

TUCKERMAN'S RAVINE TRAIL ¹

In the White Mountains, Tuckerman's Ravine Trail is the highway used by most people to reach the summit of Mount Washington. The information management system starts before the visitor arrives and ends after they leave. In addition, an information management system which directs people to Tuckermans is a system which reduces use in other areas. In a sense, it reinforces the concept that sometimes it is better to sacrifice a small area of the resource to protect the rest of the resource.

As a typical youth in the eighteen to twenty-five year range, I made my pilgrimage to the White Mountains to climb Mount Washington, the highest of the peaks in the presidential range. It was part of the Deliverance thing of a youth having to prove himself. I never asked anyone where to climb. I simply knew that if you wanted to climb Mount Washington, you climbed Tuckerman's Ravine Trail. In retrospect, I am sure that I asked others which was the best route to climb and everyone responded by suggesting Tuckerman's although there were a couple of suggestions to try Huntington Ravine trail. However, it was still Tuckerman's with a slight detour up the headwall of the next ravine over on the mountain.

Even before arriving in the White Mountains, I knew that I was going to climb Tuckermans. This is a demonstration of the phenomenal convergence of information which helps guide a person like me living several hundred miles away through the experience. And I had even contacted the land manager. The first approach and often the most powerful approach is word of mouth. In my case, I had asked several people what they would recommend. Their suggestion was Tuckermans. They suggested Tuckermans because they had done it themselves, because it is the direct route to the top of the mountain and they did so because when they asked others the same question as I did, they too were told Tuckermans. In a sense, word-of-mouth communications sets up a powerful chain of communications.

Word-of-mouth is powerful. It is interesting to view the power of word-of-mouth in terms of a land manager who wants to change visitor behavior. Before arriving on site and before even interacting with the land manager, I had already made key decisions regarding my trip. It is not a question of suggesting alternatives, now there is a need for the land manager to redirect me to another site. In addition, my expectations for the trip were already well established. Other people's experiences became the experiences I sought and wanted. They told me about Pinkham's Notch base camp, about the steep climb up the headwall of the ravine. They told me about the ice field and having a snowball fight in July. Even before arriving on-site, I had a preconceived expectation for all of these experiences. All of this before my first contact with the land manager. This experience demonstrated to me that the land manager can have quite a task in

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changing visitor behavior.

I drove into Pinkham Notch. Parked my car in the parking lot. Directly, in front of me was the Appalachian Mountain Club's (AMC) base camp at Pinkham Notch. A nationally recognized club located in Boston, the AMC operates much of the interpretive and information management systems for the Forest Service, the primary land manager of the resource. There were some interpretive displays along with information for hikers. There was the standard weather station along with information about the conditions on the summit. Downstairs there were some showers and other facilities for through hikers on the Appalachian Trail which also went past base camp.

After a minute or two, I gravitated to the counter on the far wall. There I was greeted by one of the AMC personnel. She asked me what my plans were and I indicated my intentions to climb to the summit. During our brief encounter she sized me up to determine any potential problems. First, is time of day and are we starting early enough to climb the mountain and then descend it in the same day. She asked us if we had climbed Tuckermans before. Since we answered no, she looks at us a little closer. She completes a visual pursuing of our equipment. She gives the once over to determine our physical shape. Do we look as if we know what we are doing and do we talk as if we know what we are doing. She asks if we have extra food and a jacket or cold weather gear if the weather changes. We indicated that we did. She concluded that we had some idea of what we were doing? Remember, our prior sources of information had already told us about some of the gear which we might need on the hike. Four hours up the mountain and four hours down is average. We had ample time to complete the climb. We asked if there was anything special which we might need to know. She responded that the trail started behind the lodge, that it was well marked with signs and that we should have few problems climbing the mountain. We spent another five to ten minutes looking at the displays.

Meanwhile, a middle aged man and woman were going through the same question and answer process. They caught my eye because they were clearly not prepared for the hike up the mountain. They wore flip flops, Bermuda shorts and carried a paper bag with their lunch in it. They announced that they were going to climb to the ravine. They were engaged in a polite disagreement with the same woman behind the counter who helped us. Against her advice, they were insistent on completing the climb. They left to complete their climb regardless of any advice which she provided.

After they left, I discussed the matter with the woman behind the counter. We both had a good laugh. I asked her if there was anything which she could do since they were at risk to themselves and others. She guessed that they were good for less than half a mile climb up the trail. Then she responded that she will radio one of the roving rangers who will intercept them on the trail and monitor their progress. They will think that their encounter with the ranger is by chance. However, it is by design. It is planned and part of information management. The ranger will meet the couple on the trail seemingly by chance having already discussed the matter with the woman behind the counter. He will approach the couple, monitor how well they were doing and suggest

an alternative experience for them. She noted that they should be beat and ready for some alternative experiences. Whether the couple was aware of it or not, their experience was being managed. Unbeknownst to us, our experience was being managed also.

Tuckerman's is a well used trail. A good fifteen feet wide, it is literally the highway to the sky. The width is needed, in part, for the snow tractor to ascend the mountain in winter. The trail is worn down to bedrock. The twelve inches or so of duff and other organic matter which normally covers the rest of the forest floor is completely gone. A trail worn down to bedrock such as Tuckerman's can carry as many hikers as desired. With some waterbars to divert the water off the trail harmlessly and other trail management devices, Tuckerman's is a fairly stable trail. Bedrock is fairly stable.

We worked our way up to the ravine where we came across a Forest Service station. Again, we chatted with the ranger. Again, we were evaluated, if only casually by the range. We looked the part, we were on schedule, and I am sure that we didn't raise any red flags with him with any of our comments.

Present at the station was rescue equipment. In managing the experience, the land manager and the AMC were concentrating use, particularly among more novice users, into a small area of the total resource. Doing so also reduces search and rescue problems. Since the trail receives a lot of use by novices, most of the people who will get lost or injured will do so in an area where they have concentrated the resources to handle the situation. It makes perfect sense. They had the resources close at hand to handle most any situation which might arise including the people, equipment, communications equipment and an exit route out of the backcountry. With a person on each side of the litter, carrying a stokes litter out is made much easier with the wide trail. In addition, they know where to look for a lost hiker because they are familiar with finding other lost people in this terrain.

After a brief snack at the station, we proceeded up the headwall. A steep climb, every foot increase in elevation resulted in an even more spectacular view than the one before it. After the headwall, it was over the rocks to the summit.

The summit of Mount Washington is interesting in that it reminds me of Grand Central Station. It seems as if everyone else sought to climb the summit also. There is a cog railroad with smoke belching from its engine delivering people to the summit. There is also an auto road which delivers people to the summit. After hiking up a vertical elevation change of over three thousand feet, the hiker enters a parking lot at the base of the summit filled with motorcycles and automobiles. It is culture shock. From a semi-wilderness backcountry experience, it is back to an urban setting with automobiles, tourists and exhaust fumes. We had conquered the mountain. We conquered it on foot. Others used gasoline to do the work for them. There was a satisfaction in our accomplishment. There was also a feeling that those using gasoline had cheated getting to the top. It is a bittersweet feeling which is hard to describe. In contrast to my feelings, one tourist

who drove up the mountain though that we were stupid for hiking up the mountain since it was much easier to drive. Never-the-less, there was a part of me which wanted to leave and get away from this place which was an anomaly in the backcountry.

We descended the mountain, using Tuckerman's Ravine Trail. It was getting toward dusk. We got in our automobile and drove home. We had a good experience. So did everyone else. Little did we realize how much the Forest Service and the AMC had managed our experience. By managing the information we received, they managed our experience. Little did we realize how much of the White Mountains was also protected by directing us and the rest of "thundering herds" like us on the designated highway to the summit, Tuckerman's Ravine Trail.