

## **A Summer Spent on the New England Trail**

In late August, I completed my inventory and assessment of the Massachusetts portion of the New England National Scenic Trail. Starting in June, I began to section hike the trail, documenting the conditions of different trail features (i.e., signage, drainage, blowdowns, parking sites, etc.). Throughout my hike, I collected over 500 data points that will be used to help assess and document the current state of the trail and what needs to be done over the coming years.

However, after spending over 150 miles on the trail this season, my appreciation for this recreational resource goes beyond just measuring its bridges and boardwalks. As one of the lesser-known National Scenic trails, the NET often gets lost among the publicity of the Appalachian, Continental Divide, or Pacific Crest. And to be fair, it is significantly shorter. Yet, the beauty and value of the NET should not be lost. Like the classic “New Englander,” the NET is humble and rugged. We may not have the grandeur of the Rockies; yet, the scenic views from our traprock ledges contain reminders of close-knit communities that have survived for centuries. A hike along the NET will take you past landscapes that have characterized the hardworking New England we all embrace. You pass through old pastures and lookout over active farm fields; walk through former mill structures and foundations of once-beloved homes. It is a “close-to-home” trail in many respects, a phrase that has grown in meaning over the last year. The NET stretches the width of Connecticut and Massachusetts, intersecting over 200 communities. A trail highlighting our industrious and scenic region, yet also offering a retreat and reminder to slow down. In many cases, the trailhead is just minutes away from historic cities like Hartford and Springfield. The woods become a respite from our busy lives; the allure of little mushrooms, wildflowers, and dense fern forests predicating a brief moment to stop and wonder.

As I traversed the trail this summer, I found a greater connection to the land and environment around me. Thinking about the plants and wildlife and acknowledging the stewards of the properties the trail intersects. How, for centuries, the indigenous tribes of the Nipmuc, Pocumtuc, Wabanaki, and many others have cared for and inhabited this land. Now, when I drive along roads that the trail crosses or see the Holyoke range in the distance, I feel a kinship to these pathways. I revel in the idea that this humble trail has connections to so many people, places, and history. The trail and I have shared a great deal of time, thought, and joy this past summer, and I like to believe the feeling is mutual.