the wooden rungs that help hikers up sheer cliffs.

I returned often, inspired by the nearly vertical mile view that plummets down the greatest drop of the Blue Ridge escarpment. The vista is so memorable that after a climb just over 200 years ago, legendary early Appalachian explorer Andre Michuax sang the Marseilles and proclaimed the peak "the highest mountain in all North America."

The Public Becomes a Problem

Then on a visit in 1977, I encountered "No Trespassing" signs. On a trip south from New Hampshire, where I was conducting wilderness management research with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Appalachian Mountain Club, I started a hike up the mountain and met a security guard; a hiker had died of hypothermia. Since management was uncertain about how to ensure public safety on its rugged, volunteer-maintained trails, hiking was being discouraged. If you did hike, a fee had to be paid at the entrance gate to the tourist area, a 12-mile round-trip away. I paid the fee, departed with a cash register receipt marked "hiking pass," and headed up the eroding trail with the decided feeling that I wasn't welcome.

No wonder hikers required the presence of a security guard to even consider paying the fee. The entire situation contrasted starkly with my New England research site where backpackers gladly paid camping fees to stay at caretaker-maintained backcountry tent sites. I decided to do something about it. My emerging professional orientation to the wilderness, and an awe-inspired sense of responsibility to this marvelous mountain, was propelling me into involvement.

Six months later, I was back at Grandfather Mountain as an idealistic young trail steward, about to encounter the entire spectrum of issues that surround the unusual task of managing a private wilderness. Not the least of those unique quandaries was how to institute user fees. After a meeting with owner Hugh Morton, I was hired to manage the wilderness tract and specifically to implement a user fee program that I assured him would work. Ideally, we'd break even (which didn't seem unlikely on my salary) and at the same time, reclaim the mountain's declining trail network.

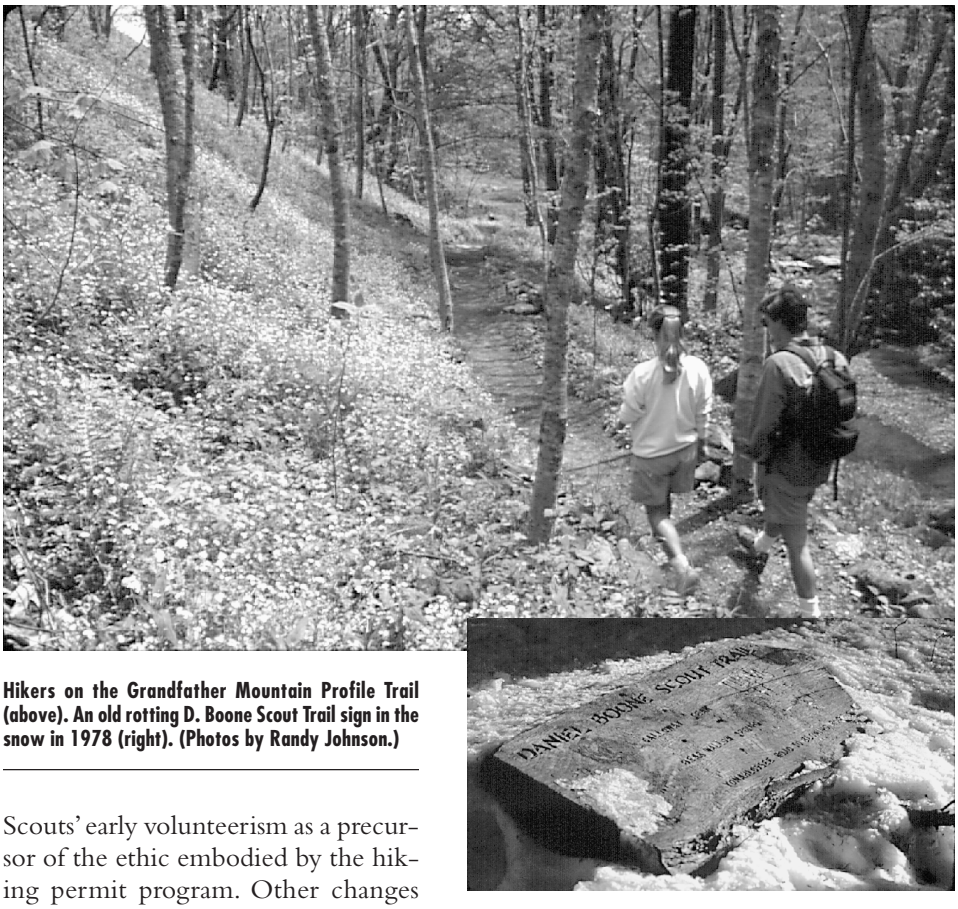
Hiking Permits and Fees

An immediate face-lift was needed in the fee program to create a more positive impression and earn public support. Hikers, perhaps more than most people, bridle at the notion that a private individual could own a mountain, much less exploit its scenic beauty for profit. That was especially true given the mountain's image as a "developed" tourist attraction where humans and machine had obviously, it seemed, triumphed over preservation.

From the beginning, new trailhead signing was installed to contrast the mountain with nearby public lands. Hikers were told that the cost of their hiking permit wasn't an entrance charge, but a use fee intended to defray the costs of new efforts to safely and soundly accommodate public use. "Lacking public funds, isn't it worth a few bucks to insure public access and preservation of private land?" trailhead signing asked.

Further, hidden environmental protection benefits of the mountain's management were pointed out in literally thousands of personal conversations with hikers. I often contrasted public parks with the Grandfather Mountain experiment in conversations with occasionally argumentative environmentalists. I could point out that Mount Mitchell, a nearby state park capping the highest summit in eastern North America, had a road all the way to a large parking area to access a tower on the summit. Yet on Grandfather, a private owner built a road only to the first and lowest peak of the mountain, ensuring that the highest peaks and the heart of the mountain's wilderness is preserved. Such protection along with the creation and maintenance of hiking trails open to the public were a key to selling the hiking permit and fee program. Federal agencies sell trail maps to popular areas for about the price of a Grandfather Mountain hiking permit, so hikers were given a high quality map free when they bought a trail pass.

Part of the support that was eventually garnered for Grandfather's new trail program was the fact the motivation behind the improvements was obviously based on the same "wildernist" values exhibited in the management of public lands. Back- country campsites were designated with preservation and solitude (party privacy) in mind, campfires were restricted at sensitive sites, new trails intelligently dispersed use, and aggressively high standards of trail maintenance were evident everywhere. When a half century-old backpacking shelter was discovered, it was rebuilt and dedicated to the original Boy Scout builders. Interpretive signing touted the Scouts' early volunteerism as a precursor of the ethic embodied by the hiking permit program. Other changes eased acceptance of the new fees. The trail pass became a safety registration form instead of a cash register receipt. Permit outlets were moved adjacent to trailheads and made available at outdoor shops that became allies in the effort. Part-time help increased trail coverage, and a volunteer program formalized use of unfunded labor.



Hikers on the Grandfather Mountain Profile Trail (above). An old rotting D. Boone Scout Trail sign in the snow in 1978 (right). (Photos by Randy Johnson.)

Research Lends a Hand

Research activities became an integral part of management. I was at first surprised that natural science researchers, like some hikers, somehow seemed to believe that private ownership tainted either the mountain's status as a natural area or its suitability for study. Though reluctant at first, researchers of many kinds were eventually enticed to launch studies on the mountain. The first of these deliberately informed recreation management decisions and helped convince hikers that collecting fees didn't preclude collecting data, especially when the effort was intended to provide information to protect the resource.

Eventually, hikers enthusiastically came to support the program. Hikers couldn't help but see that the hiking fees were paying for improvements to the trails. That interpretation was bolstered in 1985 with research conducted at Grandfather Mountain and the nearby Linville Gorge, a USFS managed federally designated wilderness area. Findings by William Leuschner, Phillip S. Cook, Joseph W. Roggenbuck, and Richard G. Oderwald of Virginia Polytechnic Institute strongly exemplified the notion that hikers would support trail fees if the alternative was deterioration of the wilderness. The research, published in the influential *Journal of Leisure Research* in 1987, noted that a large number of the hikers sampled had used both areas and that the similarities in ruggedness and wilderness character argued strongly for their being considered largely equivalent recreation settings, despite the user fee at the private site. Furthermore, the study showed that users of both areas displayed the kind of socioeconomic characteristics that the literature suggests

A car on the Blue Ridge Parkway viaduct on Grandfather Mountain. (Photo by Randy Johnson.)

typify wilderness users. Though fees found more support among those who had paid to use Grandfather Mountain, both groups of hikers strongly supported fees if paying them would prevent the deterioration of the area.

Obviously, dedicating the fees collected to support the wilderness program was the critical factor leading to a surprisingly high level of support for the program just seven years after it was implemented. No wonder that today the ability to dedicate fees to the park where they're generated is regarded as a key element in any plan to implement recreation fees. At Grandfather just such a program sparked a 98% fee compliance rate during the time the study was taking place.

Research on the mountain began to approach the kind of studies usually only conducted in the most noteworthy public parks. A wealth of studies led to discoveries of endangered species of bats and squirrels on Grandfather. Later, the cave was gated and a trail was closed to protect the bats. The southern Appalachians' first reintroduction of the peregrine falcon took place on the peak, a project that succeeded in part due to the commitment of the mountain and its staff. Over the years, thousands of hours of labor by Grandfather Mountain employees have aided academic and applied researchers in a variety of fields.

The Hiking Program Meets the Parkway

Hikers continued to see the mountain's environmental image improve. In 1987, the wilderness program at Grandfather also benefited from another decision that protected the mountaintop. After decades of controversy with the National Park Service concerning where the final uncompleted portion of the Blue Ridge Parkway would cross the flank of Grandfather Mountain, the road was finally completed on a lower route that was encouraged by Hugh Morton. Certainly the lower location protected the appeal of his "Mile-High Swinging Bridge" attraction, as some cynics noted, but it also further protected the mountain's backcountry—a fact that ecominded hikers could only applaud. For his amicable settlement of the controversy, Hugh Morton received a National Park Service award.

The delay created by the controversy led directly to the availability of bridging technology that itself greatly minimized the impact of the road. Instead of requiring a huge road cut across the fragile Black Rock Cliffs, where the road was proposed and where a gated cave protected endangered bats, a lower road location was negotiated. The road soared out away from the rocks on the S-shaped curve of the Linn Cove Viaduct, an innovative, computer-designed span.

Helping to Focus the Future

In the early years of the permit system, Hugh Morton worried that making too much of the hiking opportunities at Grandfather might deter the more sedentary. He felt the mass of visitors, now about a quarter million a year, needed to be assured that their entrance fees would guarantee an effortless stroll over the Swinging Bridge. Less than two decades later, it is the aura of wild and preserved wilderness, not to mention the lure of trails, that inspires even less active travelers. In essence, the success of private land wilderness preservation at Grandfather Mountain was due partly to the convergence of tourism and environmentalism that has recently become so visible. At Grandfather, the trend was being born years before the coining of the term "ecotourism."

Support of Wilderness User Fees

Baby boomers throughout the world have become travelers who are more than willing to pay for play, especially when it's in the outdoors and even in wilderness. That has made a success out of fee systems on public and private land. Fee-based alpine and backcountry hostels welcome hikers in Europe, New Hampshire's White Mountains, and on Mount LeConte in the Great Smokies. In Colorado, skiers, hikers, and mountain bikers have fed the growth of hut systems in the Vail and Aspen areas. Private conservation organizations have also adopted fees for use, such as the National Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy, where they steward land resources and charges are appropriate and needed. They've adopted trail fees when public access creates added costs. In fact, to ensure the preservation of the Grandfather Mountain backcountry, the Nature Conservancy was granted preservation easements to the bulk of the mountain in the early 1990s. Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania and the Mowhonk Preserve in New York are other private land parcels where fees support preservation and recreation programs.

To many proponents though, the trend to fees seems hopelessly mired because politicians seem reticent to explore new trail and entrance fees. Even within North Carolina, where per capita taxpayer expenditure for state parks ranks near the bottom in the nation, proponents of the state's sparsely developed park system have vehemently fought fees. Just Mount Mitchell State Park, atop the East's highest peak (at nearly 7,000 feet), is a single access area where even a small auto entrance fee could defray park costs and send hundreds of thousands of dollars on to other parks. But the Grandfather Mountain experience isn't an argument for selling wilderness areas to private concerns. Nevertheless, it is evidence that the sense of responsibility created by economic involvement can indeed be tapped for the preservation of wildlands.

The user fee dynamic has implications in both directions, for visitors and managers. As a direct source of revenue, hikers become customers. At Grandfather, most seem to appreciate that status, as well as the higher standard of trail maintenance and construction made possible by their fees. No one would support ending government funding for parks and leaving parks at the mercy of the fees they can collect. But a fee component in a park's funding certainly won't hurt the awareness of government employees that the public is paying the bills, a connection not always easy to keep in mind when the experience is "free."

Fee systems might still seem unsavory to some wilderness preservationists or be considered an unknown to some managers and politicians. Nevertheless, years of experience at Grandfather Mountain show that when wilderness protection and management are balanced against the acceptability of user fees, hikers indeed can see the forest through the trees. **IJW**

Randy Johnson was backcountry manager at Grandfather Mountain from 1978 to 1990 when he left to focus on a career as a freelance photojournalist. Today, he divides his time between Greensboro, North Carolina, where he is senior editor at United Airlines award-winning magazine *Hemispheres,* and his home at the base of Grandfather Mountain in Banner Elk. He writes widely about the outdoors: His new book is *Hiking North Carolina* (Falcon Press, 1996). Contact Randy at 1301 Carolina Street, Greensboro, NC 27401, USA. Telephone: (910) 378-6065; e-mail: RanJohns@aol.com.

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