SUMMARY

The Saco Ranger District of the White Mountain National Forest proposes to make changes to the parking design of and access to the Rocky Gorge Scenic Area. These proposed changes include:

- Reconfigure and relocate the existing **parking area** at the south (upstream) end of the site to safely accommodate all current vehicle use for the Scenic Area at one site and with one entrance/exit off the Kancamagus Highway.
- Remove the existing footbridge and construct a new **accessible footbridge** approximately 90 feet downstream of the current bridge location.
- Obliterate and restore both the **north road entrance** and the **north vehicle access road** from the Kancamagus Highway to the new footbridge location.
- Convert the remaining section of vehicle access road to an **accessible trail,** leading from the reconstructed parking area to the new footbridge site. Relocate and reconstruct the trail from the footbridge to Falls Pond to be universally accessible.
- Replace the existing toilet with a fully **accessible toilet**.
- Install **interpretive panels** at four stations along the trail from the parking area to Falls Pond.

These changes are needed in order to address environmental impact concerns, improve visitor safety, provide universal accessibility for all visitors, and enhance the quality of the experience of Rocky Gorge as a designated Scenic Area. These actions are consistent with objectives for this area described in the **Land and Resources Management Plan for the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF-LRMP).**

These changes are modifications of actions that were originally proposed in the Interpretive Media and Preliminary Facilities Plan for the Kancamagus National Scenic Byway, developed under contract for the White Mountain National Forest in 1993.

The major **effects** of the proposal will be:

1) A change in access, use patterns, and experience available at the site
2) Elimination or mitigation of several public safety hazards, and
3) A decreased likelihood for pollutants or sediment to enter the Swift River.

The Rocky Gorge Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluates two **alternatives** to the proposed action described above. The alternatives include the option of making no changes to the current design of the site, and the option of implementing only a portion of the proposed action. Specifically, that alternative would involve changes to the parking area and removal of the interior road through the site (as described in the proposed action) and conversion of the road to an accessible trail from the parking lot to an accessible overlook on the east side of the gorge. No changes to the bridge or the trail from the bridge to Falls Pond would take place.

Based on the alternatives and their effects, the Saco District Ranger, as the Responsible Official, must decide:

- Whether or not to select an alternative for redesign of the Rocky Gorge site to move toward addressing visitor safety, resource protection, and visitor experience concerns and opportunities within the Rocky Gorge Scenic Area as outlined in the WMNF-LRMP and other applicable policies and documents.
- Whether the alternative selected would result in significant environmental impacts to the quality of the human environment and determine whether preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is warranted.
- Whether the decision and alternatives considered meet all applicable federal, state and local laws and policies, including consistency with the WMNF-LRMP.

Figure 1 – Rocky Gorge then… photo Saco RD, undated

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO READ THIS THING

These pages are designed to describe:

What we want to do,
Why we want to do it,
What the **issues** are with doing what we want to do,
What **alternatives** we have – including doing nothing,
What the **effects** of each alternative are.

Figure 2 - …and now - photo – Saco RD, undated.

The direction to prepare a document like this is provided in the **National Environmental Policy Act** (NEPA) of 1972. This federal law lays out the environmental policy of the United States. The law (and the regulations enacted to implement it) describes a process that must be followed any time an action is proposed that may have an effect on the human or natural environment.

This process is designed to meet two twin goals: it requires us to analyze what we're doing and any effects our action (or inaction) may have, and to involve the public along the way, providing full disclosure.
So, this Environmental Assessment has been prepared to accomplish those goals.

It's structured like this:

The **SUMMARY**, **INTRODUCTION**, and **BACKGROUND** provide: a) a synopsis of the entire document, b) the intro you're reading now, and c) the history behind the project.

Chapter 1.0

This chapter gives a quick description of our **proposed action**.

The **purpose of and need for action statement** tells why we believe some action is necessary. The chapter also describes the **responsible official** (the lucky soul making the decision) and states what he or she must do.

We then describe the **existing condition** and the **desired future condition** of the area. This is basically a summary of what the site is like now and what we'd like it to be in the future.

Next there is a listing of our **public involvement** efforts, often called **"scoping"** because we're asking the public to help us determine the overall scope of the project.

Once we've determined the scope of the project, we can describe the **issues** that the public helped us identify. Many of these are concerns we've also recognized internally.

Chapter 2.0

This is often called "the heart of the document" because it describes, in detail, the reasonable range of **alternatives** available to the decision maker.

These alternatives always include our **proposed action**, and must include the option of taking **No Action** – which guarantees that we must evaluate the pros and cons of doing something versus doing nothing.

We've included a table to help compare the differences between alternatives. There's also a description of how (or whether) each alternative meets our **purpose and need for action**.

Next there's a brief description of alternative we considered, but did not consider in detail. This describes some of the early thought process and why each idea was eventually scrapped.

Chapter 3.0

This is a long one. This is where the **effects** of each alternative are described.

We've organized it this way:

> To keep things focused on the important issues, we describe each alternative by how the changes it proposes to the site affect the elements of each issue.
>
> Or to say it another way, we compare how each alternative affects each issue.

There's a description of the **affected environment** included in this section. It's basically a recap of the description of the existing condition from Chapter 1.0.

Once the effects have been described for each issue, there is a more general discussion of **effects on other resources** – things that were not identified (by Forest Service staff or the public) as a concern.

Chapter 4.0 and 5.0 are basically just lists of who put this thing together, and who from other agencies or the general public was directly involved.
So you can thank them.

Now, because we're the government we use a lot of acronyms. So to save on confusion later here's a list of ones you'll see throughout the document:

NEPA – *National Environmental Policy Act* – we already covered this. We won't use this one much.
WMNF-LRMP – ***White Mountain National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan*** – also just called the Forest Plan, this is the guiding programmatic document that directs our actions on this National Forest.
EA – ***Environmental Assessment*** – a type of environmental document prepared under NEPA.
FEIS – ***Final Environmental Impact Statement*** – a more comprehensive document required if significant effects take place as result of an action. The Forest Plan is based on a FEIS.
IDT – ***Interdisciplinary Team*** – a team of specialists from different disciplines that works together to analyze actions and write environmental documents (like the one in your hand).
ROS – ***Recreation Opportunity Spectrum*** – a system used to describe the type of recreation experience one can expect in a given area. Details of this system are included in the Forest Plan.
NH DOT – ***State of New Hampshire Department of Transportation*** – you know them, they work on roads.

Also, please note that NH Route 112 is also known as the Kancamagus Highway, and also by its official title, the Kancamagus National Scenic Byway. Highway and byway are used interchangeably in this document.

Lastly, this EA refers several times to the "Interpretive Facilities and Media Plan for the Kancamagus National Scenic Byway". Thankfully, this has a shorter name also. We refer to it as the Kancamagus Interpretive Plan.

Have fun! We hope you enjoy reading this as much as we did working on it.
No, really. We do.

BACKGROUND

The Rocky Gorge project developed out of a "futuring" exercise on the Forest, where White Mountain National Forest staff in the early 1990's creatively brainstormed a vision of the Kancamagus Highway as more than just a road from one point to another with pretty views along the way. They realized that the many uses and long history of what eventually became the Kancamagus National Scenic Byway was itself a story that, in a way, mirrors the story of the White Mountain National Forest as a whole. The idea developed to look comprehensively at the Kanc, and the sites along the way, as an opportunity to tell that story – and accomplish some long-needed care and maintenance at the same time. WMNF staff evaluated a number of locations along the Highway – both developed and unmodified – and provided information to the landscape architectural firm Terrence J. DeWan & Associates, who, under contract, produced the **Interpretive Media and Preliminary Facilities Plan for the Kancamagus National Scenic Byway** in September 1993. This plan outlines opportunities to tell the story – through interpretation – of the Forest, the Highway, the land, and the people of the White Mountains. Each site along the way tells a piece of that story, and the designs suggested in the plan are further intended to address some long standing operations and maintenance issues as well.

To begin to implement the projects outlined in the Interpretive Plan, a scoping letter was mailed to interested parties in March of 1994. This package described the proposed changes to 12 sites along the Highway, including Rocky Gorge.

Today, at most of these sites, the improvements have already been evaluated (including public involvement), designed, and completed. This includes recent improvements at Covered Bridge, Blackberry Crossing, Sabbaday Falls, and Lower Falls. Still other projects are in progress, such as Russell Colbath House scheduled for completion in the next year.

But based on issues and alternatives the public helped identify, it was determined that additional analysis was needed for the Rocky Gorge project. An interdisciplinary team (IDT) was formed on the Saco Ranger District to begin the focused examination, and an **Environmental Assessment** for the Rocky Gorge project was issued in June 1995 for public review and comment. However, because of the funding uncertainty and some concerns with the alternatives available to us at that time, no decision was ever issued, and the project was temporarily shelved.

In early 2000 it became apparent that funding for the project could become available in the form of a Congressional earmark, as there was support for the project at the Forest Service regional level and within Congress.

More significantly, because of work slated by State of New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NH DOT) for a section of the Kancamagus

Highway in the vicinity of Rocky Gorge, the possibility developed for creating a substantially new proposed action. Because of the time elapsed and the new circumstances surrounding the project, the Saco District decided to restart the process and begin crafting a new Environmental Assessment. The end result of that process is the document in your hands.

It is of vital importance to recognize that the public involvement that occurred in the early 1990's as part of the original Environmental Assessment, and the comments generated after the draft EA was issued in 1995 were fundamental in getting us to the starting point for this document. All told, three distinct public involvement efforts have occurred, and eight different alternatives have been examined in the nine years this process has gone on.

Among the public comments we have recently received was a suggestion that the Forest Service had already made up its mind about this project and was proceeding without regard for public opinion. It is our hope that the readers of this EA will know that, whatever alternative is selected, we have approached this project with great respect and appreciation for the past and the work of those who have come before us. Our primary objective is to make this beautiful site even a little better, and accessible to all.

1.0 PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 PROJECT LOCATION

The Rocky Gorge Scenic Area Improvements Project is a U.S.D.A. Forest Service proposed project located on the Saco Ranger District of the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF). The project area is located within Carroll County, in the Town of Albany, west of the Kancamagus Highway (New Hampshire Route 112) 8.5 miles west of Conway NH (See Figure 1 - Vicinity Map).

1.2 PROPOSED ACTIONS

The Saco Ranger District proposes to implement actions related to the parking lot, interior access road, bridge over the gorge, and trail to Falls Pond. These actions are designed to realize opportunities defined and described in the Interpretive Media and Preliminary Facilities Plan for the Kancamagus National Scenic Byway, in keeping with the Land and Resources Management Plan for the White Mountain National Forest.

More detail on the Proposed Action is in chapter 2.2 Alternatives

1.3 PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.3.1 Purpose and Need Statement

The ***purpose*** of action at Rocky Gorge is to provide a high-quality day use recreation opportunity for all National Forest visitors in a minimally modified Roaded Natural setting, consistent with direction provided in the 1986 Land and Resource Management Plan for the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF-LRMP). User groups who seek opportunities at this end of the recreation spectrum are typically families with children, people with accessibility challenges, and/or those unfamiliar with outdoor skills, who wish to learn about natural environments, enjoy the benefits of exercise, and experience out-of-doors skills at the entry level.

This section describes *why* we want to take action at Rocky Gorge

The ***need*** for proposed reconstruction of this site is to address ongoing safety, environmental and visitor experience concerns, to provide universal access, and to facilitate interpretation of this site.

- Safety concerns relate to the flow of traffic (pedestrian and vehicular traffic both utilize the section of roadway parallel to the gorge); alignment and sight distance at the entrances to the Kancamagus Scenic Highway; and the design and location of the current footbridge.

- The environmental concerns are associated with the design of the current roadway parallel to the gorge and the design of the existing parking lot.

These areas provide little protection to the Swift River in the case of accidental spill of oil or gasoline from passenger vehicles. The area between the parking lot and the Swift River has become very worn by pedestrian use, leaving bare ground and exposed tree roots. Also, the bridge's current location is within and below the 100-year flood level for the Swift River.

- Visitor experience concerns result from the presence of vehicle traffic on the roadway parallel to the gorge, and the existence of a bridge and resulting concentrations of visitors in the middle of the gorge.

- The primary and secondary attractions of the site are not universally accessible to all Forest visitors.

1.3.2 Existing Condition

Rocky Gorge has long attracted visitors to enjoy its scenic qualities. The Swift River forms the primary attraction of the site as it turns, narrows, and tumbles over a steep cascade. The river then deepens as it continues through a long, steep, cliff-bound gorge. Falls Pond and the surrounding forest compose the area's secondary attractions, providing a serene complement to the more tumultuous experience at the Gorge (see ***Figure 2 Current Condition Map***). The Forest Service's Eastern Regional Forester designated it as a 70-acre Scenic Area in 1961. The site receives regular visitation year-round, with the peak use during the hot summer months and again during the spectacular heights of autumn foliage. The primary recreation activities in the Scenic Area are: viewing and photographing scenery, hiking, cross-country skiing, fishing, water play, whitewater boating, and resting while driving for pleasure.

This section describes what Rocky Gorge is like right now

Those currently visiting this site can enter the area from the south and park in the existing southern parking lot, or can enter from the north along a one-way access road, and park along this entry road or park in the southern parking lot. Those entering from the north must drive adjacent to the gorge through the scenic area in order to exit the site. Pedestrian traffic traveling from the parking lot toward the gorge shares the roadway with oncoming vehicle traffic. A low, creosote-treated wooden barrier rail along this stretch separates pedestrian and vehicle traffic.

Vehicular traffic may detract from the scenic qualities of the area and may present a safety hazard to pedestrians (especially children, who are often inclined to "tightrope" along the traffic barrier railing) walking along this roadway. This traffic brings with it the potential of gasoline or oil spills into the river and the emissions of exhaust odors.

There are spaces for approximately 40 cars in the parking lot. There are five (5) designated spaces for cars to park along the vehicle access road downstream of the gorge. There is approximately 1400 feet of additional shoulder space along the access road where overflow parking takes place. Approximately 70 cars can potentially park along

this stretch of road. This makes for a total approximate capacity of 115 car spaces. There are no designated bus/RV or motorcycle parking spaces.

There has long been a bridge of some type or another over the gorge in the current location, though these bridges have been replaced several times due to the seasonal power of ice and high water.

The current bridge is not designed to provide access to those with disabilities, and visitors must travel over uneven, open ledges to reach the bridge. These ledges may be slippery when wet or icy – or impossible to cross in times of high water. Furthermore, the bridge itself can be quite difficult and hazardous to cross during the winter months due to ice and snow buildup.

The trail to Falls Pond travels from the west edge of the bridge straight up a slight hill, past the junction with the Nanamocomuck Cross-country Ski Trail, and down slightly to the edge of Falls Pond. To climb the hill a staircase with steps framed from wooden railroad ties has been constructed. The area around the hill has been impacted from visitors avoiding the stairs to either side.

1.3.3 Desired Future Condition

The desired future condition of this site is one that offers a safe, fully accessible, quality developed recreation experience in keeping with Land and Resource Management Plan direction to visitors of all abilities without compromising the aesthetic values inherent in the natural setting of the Scenic Area.

This is how we'd like to see Rocky Gorge in the future

The **Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) for the White Mountain National Forest** gives this National Forest long-term direction for the management of its natural resources.

Management direction includes Forest management goals and objectives: to feature quality recreation opportunities not likely to be provided elsewhere on other lands; and to recognize the demand for and importance of day use areas and driving for pleasure as part of the Forest's total recreation opportunity spectrum. Forest-wide standards and guidelines state that all facilities within a site will be evaluated for the needs of people with disabilities (LRMP section III- 8). This direction is attached as Appendix A.

Programmatic documents cited in this environmental assessment (such as the WMNF-LRMP) as well as other documents referenced are available for public review at the Saco Ranger District Office, 33 Kancamagus Highway, Conway, New Hampshire 03818.

During the Forest Planning process of 1986 the Rocky Gorge Scenic Area was set aside as part of Management Area 8.1 with a distinct set of standards and guides (LRMP section III -70-71). This direction is attached as Appendix B. A key

feature of this direction is that facilities will prevent site deterioration, protect the user from health and safety hazards, and provide for user convenience. The Forest Plan designates the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) class for the Scenic Area as Roaded Natural (LRMP III-70). The setting is for this ROS class is characterized by a predominately unmodified natural environment with moderate evidences of the sights and sounds of human activity (LRMP appendix VII-H-1 through VII-H-7). More information on ROS is available as part of the project record.

The Forest Plan references a **Rocky Gorge Management Plan**. The only signed copy of this document is dated 1961 and consists of two pages of direction. While brief, the management vision for Rocky Gorge is entirely appropriate and still quite valid. Given the age of the document, the creation of more fully developed management direction in the WMNF-LRMP, but primarily because nothing in the Management Plan is contrary to actions considered in this area, the Rocky Gorge Management Plan is available as part of the project record.

In 1993 the White Mountain National Forest received the contracted **Interpretive Media and Preliminary Facilities Plan for the Kancamagus National Scenic Byway** (Kancamagus Interpretive Plan). This plan outlines opportunities to redesign existing and develop new facilities along the Kancamagus Highway in order to relate the story of the land, resources, use, and history of the White Mountains and the White Mountain National Forest. This plan serves as the long-term outlook – over 20 years or more – for the facilities along the Kancamagus Highway.

The **Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)** directs local and state governments to eliminate all forms of discrimination against persons with disabilities, including exclusionary facility design. While the Federal Government is mandated to provide accessibility under previous legislation (the Architectural Barriers Act and Rehabilitation Act), agencies typically strive to meet the higher standards described in ADA.
Additional specific guidance is provided in the draft **USDA Forest Service Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Guidelines** and the draft **USDA Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines** of February 2003. These drafts detail specific construction standards for outdoor recreation facilities to be used until final rules can be published. These documents are available for review as part of the project record.

This environmental assessment is tiered to the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Forest Plan.

1.4 DECISION TO BE MADE

The Saco District Ranger, as the Responsible Official, must decide:

- Whether or not to select an alternative for redesign of the Rocky Gorge site to move toward addressing visitor safety, resource protection, and visitor experience concerns and opportunities within the Rocky Gorge Scenic Area as outlined in the WMNF-LRMP and other applicable policies and documents.

- Whether the alternative selected would result in significant environmental impacts to the quality of the human or natural environment and determine whether preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is warranted.
- Whether the decision and alternatives considered meet all applicable federal, state and local laws and policies, including consistency with the WMNF-LRMP.

1.5 SCOPE OF THIS ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT, PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, SCOPING EFFORTS

Analysis to determine the scope of the project has been conducted by the ID Team. Efforts to involve the public and other affected and cooperating agencies in this process include:

- The Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) issued quarterly for public review by the WMNF has contained information regarding the resumption of the Rocky Gorge analysis as of October 1, 2001.

- A scoping letter requesting public comment was mailed to interested parties on November 27, 2002

- Public notices regarding the proposed action appeared in the following newspapers:
  The Manchester Union Leader, December 6, 2002
  The Conway Daily Sun, December 6, 2002
  The Mountain Ear, December 5, 2002

- To provide current project information and seek input, comments or concerns, the Saco District Ranger has met with:
  The Local Swift River Advisory Committee, July 8, 2002.
  Town of Albany, Board of Selectmen – Fall 2001, Winter 2002, August 7, 2002.
  Town of Bartlett, Board of Selectmen – July 26, 2002.

- The following meetings have occurred with NH DOT:
  January 31, 2002, Concord, NH
  May 14, 2002, Rocky Gorge site
  June 14, 2002, Saco Ranger Station
  November 8, 2002, Concord, NH
  January 9 and 21, 2002, Concord, NH

It should be noted that public comments as well as internal analysis and review from previous scoping efforts in 1994 and 1995 have also served as a basis for this new analysis.

1.6 RELEVANT ISSUES

This section of the EA identifies pertinent issues raised internally and externally during the scoping process. A discussion of how each of these issues is addressed by alternatives (described in ***Chapter 2.0***) is located in ***Chapter 3.0 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences.***

1.6.1 Issues Central to the Decision Being Made

A central issue is one that has been used to develop alternatives.

Based on IDT analysis and comments received during the scoping process, five issues have been identified as central to the decision to be made at Rocky Gorge.

> ***Internal Issue*** – one raised by FS staff
> ***External Issue*** – one raised by the public

Issue 1 – Development Level
A common concern raised both internally and externally has been whether the proposed actions at Rocky Gorge constitute an expansion of the facilities and whether these actions will attract greater use to the site – and to the Kancamagus Highway as a whole. There is concern that any increase in use may degrade the quality of the experience available there. Furthermore, several comments suggested that the changes to Rocky Gorge moved the site - and contributed toward moving the National Forest generally - away from its intended rustic, scenic, and undeveloped character.

Issue 2 – Accessibility
Internally, there is concern regarding the level of access available at the site for persons with mobility challenges, conformity with LRMP and legislative direction to offer accessible recreation opportunities, and whether design changes increase, decrease, or keep constant the level of access for all visitors.
Externally, the sentiment was expressed that retaining the access road through the site best met the desire for accessibility since it offers a drive-through option for visitors. Additionally, the necessity of reconstructing and relocating the section of trail to Falls Pond to meet accessibility standards was questioned.

Issue 3 – Bridge Location and Design
Several comments relate to the proposed relocation and reconstruction of the bridge over the gorge. Concerns were expressed regarding the historic significance of the current location, whether the new location would offer the same quality view and experience of the gorge and falls, whether the new design would withstand high water events, whether the current bridge is in fact threatened by high water events, and whether the new design could provide appropriate access to all visitors without itself becoming a visual detriment to the site.

Issue 4 – Public Safety

Internal analysis has raised concern that the current design of the site creates inherent hazards to public safety. The current design requires all traffic – including tour busses and recreational vehicles (RV's) – to move through the south-end parking lot. This lot is not designed with proper turning radii for these vehicles (especially when the lot is full) forcing them to perform multiple-point turns in order to navigate through the site. The location of the restroom draws additional pedestrian traffic into the vicinity of one of these tight turning radii. All pedestrian traffic must walk parallel to the access road through the site to reach the bridge, increasing the likelihood of pedestrian/motor vehicle collision. The north-end access road entry from the highway has poor sight distances for vehicles traveling on the highway. Access to the bridge is across open, uneven rock ledge, which may be slippery in wet, icy, or snowy conditions – or impossible at times of high water.

Figure 5 – The ledges one must cross to get to the bridge– Saco RD photo, undated

Issue 5 – Environmental Impact

Internally and externally there are concerns regarding potential environmental impacts related to the design of the site. The existing parking facility is sloped toward the Swift River, and is designed to drain surface runoff from the pavement through a sluiceway directly into the river. The current layout leaves very little vegetated buffer between the parking lot and the river. What buffer there is has become impacted from visitors taking a direct path to the water from their vehicles.

The access road through the site has a minimal shoulder to buffer the pavement from the river. There is some slumping of material that may be attributable to the road.

The potential exists for gas or oil to spill from vehicles using either the road or the parking lot, and for those spills to directly enter the Swift River.

The trail to Falls Pond climbs directly up a steep grade over a series of stairs that visitors tend to avoid to either side. Soil compaction in this area has led to loss of vegetation and erosion.

1.6.2 Other Issues Within the Scope of Analysis, but not Central to the Decision

Through public comment analysis, three issues were identified as related to the scope of the project, but were not considered central to the decision being made.

A brief response to these issues including an explanation as to why they are not considered central to the decision is provided here rather than in ***Chapter 3.0 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences.***

Cost of the project

Comments were received questioning the total cost of the project. There was also some concern about how this project is prioritized against other needs across the Forest.

Congress has earmarked funding for completion of projects described in the Kancamagus Interpretive Plan as a whole, with implementation scheduled between fiscal years (FY) 2001 and 2004. These funds are to be used only for work related to the Kancamagus Interpretive Plan, so there is no competition between these projects and other capital investments needed on the Forest. Within these earmarked funds, the Forest Service has the discretion to adjust funding for individual projects as needed. We also have latitude to shift funds between projects, or turn it back when work is done below estimate. We hope to do so on the Rocky Gorge project. Given the dedicated nature of the funding, this issue was not considered central to the decision to be made.

Preliminary estimates to implement all of the projects proposed in the March 31, 1994 scoping package was $3.8 MM.

In FY 2002 the WMNF received $1.655 MM for the Kancamagus projects, used to complete work at several sites along the Highway, and begin work at other locations.

In 2000, the estimate for implementation of the proposed action at Rocky Gorge was approximately $684,000. This work is tentatively scheduled for FY 2003 as part of Phase II of the overall Kancamagus Interpretive Plan project.

The opportunity to accomplish the Rocky Gorge project jointly using New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NH DOT) designers, contractors, and resources is expected to result in an additional savings. DOT intends to consolidate parking lot construction as part of their improvement of Rt. 112.

Amenities for Other Users

Comments were received requesting consideration for picnic facilities, accommodation for whitewater boat access, and use of the interior access road for bicycles traveling along the Kancamagus Highway. A suggestion was also made to retain the access road to bypass the highway in case of a vehicle accident in this location.

Picnic Facilities
The Rocky Gorge site has a history of providing picnic facilities – this is even stated as management direction in the 1961 management plan. Tables were maintained until the 1970's when the parking lot was constructed. The IDT considered adding picnic facilities, but given concerns regarding development level and potential increased use of the site – as well as additional maintenance requirements – these additions were not included in any alternative. It should be noted that nothing in this analysis would preclude making a separate NEPA decision to add picnic facilities in the future, if deemed necessary.

Whitewater Access
Consideration was given to the public comment regarding the need to incorporate access for spring whitewater use into any Action Alternative.

The up-river takeout/put-in by the existing parking lot is to be stabilized with an access path in Alternatives 2 and 3, but no designated downstream put-in would be implemented with either Action Alternative. Boaters using the site as a put-in to access the river below the gorge will need to carry boats from the parking area to any informal access point they choose. In Alternative 2 and 3 the interior access road bed would serve to some degree for downstream river access.

An additional put-in point was considered below the falls in the vicinity of the bridge location proposed in Alternative 2, but has not been recommended in any of the Action Alternatives. The IDT felt that the construction of a river access point in the middle of the Gorge would be too visually intrusive to justify the limited boating use it would receive, and may encourage additional swimming activity in an area closed to that use. Boaters portaging the falls can negotiate their gear over the ledges (as they have historically) or continue their portage along the old interior road corridor to an informal put-in location downstream.

Because the water levels on the Swift generally limit the whitewater boating season, it was felt that the impacts resulting from individuals portaging around or accessing the river below the falls would be manageable within either Action Alternative (obviously, no improvements would occur with the No Action). If impacts indicate that an access trail to the river below the falls is a needed addition, nothing in any alternative precludes construction of such a trail in the future.

Bicycle Use

One respondent offered suggestions regarding use of the interior access road as a bicycle lane that could be also used as a motor vehicle traffic bypass if that section of the Kancamagus Byway were blocked by accident.

The IDT considered this suggestion, but because the length of the Kancamagus will have 4-foot bicycle lanes adjacent to the travel lanes, it did not seem advantageous to keep the length of the access road open in order to widen the northbound bike lane for less than half a mile. Furthermore, using the access road as a bike route would deposit bicyclists in the middle of the parking lot – a significant safety issue – rather than keeping them in the travel lanes along the byway. The access road could offer an alternate route around any accident that blocked the byway, however these types of accidents are expected to occur very infrequently, and not require any specific mitigation. Indeed, one aspect of both this project and that planned by NH DOT is to improve public safety along this stretch of byway, reducing the overall likelihood of motor vehicle collisions. Bicycles will have access to the Gorge either in the current manner (No Action) or to the parking area (Alternatives 1 and 2).

Interpretation of the Site

Some comments requested specific topics for interpretation, others questioned the overall level of interpretation at the site.

Currently, four topics are planned for interpretation at the site. One panel deals with recreational history dating back to the 1860's, a second with why swimming is prohibited in the gorge (this panel retells the story of a young woman caught underwater by the river's current) a third panel discusses the power of water and ice, and a fourth describes the ecosystem of Falls Pond.

The intent of this interpretation is to provide visitors a sense of the cultural and natural history of the gorge, and of the National Forest as a whole. Some respondents supported the level of interpretation, others sought for fewer panels – suggesting there is a wide range of opinions regarding this topic. Out of literally hundreds of possible topics, and based on the recommendation of professional designers involved in the Interpretive Media and Preliminary Facilities Plan, it was determined that four panels across the site provided a reasonable level of information without overwhelming the site.

One respondent requested that the current interior access road be acknowledged as a representative section of the historic carriage road that ran through the Passaconaway valley – either by retaining the road itself or through interpretation planned at the site. We have been unable to locate any specific historical documents confirming that this road lies on the bed of the old town road through the valley. Maps from the Saco Ranger District Land Status Atlas dated 1914 and 1920 (revised 1935) suggest that the Swift River Logging Railroad may have been

located along this route, but that in this area the town road ran to the east and south of the rails, possibly along the route of the current Kancamagus Byway. Consultation on this matter has been made with the Albany Historical Society and the WMNF Archaeologist. Neither was able to confirm the location of the carriage road relative to the current site layout. Additionally, both suggested that a better example of the historic road was located in and near Blackberry Crossing Campground. Since the history of use – including asphalt surfacing and years of motor vehicle traffic – is so extensive on the Rocky Gorge road, and a better example of the carriage road exists elsewhere, the IDT felt that the history of travel in the Passaconaway valley was best captured through other means. Nothing in the Cultural Resources Report (on file) for the project suggests any specific historical significance of the access road. Since the roadbed will be a recognizable feature following restoration and will be available for informal visitor use, interpretation or appropriate memorialization could occur in this area at a later date if additional research suggests greater historical significance of this feature.

1.6.3 Issues Outside the Scope of the Project

During public comment, issues were raised that are not within the scope of this project because they are not caused by the proposed action, nor are they affected by the alternatives available to the decision maker.

Some comments were received relating to changes to NH Route 112 (the Kancamagus Highway) proposed by State of NH DOT.

These issues are addressed in the analysis conducted by NH DOT for that project.

2.0 ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

This section of the EA outlines the various alternatives the deciding official may choose to both meet the purpose of and need for the project and address the issues identified in **Chapter 1.6**.

It includes the option of taking no action at this time, identifies the original proposed action made public through the scoping process, and describes an additional alternative developed by the IDT. Each meets the purpose and need of the project and addresses the issues in different ways.

Chapter 2.5 describes **Mitigation Measures Common to all Action Alternatives.**

In **Chapter 2.6** there is a discussion of **Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Further Study**.

2.1 Alternative 1 (No Action)

This alternative would involve no improvements to the Rocky Gorge Scenic Area at this time. However, this would not preclude ongoing maintenance of the existing facilities at this site.

This alternative is responsive to issues regarding change in development level, and maintains the north motor vehicle entrance and access road used by some visitors. It is not responsive to the purpose of and need for the project because it does not address the stated safety, environmental, visitor experience or universal accessibility issues.

2.2 Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)

This alternative was developed to address the stated purpose of and need for action in the project area (pages 8-11). It seeks to modify the site layout to accommodate existing use, mitigate safety and environmental issues, improve visitor experience of the area, and provide universal access for all Forest visitors.

Activities related to Parking Facilities

- Relocate, reconstruct and reconfigure the existing south-end parking lot to accommodate all current use at the site. The lot will be moved away from the river, with the eastern section located on the roadbed of the existing Kancamagus Highway.

  The lot would have:

  A design that drains surface water away from the river into a grass-lined swale for filtration

  A single entrance/exit point from the highway located at the south end of the lot, away from the gorge.

  42 car spaces around a central island, 5 dedicated bus spaces along the east (highway) side of the lot, dedicated space for up to 8 motorcycles (consisting of inset concrete kickstand pads), and two dedicated accessible spaces at the north end of the lot, closest to the bridge.

- Remove the current toilet. Construct an accessible toilet near the north end of the parking lot.
- Rehabilitate the hardened area between the lot and the river by planting native trees and shrubs. Harden the current boat put-in/take-out access trail to the river above the gorge.

Activities related to Access to the Gorge

- Convert the vehicle access road from the parking lot to the bridge location into a universally accessible trail. This would involve removing pavement, narrowing the width of the roadbed, and resurfacing with compacted natural material or pavement.
- Obliterate the north-end vehicle entry and the 1400 feet (approximately) of paved road from this entrance up to the bridge location. This would involve removing pavement, scarifying the ground, and seeding to a native ground cover. Foot access into this area would be permitted, and the roadbed would be available for informal visitor use.

Activities related to The Bridge

- Remove the current bridge over the gorge.
- Construct a new, universally accessible bridge spanning the gorge at a location approximately 90 feet downstream from the current location connecting the new accessible trail to the west side of the gorge.

Activities related to Access to Falls Pond

- Construct a universally accessible trail from the bridge to Falls Pond. The trail would incorporate curvilinear design, include rest locations, an overlook on the west bank directly above the falls and an overlook of Falls Pond.
- Remove the wooden staircase on the current trail. Rehabilitate the trail and surrounding area with native vegetation.

Activities related to Interpretation

- Install four interpretive panels along the trail from the parking lot to Falls Pond.

A blank page for your enjoyment

(Just kidding, it helps the maps line up right →)

2.3 Alternative 3

This alternative was developed to respond to concerns about the overall level of development at the site and the location and design of the bridge, while still partially addressing some limited aspects of the safety, environmental, accessibility, and visitor experience concerns.

Activities related to Parking Facilities

The same actions regarding parking facilities described in ***Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)*** would be taken with this Alternative.

Activities related to Access to the Gorge

The same actions regarding access to the gorge described in ***Alternative 2*** would be taken, with the following exception:

> The accessible trail would be constructed from the parking lot to a location in the vicinity of the current accessible viewpoint along the interior access road. The trail would pass by the old water pump location, the area that currently provides access to the open ledges leading to the bridge. There would be no accessible route from the end of the trail to the bridge.
>
> The north-end entrance and access road would be removed up to the terminus of the new accessible trail. The process of removing the road and rehabilitating the roadbed would be the same as in ***Alternative 2***.

Activities related to The Bridge

No action would be taken to remove, relocate, or reconstruct the bridge at this time.

Activities related to Access to Falls Pond

No action would be taken to relocate or reconstruct the trail to Falls Pond at this time. No changes to the west side of the gorge would take place, and no scenic overlooks of either the gorge or Falls Pond would be constructed.

Activities related to Interpretation

Interpretation would still consist of four (4) panels, but only three would be located along the accessible trail. A fourth sign would be installed at Falls Pond.

2.4 Comparison of Alternatives

The following table illustrates the differences in Alternatives. The comparison of effects of implementing any alternative will be discussed in ***Chapter 3.0 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences.***

Table 1 – ***Comparison of Alternatives***

	Alternatives		
Issues	**Alternative 1 No Action**	**Alternative 2 Proposed Action**	**Alternative 3**
Parking Facilities	No change to current condition	Redesign current lot to accommodate up to 44 cars, 5 busses, and 8 motorcycles. Move lot away from river. Rehabilitate riverbank. Relocate toilet.	Same as Alternative 2.
Access to the Gorge	No change to current condition	Reconstruct access road from parking lot to bridge location. Obliterate and rehabilitate north-end access point and 1400 feet of roadway up to the bridge location	Same as Alternative 2, but trail ends at the water pump site and does not access the bridge.
The Bridge	No change to current condition	Remove existing bridge. Construct new, fully accessible bridge approximately 90 feet downstream of current location.	No change to current condition
Access to Falls Pond	No change to current condition	Remove existing staircase. Reconstruct trail to pond on curvilinear design to meet barrier-free standards. Trail to include overlooks of falls and pond.	No change to current condition
Interpretation	No change to current condition	Four panels spread along trail from parking lot to Falls Pond.	Three panels between parking lot and end of accessible trail, one panel at Falls Pond

2.5 Mitigation Measures Common to All Action Alternatives

- Conduct surveys for presence of **Pond Reed Bent-grass (***Calamagrostis lacustris)* along the Swift River inside the analysis area prior to any implementation along the stream bank or any portion of the project that may

cause siltation into the Swift River If this species is determined to be present, further mitigations to the project would be required to protect it.

- Design the parking lot to maintain the high water quality of the Swift River. Design should catch all runoff from the parking area and drain it to the side away from the River for filtration and percolation.
- Provide siltation devices during implementation under any of the Action Alternatives to eliminate or reduce siltation into the Swift River.
- Any cultural resources discovered during implementation will be evaluated by heritage personnel as to their significance and a determination will be made whether any mitigations will be needed to protect those resources.
- Best Management Practices would be followed during implementation of any action alternative to eliminate potential adverse effects during construction.

2.6 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated From Further Study

These alternatives were developed as part of the initial planning for the Rocky Gorge project. They include the design suggested in the Kancamagus Interpretive Plan, the alternative developed in the draft Environmental Assessment of 1996, and an additional alternative responsive to comments received during the public comment period following the release of that document. A brief summary of each alternative is provided, with a description of why the action has not been analyzed in detail in this assessment.

2.6.1 Alternative A. Original Proposal from the Kancamagus Interpretive Plan

Summary –
This alternative would:

- Reconfigure the existing south-end parking lot to accommodate 19 cars and four busses (or a combination of bus/RVs). The new configuration would change the alignment of the entry from the byway; provide for accessible parking and a bus unloading area.

- Construct a new parking area on the north end of the site to accommodate approximately 25 cars and 6 busses/RVs; change the alignment of the north entrance and obliterate/rehabilitate the old north entry.

- Remove the paved access road and replace it with an accessible trail running between both lots and up to the bridge,

- Replace the existing bridge in its current location with an accessible bridge. This would require spanning a total distance of approximately 110 feet across the Gorge and adjoining rocks.

- Rebuild the trail to the pond – but not to barrier free standards, and provide interpretation of the site.

This alternative was designed to be response to the purpose of and need for action at the site. It was carefully studied in the 1996 EA, but has been eliminated from further study at this time. The relocation of the Kancamagus Byway planned by NH DOT in this area allows for a parking design that meets the twin goals of accommodating existing use for the site without encroaching on natural setting of the gorge. Furthermore, while parking capacities would not increase with this alternative, construction of a second completely new parking lot may exacerbate the internal and external concerns related to development level of the site.

In addition, the bridge span required to make the bridge fully accessible in its current location would require either an extensive single span of approximately 110 feet over the Gorge and rocks, or two connected spans. This was eliminated from further study because it was determined likely to be visually obtrusive and highly expensive.

2.6.2 Alternative B. Developed in the 1995 EA

Summary – This alternative is very similar to Alternative 2 in terms of parking design and access to the bridge. The bridge itself would be relocated approximately 90 feet downstream and the trail to Falls Pond would meet barrier-free construction standards along its entire length. (These last two elements have been incorporated into the current Proposed Action.)

This alternative was designed to address concerns about visual impacts of a redesigned accessible bridge at the original bridge location and recognizes the opportunity to extend accessibility to the Pond.

This alternative was eliminated from further study for reasons similar to Alternative A. – those related to the two-lot parking design.

2.6.3 Alternative C. Developed in response to Comments to the 1995 EA

Summary – This alternative is similar to Alternative 3, but retains a paved road between the two parking areas.

This alternative was created to address concerns about removing vehicle access through the site and the resulting distances that would have to be traveled on foot from either parking area to the site's primary attractions.

The IDT felt that the issues this alternative was designed to address were actually better met by the No Action alternative, and that No Action was responsive to development level concerns in a way this alternative was not.

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Specifics of each alternative are described in ***Chapter 2.0 Alternatives Including the Proposed Action***.

This chapter describes the effects of each alternative on the human and natural environment of the project area.
It first considers the effects of each alternative in terms of the central issues identified through public involvement and internal analysis. These issues are described in detail in ***Chapter 1.4 Relevant Issues.***
There follows a discussion of effects on other resources, such as soil, water, vegetation and wildlife, as well as a general discussion of social issues.

It is important to note that the central issues identified with this project are interrelated. For example, any proposed changes to the bridge location and design (Issue 3) have effects on the site's development level, the level of accessibility, and public safety (Issues 1, 2, and 4). As such, the discussion of effects may refer to multiple issues in any one section. For clarification, the central issues that have been identified are:

- Development Level
- Accessibility
- Bridge Location and Design
- Public Safety
- Environmental Impacts

3.1 Issue 1 - Development Level

The site receives regular visitation year-round, with the peak use during the summer months and again during autumn foliage.
Those currently visiting this site can enter the area from the south and park in the existing southern parking lot, or can enter from the north along a one-way access road, and park along this entry road or park in the southern parking lot. Those entering from the north must drive adjacent to the gorge through the scenic area in order to exit the site.
Pedestrian traffic traveling from the parking lot toward the gorge shares the roadway with oncoming vehicle traffic. A low, creosote-treated wooden barrier rail along this stretch separates pedestrian and vehicle traffic. There are spaces for approximately 40 cars in the parking lot. There are five designated spaces for cars to park along the vehicle access road downstream of the gorge. There is approximately 1400 feet of additional shoulder space along the access road where overflow parking takes place. Approximately 70 cars can potentially park along this stretch of road.

This is a summary of the Affected Environment and a recap of the central issue. See ***Chapter 1*** for more info on the existing condition as well as the info on all issues associated with the project.

There is a bridge over the gorge that is not universally accessible to all Forest visitors. The trail to Falls Pond travels from the west edge of the bridge straight up a slight hill, and down again to the edge of Falls Pond.

A common concern raised both internally and externally has been whether the proposed actions at Rocky Gorge constitute an expansion of the facilities and whether these actions will attract greater use to the site – and to the Kancamagus Highway as a whole. There is concern that any increase in use may degrade the quality of the experience available there. Furthermore, several comments suggested that the changes to Rocky Gorge moved the site - and contributed toward moving the National Forest generally - away from its intended rustic, scenic, and undeveloped character.

3.1.1 Alternative 1 (No Action)

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 1 on Development Level of the Site

With selection of this alternative, the development level of the Rocky Gorge site would remain the same.
Designated parking space would be provided for 45 cars with 1400 feet of potential parking (approximately 70 cars) along the north end access road. No space would be provided for busses, RVs, or motorcycles.
Because the access road would remain, all vehicles using this entrance would travel through the site in close proximity of the gorge. Those vehicles would be forced to travel through the south end parking facility to exit the site.
The bridge would remain a dominant constructed feature in the center of the gorge.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 1 related to Development Level

Selection of this alternative would not fulfill the stated purpose of and need for action in this area. It would address concerns from those who feel that any action in the area constitutes an unacceptable change in development level

It is expected that the cumulative effects of no action would entail a continuation of current use patterns at the site. Public safety, visitor experience, and environmental impact concerns would be allowed to remain and would not be addressed.

3.1.2 Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 2 on Development Level of the Site

The reconfigured parking lot would cover a slightly larger area than in the current condition, it would expand from just over a half-acre to just under an acre in approximate total area. Parking capacity would increase slightly to accommodate bus/RVs, disabled visitors, and motorcycles. This alternative

Direct Effects – Caused by the action and occur at the same time and place
Indirect Effects – Caused by the action and are later in time or farther removed in distance

calls for 44 designated car spaces – one fewer than in the current design. Designated bus/RV and motorcycle spaces are not currently provided at the site, but provision of this space was not considered excessive by the IDT since these vehicles are already using the site, and have a reasonable expectation of access. Furthermore, since the vehicle access road will be removed, the informal potential parking along this route will be eliminated, thus reducing the potential for overcongestion. Occasional peaks in use may be accommodated through the combination of car and bus/RV spaces.

Figure 9 – Enjoying the view – Saco RD photo, 1986

Removing the vehicle access road through the site up to the bridge location would allow for this area to rehabilitate and become more natural – it would reduce, rather than increase the development level. Additionally, visitors would experience the gorge setting with the sights, sounds, and smells of motor vehicle traffic pushed into the background. Since planned accommodations for motor vehicles represent a change in layout rather than an expansion, the IDT felt that the development level of the site would not increase because of parking and vehicle traffic flow design.

The bridge to be built would be 6 feet wide and approximately 90 feet long. This is considerably wider and longer than the current bridge in order to meet accessible standards, and this may be seen as an increase in the development level of the site. However, since the proposed action calls for locating this larger bridge 90 feet downstream of the current location, the expectation is that the gorge itself would appear less developed. Visitors who are able to travel across the ledges may look into the depths of the gorge and view the falls from the eastern edge – the location of the current bridge stairs and footing – and they would enjoy this perspective without the intrusion of the bridge. The Gorge could also be viewed up close from the falls overlook to be built on the west side.

Relocation of the trail would result in a more highly constructed route to Falls Pond including two overlooks, benches serving as rest stops, and a surfaced tread to allow for universal access. This increase in development level would be offset somewhat by the elimination of the wooden staircase and the rehabilitation of the impacted area around the trail, but this portion of the project may be reasonably seen as an increase in the development level of the site.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 2 related to Development Level of the Site

General Effects

This alternative fully meets the purpose of and need for action as described, and is entirely in keeping with the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum class and WMNF-LRMP direction for this area.

> ***Cumulative Effects*** – Sum of the effects of the action added to past, present, and reasonable foreseeable future actions

Because the proposed action seeks to reorganize the layout rather than expand the facilities at the site in order to accommodate existing use in a manner consistent with direction in WMNF-LRMP, the effects of the actions at Rocky Gorge are considered a modification rather than an increase in the development level of the site.

Effects on Use Patterns

This alternative has the potential to increase the length of stay for visitors who formerly utilized only the drive-through opportunity. The enhancement of the opportunities on the west side of the bridge – the trail to Falls Pond, overlooks, and interpretation – has the potential to disperse these longer-staying visitors over a larger area. This is considered appropriate, because part of the goal for interpretation and enhancement of visitor experience is to encourage a more thorough appreciation of the qualities of the area. The extent of such change in use of the site is difficult to project, but with no significant increase in car parking capacities being proposed, the effects are expected to fall within an acceptable level.

Furthermore, it is possible that due to removal of the access road overall use of the site may drop. Those seeking to enjoy the views of river, pond, and mountain scenery from their vehicles will find these opportunities at other locations along the Highway such as Lower Falls, Lilly Pond and points in-between.

This, and other proposed actions along the Kancamagus Highway seek to reorganize existing parking designs to better handle existing use levels without significantly increasing total capacities. There are clear opportunities to better accommodate individuals with disabilities, bus, and RV traffic through these sites. This ability to improve traffic flow through these facilities and elimination of some inherent safety problems will greatly enhance the experience of visitors that use these facilities.

Additional Basis for this Evaluation

Average Daily Traffic Count Figures

To evaluate trends in use of the Kancamagus Highway, the Saco District examines State of New Hampshire Department of Transportation traffic count

figures on an ongoing basis. These figures provide some context for understanding traffic use changes in the area over time. See **Table 2**.

From 1982 to 1992, traffic count figures show an increase in use at the East end of the Kancamagus Highway. Average daily traffic rose form 1,180 to 1,685 vehicles per day (an increase of 43%). However, adjacent use in the area experienced similar growth patterns during this same time period: Routes 16 and 302 in Conway up 41%; Route 302 east of Conway up 37%; and Route 16 in Jackson up 46%.

Traffic count figures from 1992 to 2000 show an overall increase of only 1% at the East end of the Kancamagus, from 1,685 to 1,708 vehicles per day. It should be noted that Annual Average Daily Traffic figures at this location reached a high of 2,063 vehicles per day in 1995 – up 22% from 1992 levels. Traffic counts for Routes 16 and 302 in Conway show a 6% drop for the 1992 – 1998 period (based on available statistics) and Route 16 in Jackson shows a 3% decrease in use for the 1992 – 2000 period. Overall consistency in traffic counts suggest that current use levels along the Kancamagus are stable relative to the 1992 levels reflected in the design standards for parking capacity.

Table 2 –*State of NH DOT Average Daily Traffic Count Figures*

	1986 - 1992	**1992 - 2000**
Kancamagus Byway East end	1,180 – 1,685 vehicles/day **43% increase**	1,685 – 1,708 vehicles/day **1% increase**
Routes 16 and 302 Conway	**+ 41%**	**6% decrease** (1992-1998 data available)
Route 302 East of Conway	**+ 37%**	No data available
Route 16 Jackson	**+ 46%**	**3% decrease**

Additionally, the period 1992 – 2000 is the timeframe between conception and implementation of several aspects of the Kancamagus Interpretive Plan projects, including changes to Sugar Hill and C.L. Graham Overlooks.

Saco Visitor Center Use Figures

An additional perspective on use may be gained through examination of visitor counts at the Saco Ranger District Visitor Center, located at the eastern end of the Kancamagus Byway. Electronic counts of visitation at the site are only generally reflective of use at other locations given that visitors use the site for greatly different reasons than those at Rocky Gorge, but the figures still offer some insight.

Overall, from 1996 through 2002 visitation at the site increased approximately 7%. However, the most recent spike in use occurred in 1998, when use increased 19% over 1996 levels. Since that peak year, visits have been on the decline, dropping steadily each year for a total of -10% since 1998.

The development level of the Saco Visitor Center has remained fundamentally constant over the past seven years, suggesting that changes in use are inherently difficult to predict and are influenced by a variety of factors, many outside the control of the Forest.

Relationship of this Project to Development Level of the Highway and the Forest

Several respondents to scoping expressed concern that the WMNF is becoming overly developed in a manner inconsistent with the intended setting of a National Forest. There was also some question as to the motives for proposing this or any action changing the existing condition of a developed site.

The changes proposed for the developments along the Kancamagus Highway have been designed not only to utilize opportunities to communicate the story of the White Mountain National Forest and the message of multiple-use management, but also to accomplish resolution to long standing issues associated with layout of the sites and their ability to accommodate an appropriate level of visitor use. These projects are intended to better fulfill the intent of the Forest Plan in providing a quality recreation opportunity for those who will never get far from their vehicles, and these changes should not move the sites out of their intended Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Class ("roaded natural") in terms of the setting or experience being offered. These types of developed recreation opportunities are at one end of the range of recreation opportunities available across the National Forest, and they are very much in line with those associated with the activity of driving for pleasure envisioned in the 1986 WMNF-LRMP

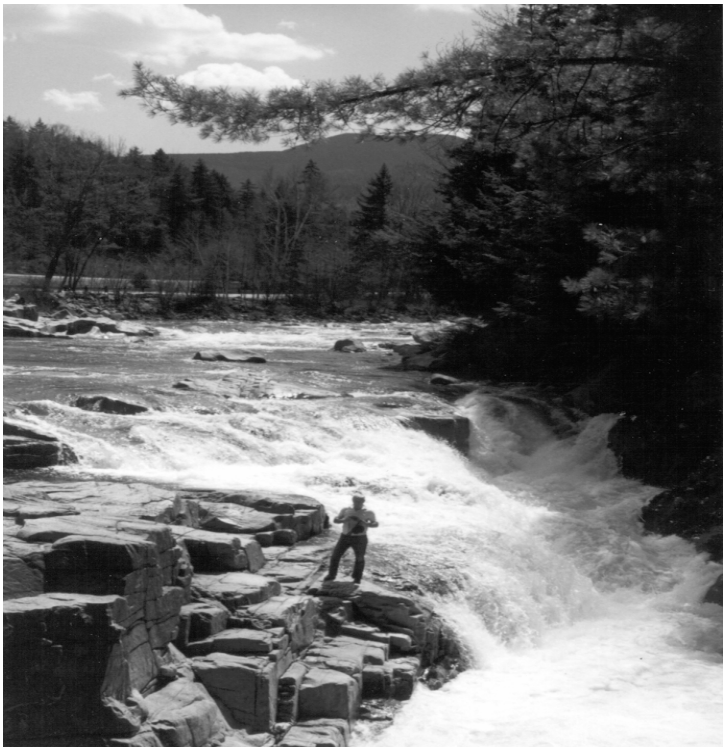

Figure 10 – The falls – photo D. Pratt 4/90

and are consistent with the cumulative effects analysis conducted as part of that planning effort.

Interestingly, this is by no means a new concern. The historical file for the Rocky Gorge area includes a letter dated 1936 questioning then-Forest Supervisor C.L. Graham's decision to allow picnic tables, a register box, signs, and a designated trash pit at the "Rocky Gorge Forest Camp" because of many of the same concerns. Supervisor Graham's response is similar to ours: that these actions are designed to better manage the use of and impacts on this popular and spectacular site.

Summary: The proposed action, when combined with other recent or planned future improvements at nearby Lower Falls, Blackberry Crossing, Sabbaday Falls, and Russell Colbath House, are not expected to significantly change the development scale or user experience at Rocky Gorge or cumulatively on the Kancamagus Highway as a whole. Similarly because site capacity is not increased by this alternative, it is considered unlikely to result in increased use at Rocky Gorge - visitation levels should not be significantly affected.

3.1.3 Alternative 3

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 3 on Development Level of the Site

This alternative was developed in part to address public and internal concern related to the desired development level of the Rocky Gorge area.

The effects of the parking lot reconfiguration and removal of the access road would be very similar to those described in Alternative 2. All other facilities within the site would remain in their current condition.

The bridge would remain as a dominant constructed feature at its current location in the center of the gorge.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 3 related to Development Level of the Site

This alternative meets the purpose of and need for action in the area more than No Action, but not as fully as the Proposed Action. The overall effect would be a reduction in the development level of the site, primarily because of the removal of dual entrances and the access road through the site.

The removal of the access road would change the use patterns within the area since the drive-by opportunity would no longer exist. Visitors would need to access the accessible viewpoint and water pump area on foot (this is a location currently reachable by car).

It is not expected that changes to the parking area and roadway would cause an increase in use of the site. Indeed, removal of the access road would eliminate the drive-by vehicle use, as in Alternative 2.

Visitors would still concentrate on the eastern side of the gorge and on the bridge rather than dispersing across the site since changes to the trail and creation of overlooks on the west side would not take place.

3.2 Issue 2 – Accessibility

Affected Environment and issue recap

There is a limited opportunity to view the site from a passenger vehicle traveling along the interior access road. The bridge, which provides the best view of the falls, is not universally accessible. The trail to Falls Pond does not meet universal accessibility standards. Internally, there is concern regarding the level of access available at the site for persons with mobility challenges, and whether design changes increase, decrease, or keep constant the level of access for all visitors.

Externally, some respondents expressed the sentiment that retaining the access road through the site best met the desire for accessibility. Also, the necessity of reconstructing and relocating the section of trail to Falls Pond to meet universal accessibility standards was questioned.

3.2.1 Alternative 1 (No Action)

Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects of Alternative 1 on Accessibility

This alternative does not meet the purpose of and need for action in the area, because full access to the site is not provided for all Forest visitors.

Visitors with mobility challenges would not be able to access the bridge site to view the falls and look into the gorge. They would not be able to access Falls Pond. However, the limited drive-by experience of the site would still be available to those in cars or busses, and as some respondents pointed out, it would be possible to drop off passengers who are unwilling or unable to travel by foot at the water pump site.

Because the access road is one-way, those visitors who choose to drop passengers off at the water pump would be forced to travel through the parking lot, turn left onto the highway, turn left back into the north entrance, travel back through the site and into the parking area before exiting again onto the highway in order to retrieve this companion. This extra travel compounds the safety, environmental, and experience effects of a single vehicle, but does not gain mobility challenged visitors any better view of the gorge or falls since there is no universally accessible route to the bridge and its spectacular perspective on the gorge.

Figure 11 – Rocky Gorge looking upstream – Saco RD photo, undated

The retention of the access road through the site would offer a limited view of the river and the rock walls at the terminus of the Gorge for vehicle passengers, as well as a view of the open ledge area on the east side of the river, the bridge, and the stretch of the Swift River above the Gorge. Passengers on tour busses may enjoy an improved view due to the height of those vehicles.

3.2.2 Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)

Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects of Alternative 2 on Accessibility

This alternative is designed to open the primary and secondary attractions of the site to all visitors – including those with mobility challenges – and to accomplish this in a manner fully in keeping with the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum objectives for the site. It fully meets the purpose of and need for action related to accessibility.

With this action, visitors would be required to travel a minimum distance of approximately 400 feet from the disabled parking spaces to reach the bridge. Another 45 feet places them in the best viewpoint for the gorge as a whole. An additional 175 feet will reach the falls overlook, offering a closer look at the roaring water, and 380 more feet would gain the overlook of the pond. The total

distance from the disable parking spaces to Falls Pond would be approximately 1000 feet (including the 90-foot bridge span).

The effects of the proposed action are that the primary and secondary attractions of the site would be available to all visitors under universally accessible standards as defined in the US Forest Service Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Guidelines (FSORAG) and US Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines (FSTAG) drafts of January 2003.

As one respondent commented, there are other locations on the district where visitors may observe settings similar to Falls Pond from a motor vehicle. However, for those with mobility challenges there are few opportunities to enjoy this type of experience away from their cars. With this alternative, all Forest visitors would have every opportunity to experience the entirety of the Rocky Gorge area, and the opportunity to do so in a minimally modified setting where the sights and sounds of nature dominate.

The removal of the access road would affect a percentage of visitors who choose to experience only the drive-by opportunity. These visitors would be required to park and travel on foot to reach the gorge, however, they would have access to the most desirable viewpoints within the site – something entirely lacking in the current condition. Additionally – as earlier mentioned – opportunities exist in other locations across the Highway and the Forest to enjoy spectacular views from a vehicle similar to those available at Rocky Gorge.

3.2.3 Alternative 3

Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects of Alternative 3 on Accessibility

This alternative does not meet the purpose of and need for action relative to improved access for all visitors.

The level of access to the gorge site would decrease with implementation of this alternative. The drive-by experience would be removed, yet those with mobility challenges would still have no opportunity to reach the bridge and the spectacular view of the falls (as in the No Action Alternative). Nor would they have the opportunity to enjoy Falls Pond.

Mobility challenged visitors would have the limited opportunity to reach the water pump site and the existing accessible viewpoint along the current access road via the universally accessible trail from the parking area to these locations.

3.3 Issue 3 – Bridge Location and Design

There have been several bridges at this site over the years. The current footbridge over the gorge is 45 feet long and is constructed of iron “I beams”. We have been unable to

determine when this existing bridge was constructed. Access to this bridge requires climbing over a series of ledges and is not accessible to visitors with disabilities. This bridge also provides winter access to the mid point of the Lower Nanamocomuck Cross Country Ski Trial. To reduce the chances of a visitor slipping and falling under the bridge railing the Forest Service reinforces both railings with snow fence prior to the winter season. Negotiating the ledges approaching the bridge and the steep slope of the Falls Pond Trail may be hazardous when conditions are wet or icy.

Affected Environment and issues related to the bridge

Concerns have been expressed regarding: 1) the historic significance of the current location; 2) whether the new location would offer the same quality view and experience of the gorge and falls; 3) whether the new design would withstand high water events; 4) whether the current bridge is in fact threatened by high water events, and 5) whether the new design could provide appropriate access to all visitors without itself becoming a visual detriment to the site.

3.3.1 Alternative 1 (No Action)

Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects of Alternative 1related to Bridge Location and Design

Several elements of the purpose and need will not be addressed with this alternative.

The bridge would remain in the center of the gorge. Based on both hydrologic analysis as well as evidence that bridges have been washed out or damaged by ice at this location several times, the existing structure would be vulnerable to damage or washout as a result of ice or high water events.

The location would provide a view with the falls in the foreground and offers visitors a wonderfully vertiginous sense of the depth of the gorge. However, visitors would still be drawn to concentrate where they compound the intrusion of the constructed feature for those at other viewpoints around the site.

The historic location of the bridge would be retained.

Public safety and access concerns specific to the bridge would not be addressed.

3.3.2 Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 2 related to Bridge Location and Design

There would be impacts to a previously undisturbed area during construction. Following construction, the permanently impacted area would be confined to the area under the bridge abutments.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 2 related to Bridge Location and Design

The aspects of the proposed action relative to the bridge are fundamental towards meeting the overall purpose of and need for action, and are specifically required to fully achieve the accessibility and safety goals of the project.

Figure 12 – Rocky Gorge at high water, July 1973. Yes, that's the bridge! H. Hatch photo

Based on hydrologic assessment, moving the bridge downstream would make it less vulnerable to the power of ice and high water.

The view of the falls from the bridge would move from the foreground into the mid-ground, but there will be a fuller perspective of the entirety of the gorge. (There would be a spectacular close-up view of the falls from the proposed falls overlook). The experience of the high-walled depths of the gorge would still be retained – though in other than the historic location. Relocating downstream would remove the visual intrusion of the bridge itself and the resulting concentrations of visitors from the center of the gorge, providing a more naturalized appearance of the site when looking upstream.

There were concerns by some respondents over whether the new bridge would be designed to blend with the natural surroundings of the gorge or become a detriment to the visual quality of the site. This concern was shared by the IDT, and a variety of construction materials and configurations were considered to address both visual and accessible concerns:

Use of wooden stringers was considered. Engineering specifications for weight loading requirements would result in wood laminate stringers 6½ inches thick by 48 inches deep to span the entire length. The depth of these stringers could be reduced to 26 inches if we were to use a central support pier and increase the

stringer thickness to 8-¾ inches. The use of wooden stringers was considered desirable, but the massive nature of the 48-inch deep timbers was considered inappropriate for this setting. Use of the central pier reduced the concerns of stringer mass, but the pier itself was considered a visual detractor and presented a slight concern as a hydrologic restriction. A prefabricated metal truss structure was also considered. While it would not require any central pier, the team reviewing this proposal felt that such a structure would become a dominant feature across the gorge and detract too much from the area's scenic qualities.

The design identified as the preferred solution is a combination of steel I-beam stringers with a wooden deck and railing. The strength of the I-beams permit spanning with out the need for a central pier. The wooden superstructure helps establish a material relationship to the natural surroundings. The I-beams will be arched and made of weathering steel to help them visually blend into the setting. If the I-beams are considered visually detracting after construction, they could be faced with wooden material, but this step is not anticipated as necessary at this time.

Bridge design drawings are available as part of the project record.

3.3.3 Alternative 3

Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects of Alternative 3 related to Bridge Location and Design

The purpose and need for action is not met with this alternative.

Effects related to the bridge are the same as with the No Action alternative.

3.4 Issue 4 – Public Safety

The current design of the parking and access facilities at Rocky Gorge requires all traffic – including tour busses and RV's – to move through the south-end parking lot. The parking configuration of this lot creates a turning radius of 32 feet at its south end, forcing busses and RV's to perform multiple-point turns in order to navigate through the site when the parking spaces at that end are occupied. This increases the possibility of vehicle or pedestrian collision as these large vehicles repeatedly maneuver forward and in reverse in tight quarters. The location of the restroom draws an additional flow of pedestrian traffic into the vicinity of one of this narrow turning radius.

Affected Environment and issues related to public safety

The north-end access road has poor sight distances for vehicles traveling on the highway, increasing the likelihood of collisions on the highway as vehicles suddenly slow and turn into the site.

All pedestrian traffic must walk parallel to the access road through the site to reach the bridge, increasing the likelihood of pedestrian/motor vehicle collision. The low wooden traffic barrier separating the pedestrian walkway from the vehicle road is inviting to walk across in a "tightrope" fashion – especially to children.

Access to the bridge is across open, uneven rock ledges, which may be slippery in wet, icy, or snowy conditions – or impossible at times of high water.

3.4.1 Alternative 1 (No Action)

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 1 related to Public Safety

Under Alternative 1, sight distances for the entry/exit points would not improve. Pedestrians would still travel in close proximity to vehicles. The turning radii for busses would not improve; larger vehicles would still need to perform multiple-point turns to negotiate the parking lot. The location of the toilet would still draw concentrations of visitors into the vicinity of a tight turning radius. Access to the bridge would still require travel over rough and uneven ledges, which may be slippery when wet or icy or impossible at times of high water. The difficulties of crossing the bridge in winter due to ice and snow buildup would remain.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 1 related to Public Safety

Public safety concerns identified in the purpose and need statement would not be addressed.

The heightened potential would remain for: vehicle accidents due to poor sight distances at entry/exit points, vehicle/pedestrian accidents along the access road, vehicle accidents due to poor turning radii for larger vehicles (especially when the lot is full), vehicle/pedestrian accidents near the toilet facility, pedestrian accidents as visitors cross uneven and potentially slippery ledges to reach the bridge, and pedestrians slipping or falling off the bridge when crossing in snowy or icy conditions.

3.4.2 Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 2 related to Public Safety

Since the north-end access road would be eliminated, there would be no issue with sight distances at this location for vehicles traveling on the highway. Analysis and consultation with State of NH DOT officials suggests that reducing the number of entrance/exit points for Rocky Gorge provides safety benefits for vehicles traveling the highway through this area.

Alternative 2 would provide proper maneuvering space for larger vehicles within the parking lot. The toilet would be located along the direction of travel from the

parking lot to the gorge. The access road would be removed, so pedestrians would no longer share their access to the gorge with motor vehicles. Visitors would be able to access the primary view of the gorge and the falls without needing to cross the open and uneven ledges, and the bridge and railings would be designed to provide safer passage in winter conditions.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 2 related to Public Safety

This alternative addresses all public safety concerns identified in the purpose and need statement. It provides the safest degree of access to the site within the desired ROS setting. The potential for accidents between motor vehicles, between motor vehicles and pedestrians, and among pedestrians traveling through the site is greatly reduced.

There would be no restriction on travel within the site for those able-bodied individuals who choose to travel over the rocks, through the woods, down the river (or over the falls in a kayak, even), so there is always some possibility of injury to Forest visitors. It is impossible to mitigate these hazards entirely without vastly altering the natural qualities of the site and restricting public access – two actions in direct contrast to the purpose and need for the project and the direction for the area provided in the WMNF-LRMP.

3.4.3 Alternative 3

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 3 related to Public Safety

The public safety concerns related to the sight distances along the highway, the layout of the parking area, and the access road through the site would be addressed, as in Alternative 2. However, the issues regarding bridge access would not be resolved.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 3 related to Public Safety

This alternative would resolve some of the most pressing issues related to public safety identified in the purpose and need, those involving the potential for motor vehicle accidents and motor vehicle/pedestrian accidents.

Visitors to the gorge who wish to access the primary and secondary attractions of the site would have to use the same degree of caution to prevent injury as is currently required.

3.5 Issue 5 – Environmental Impact

There are potential environmental impacts related to the design of the site. The existing parking facility is sloped toward the Swift River, and is designed to drain surface runoff from the pavement through a sluiceway directly into the river. The

current layout leaves very little vegetated buffer between the parking lot and the river. What buffer there is has become impacted from visitors taking a direct path to the water from their vehicles. The access road through the site has a minimal shoulder to buffer the pavement from the river. There is some slumping of material that may be attributable to the road.

Affected Environment and issues related to impacts to the bio-physical environment. There is more discussion on this in ***Chapter 3.6 Effects on Other Resources***

The potential exists for gas or oil to spill from vehicles using either the road or the parking lot, and for those spills to directly enter the Swift River.

The trail to Falls Pond climbs directly up a steep grade over a series of stairs that visitors tend to avoid to either side. Soil compaction in this area has led to loss of vegetation and erosion.

3.5.1 Alternative 1 (No Action)

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 1 related to Environmental Impacts

The parking lot would continue to drain runoff through a sluiceway directly into the Swift River. The access road would remain in place with minimal buffer to protect the river against potential oil or fuel spills. The bridge would still be vulnerable to washout so the potential for this material to enter the Swift River. The wood-framed staircase on the trail to Falls Pond would remain, so it is expected that impacts to soil and vegetation in this area resulting from visitors avoiding the stairs would continue. No rehabilitation would occur along the stream bank between the parking area and the river.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 1 related to Environmental Impacts

The environmental impact concerns identified in the purpose and need statement would not be addressed. The potential would remain for oil and/or gas leaks from vehicles using the parking lot or access road to enter the Swift River. No rehabilitation of impacted areas adjoining the site would occur.

3.5.2 Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 2 related to Environmental Impacts

Parking lot design would drain surface water away from the river into a grass-lined swale for filtration. The access road would be removed, eliminating both the possibility of vehicle fluid spills in this area, and the concern that vehicle use of the road may contribute to slumping of subsurface material into the river. The parking area itself would be further from the river. The impacted area between the lot and the river will be rehabilitated with native trees and shrubs, providing a

start for natural growth to reclaim the stream bank. This action will also be taken in impacted areas along the current trail to Falls Pond. The overlooks of the falls and of Falls Pond would concentrate visitor impacts onto these facilities that are designed to absorb this type of use.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 2 related to Environmental Impacts

This alternative best meets the purpose of and need for action relative to environmental impacts.

Figure 13 – Looking downstream toward the bridge – Photo D. Pratt, 4/90

The potential for passenger vehicle fluids – oil, gas, and coolant, for instance – to directly enter the Swift River from the Rocky Gorge site would be virtually eliminated. Any vehicle fluid spills on the paved surface of the parking lot would be drained away from the river and treated according to Best Management Principles for parking lot design and construction.

Approximately 1400 feet of pavement would be removed from the access road and rehabilitated, giving this area an opportunity to support natural growth and serve as a greenway for walkers looking to stroll on-site.

3.5.3 Alternative 3

Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects of Alternative 3 related to Environmental Impact

This alternative meets the most pressing environmental issues identified in the purpose of and need for action statement.

The effects of this alternative are similar to those with Alternative 2, with the exception that no restoration work would occur along the trail to Falls Pond

Table 3 – ***Issues and Effects Matrix***

	Alternative 1 (No Action)	Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)	Alternative 3
Issue 1 Development Level	No change in development level	Parking – Same capacity, but slightly larger. Moved away from river Road – Removed Bridge – Larger, but moved Trail – More constructed	Same as Alternative 2
Issue 2 Accessibility	Retains motor vehicle access through the site Does not provide universal access to the site's main attractions	No motor vehicle access through the site Provides universal access to all visitors to the site's main attractions	Motor vehicle access removed. Universal access to the water pump area, no universal access to the site's main attractions
Issue 3 Bridge Location and Design	Highly susceptible to high water and ice Not accessible Historic location Center of gorge, with view of falls in foreground	Less susceptible to high water and ice Universally accessible Not historic location Removed from center of gorge, with view of length of gorge and falls in the mid-ground	Same as Alternative 1
Issue 4 Public Safety	Public safety issues are not addressed	All identified public safety issues are addressed	Same as Alternative 1 – not addressed
Issue 5 Environmental Impact	Environmental impact issues are not addressed	All identified environmental impact issues are addressed	Same as Alternative 1 – not addressed

3.6 Effects on Other Resources

3.6.1 Effects on the Physical/Biological Environment

3.6.1.1 Soil & Water – Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects

Implementation of the No Action Alternative would result in a lost opportunity at this time to mitigate existing design problems that permit potential oil and gas spills to flow directly into the Swift River.

Implementation of Alternatives 2 or 3 would have very similar effects on the soil and water resources. Reshaping of the existing parking lot would permit diversion of the runoff to a low area capable of filtering the runoff and temporarily retaining potential oil spills for treatment. The location change of the south-end parking lot would occur on soils already impacted from existing facilities. Elimination of the roadway parallel to the gorge would remove the potential of oil and gas spills from this roadway.

Alternatives 2 and 3 also provide for stream bank stabilization through plantings and spot armoring (placement of boulders) along areas of bank erosion between the existing (southern) parking lot and the Swift River. There would be a rehabilitation of soils along the obliterated access road from the bridge northward to the highway.

Alternative 2 would reduce the number of "bootleg" trails between the gorge and Falls Pond. Construction of the pond overlook should reduce impact on the pond shoreline, as not everyone will need to visit the pond's edge. Alternative 3 would not achieve this effect.

The cumulative effect of this proposal (Alternatives 2 and 3), when combined with other recent or planned projects on the Kancamagus Highway, is generally beneficial. All projects (including Sabbaday Falls, Lower Falls, Blackberry Crossing, and Russell Colbath House) are designed to reduce the potential for spills or other adverse effects to soils and water quality.

None of the action alternatives would affect the Swift River's potential for inclusion in the National System of Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

3.6.1.2 Vegetation – Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects

Implementation of the No Action Alternative would mean that rehabilitation of the areas between the southern parking lot and the river and on the shoreline of Falls Pond would need to be treated as a separate project.

As with soil and water, the impacts on vegetation would be very similar with the implementation of either Alternative 2 or 3. Approximately 2 acres have been cleared and paved by past recreation development on this site.

Obliteration of the roadway from the bridge location north to the byway would allow approximately 1.8 acres to be revegetated with native species. The addition in capacity to the south end parking facility would substantially take place on acres that have been previously cleared or were part of the current byway roadbed. Approximately 0.2 additional acres would be cleared for this facility.

The worn and compacted areas adjacent to the southern parking lot and at the shoreline of Falls Pond would be rehabilitated with the implementation of Alternatives 2 or 3.

Some vegetation would be removed for construction of the trail to Falls Pond, this would be offset by rehabilitation of the existing trail and surrounding impacted area.

The cumulative effect on vegetation composition of this and all other known projects within this part of the Swift River watershed is so infinitesimally small as to be negligible.

3.6.1.3 Wildlife – Direct Indirect, and Cumulative Effects

Alternative 1 (No Action):

Implementation of the No Action Alternative would result in having wildlife populations remain in current status. No new or additional disturbance would occur.

Alternatives 2 and 3:

Reconstruction of the existing parking lot at the south end of the site would have minimal impacts to wildlife except during implementation. The same land area would be utilized and function in a manner similar to the current condition. While there would be disturbance during construction to wildlife species currently occupying the area around the parking facility, it is not expected that any species would be completely eliminated from the area, as only individuals would be affected. A portion of the existing lot would be rehabilitated, increasing the area of future habitat available for wildlife.

Construction of a new vault toilet would have minimal effects on wildlife. The small amount of ground it would be constructed on would be eliminated as available habitat. Design would assure the vault was out of the flood zone of the Swift River.

Habitat would be gained by obliteration and revegetation of the existing paved roadway through the gorge, increasing available habitat for those species presently utilizing the area. Some habitat gain would be realized by the conversion of the south end of the roadway to a narrower accessible trail, reducing the amount of ground area covered by pavement. While the footpath would still require some type of surfacing, it would not be as wide as the present road.

Bridge, trail, and parking lot construction has the potential for creating siltation of the Swift River. *Calamagrostis lacustris,* a Regional Forester's listed plant is known to exist

on the banks of the Swift River both above and below the project area. Siltation induced by project construction may affect this plant. Use of siltation collectors during construction and until soils are stable would eliminate this short-term potential problem.

Long-term benefits would be seen from this project with the elimination of potential fuel spills from entering the watershed through reconstruction of the parking lots. This would eliminate potential negative affects on these plants as well as many other species inhabiting this watershed, including fish and aquatic life.

Alternative 2 only:

Construction of a longer bridge at a site 90 feet downstream would have little or no effect on wildlife other than during actual construction and installation. The area of ground required for the bridge abutments would eliminate a small amount of habitat available for those species presently utilizing the site. The area of ground under the existing bridge abutments would be available for wildlife use. No cumulative or long-term effects are expected.

Reconstruction and rerouting of the trail from the bridge to an overlook of Falls Pond would eliminate some habitat. The length of the new trail would be longer than the existing 240 feet of trail between the bridge and Falls Pond. The new trail would impact ground-dwelling species presently utilizing the designated trail location and affect a larger area of habitat than the existing trail. Once in place, the trail would have minimal effects on wildlife utilizing the area.

3.6.2 Effects on the Social Environment

3.6.2.1 Recreation

Implementation of the No Action Alternative would result in a continuation of the existing Recreation Experience.

Alternatives 2 and 3 would provide a setting much more in keeping with the ROS desired in this Scenic Area. The sights, sounds, and emission odors of motor vehicles would be greatly reduced, allowing the natural attributes of the area to dominate. Possible visitor confusion regarding the orientation of the two entrance locations would be eliminated. The pace of traffic through the Gorge would slow to a self-propelled level, allowing for

appreciation and contemplation of the qualities of the site. Interpretation at the site will seek to stimulate understanding of the natural and human history of the Gorge.

Selection of Alternative 3, with a new bridge 90 feet downstream of its current location would provide an excellent mix of viewing and photography opportunities not currently available.

The new bridge and trail relocation would also improve access to the Nanamocomuck Ski Trail for both winter and summer users and for maintenance activities.

Interpretation planned for this site includes a panel describing an interesting incident from 1942 in which a young lady was swept over the falls. The intent of this panel is to provide a safety message and explain why the Forest Service no longer permits swimming near these falls or within the gorge itself.

3.6.2.2 Visual Resources

Implementation of the No Action Alternative or Alternative 3 would do nothing to remedy the visual concerns associated with visitor concentration – and the bridge itself – in the middle of the gorge area.

The bridge relocation and gorge viewing area proposed in Alternative 2 would help remove the concentrations of people from the middle of the gorge. The presence of vegetation on the Falls Pond side of the gorge will help screen visitors at the gorge viewing area from the view of visitors on the Kancamagus side of the gorge.

3.6.2.3 Cultural Resources

Cultural resource inventories were conducted within the project area by Don West and David Hrdlicka, and reviewed by the Forest Archaeologist. No cultural resources were found within this proposed project area. Cultural Resource Reports #89-5-1 and 94-5-4 are on file.

As no cultural resources were identified during inventory of the project area, there should be no physical impacts with implementation of any of the alternatives being considered. If previously unknown cultural resources were discovered during project implementation, evaluations and mitigation measures would be developed prior to proceeding. Implementation of all Action Alternatives would include the installation of interpretive panels describing the recreational history of Rocky Gorge.

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William Bartlett of NH Dept. of Resource and Economic Development, Jennifer Melville of Appalachian Mountain Club, and George Zink of Wonalancet Out Door Club contributed to the 1995 analysis effort.

Our thanks go to all involved parties for their care, concern and cooperation in the preparation of this document.

Figure 14 – Rocky Gorge