

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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From Monadnock to the Sound

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HOME TO some of the most spectacular sections of the Appalachian Trail, New England could gain a new interstate hiking trail that is closer to the region's population centers. US Representative John Olver of Amherst filed a bill this month to create a New England National Scenic Trail that could one day stretch from Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire to the Long Island Sound at Guilford, Conn.

For 190 miles of the 220-mile distance, the trail would roughly follow the route through the Connecticut River Valley of the existing Monadnock, Metacomet, and Mattabessett trail system in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The principal addition would be a 14-mile spur from the southern end of the Mattabessett in Connecticut to the shoreline in Guilford.

The state of New Hampshire chose not to join Connecticut, Massachusetts, and the US Department of the Interior in the feasibility study for the new trail, but Olver's bill would encourage Interior to work with New Hampshire and private and public organizations in that state to include the stretch from Royalton, Mass., to Monadnock's 3,165-foot summit in the national scenic trail. Nationwide, there are already eight such trails, including the Appalachian and the Pacific Crest.

Within 10 miles of the new trail live 2 million people. Many already use -- and do maintenance work on -- the existing stretches. At a time when young people, in particular, need more recreational opportunities to ward off the health problems of obesity, the national scenic trail designation should increase the path's popularity. It should also help protect it from development pressures. Much of the trail is on state forest or park lands near the river valley's farms, forests, tobacco barns, and towns.

Monadnock itself has 40 miles of maintained foot trails and is considered to be the second-most-frequently hiked summit in the world, after Japan's Mount Fuji. Three of the Massachusetts peaks on the new trail include Mount Grace, Mount Holyoke, and Mount Tom. The new trail includes a wide range of natural habitats and is close to more than 50 registered village historic districts. Hikers could pass over volcanic, sedimentary, and glacial rock and observe fossils and dinosaur footprints.

The goal of planners is that the scenic trail will have a single trail blazing system, but with few through hikers, since overnight camping would be permitted in only a limited number of locations. Of course, decades ago planners of the Appalachian Trail did not envision through hikers for its 2,175-mile length, either. Congress should designate the path as a new national scenic trail and let the walking public decide how best to use it. ■