

Massachusetts Hang Glider Association
C/O
Michael J. Morrissey, President
69 Bryan Avenue
Easthampton, MA 01027

Dear Friend:

We are writing to you because the Mass Hang Glider Assn has encountered a problem at one of its most popular flying sites, and because you, due to your position, will probably be called upon to participate in the resolution of the situation. We hope that you will consider what we have to say before you make any decisions in this matter.

You may already be aware that hang gliding has been a regular activity at Skinner State Park on Mount Holyoke in Hadley for over two years. During this period, hang gliding has been sanctioned by the Department of Environmental Management, and the flying program there has been operated cooperatively by the DEM and MassHGA. During this two year period, we have attained a perfect safety record both among pilots and among spectators; we have made hang gliding the prime attraction to the public visiting Skinner Park; we have been cited in a national hang gliding publication as an outstanding example of excellent site management. All of this has been accomplished with virtually no drain upon the resources of the park or its staff.

Unfortunately, due to a regrettable incident that occurred this past winter, which you may also be aware of, the hang gliding program has been summarily cancelled by the DEM, and it is quite possible that hang gliding will be permanently banned at Skinner. It is this decision that you will probably be called upon to register an opinion on.

The incident in question was the cutting down of a number of trees and shrubs at the hang glider take-off area. MassHGA realizes that the action was most probably taken by hang glider pilots, since nobody else would have any reason for wanting to see those trees cut. However, this was an unsanctioned action, perpetrated by a party or parties unknown.

The MassHGA has attempted to discover the identity of the parties responsible, but without success. Apparently the individuals responsible have realized the seriousness of their action, and have determined to keep their identities hidden. At any rate, the result of their action has been the loss of the site to all glider pilots.

The members of MassHGA deplore the irresponsible actions that took place this winter, and no attempt can or will be made to justify the cutting of the trees. However, we also feel that the action of the DEM in closing the site to all pilots has been grossly unreasonable.

In the past two years, literally thousands of flights have been made at Skinner Park, by literally hundreds of pilots. It seems totally unreasonable to penalize these hundreds of pilots for the actions of one or two individuals. It simply makes no sense to treat hundreds of responsible pilots as criminals just because a couple of individuals acted irresponsibly without the knowledge or consent of the vast majority.

We feel that the following facts must be taken into consideration in formulating a decision regarding the future of hang gliding at Skinner State Park:

Hang glider pilots, as a group, cannot be held responsible for the action that has resulted in the closing of the site.

The hang glider pilots of Massachusetts are taxpaying citizens of the Commonwealth and members of the public whom the park system exists to serve. Therefore, they have a right to practice their preferred form of recreation in the state parks unless some overriding reason to the contrary exists.

The incident in question, upon examination, does not present such an overriding reason to the contrary.

Consider the fact that there is nothing inherent about the practice of foot-launched aviation that requires the cutting of trees or any other damage to the land where the sport is practiced. At the mountain in question, the required launch area already exists, and its use is merely a convenience to hang glider pilots. Nothing will be gained by blocking the use of these already-existing facilities.

Despite the fact that some individual pilot(s) apparently felt that they could 'improve' the facilities by cutting a larger clearing, the fact that the mountain has been used as a flying site for two years prior to this action is proof that the action was not required.

Consider also that no other incidents of damage to the park's grounds or facilities have been recorded in the two years of hang glider operations at Skinner Park, as a result of hang gliding.

It is relevant at this point to mention that damage to the grounds and facilities of Skinner Park, including wanton vandalism, has been a continuing problem at that park since long before anyone ever appeared there with a hang glider. Hikers, snowmobilers, cross-country skiers and simple park visitors have taken their toll on the park's resources and facilities year after year.

Automobiles have been driven more than once through a locked gate at the park entrance, causing expensive and extensive damage - yet nobody proposes expelling all automobile drivers from the park. Snowmobilers and hikers and visitors have destroyed foliage, trampled and damaged trails, and even perpetrated arson and other vandalism on the buildings in the park - yet nobody proposes expelling all such park visitors from the park.

Yet, just once, some hang glider pilot(s) cause a single incident of damage, and already all hang glider pilots have been expelled from the park!

The different, and unfair standards applied to hang glider pilots as opposed to other segments of the public are reflective of an attitude which is in itself a problem.

During the past two years, the cooperation received by Mass HGA from the Skinner State Park staff has been superb; Doug Peterson and his staff have been great friends of the sport, and have represented the DEM to the hang gliding public commendably.

However, the attitudes of higher officials - those in a position to make decisions regarding the use of the park - have left much to be desired. One high DEM official has made a statement that he didn't want to consider hang gliding in the state parks simply because he doesn't like hang gliders. Another has strongly implied, in a conversation with a MassHGA representative, that if snowmobilers had cut down trees in the park, the park would not automatically be closed to snowmobilers. Yet, these same officials have expelled all hang glider pilots from the park due to a single incident by some unknown individual(s), and have indicated that they would like to see the ban made permanent.

Another indication of this attitude is the fact that in several conversations with MassHGA representatives, DEM officials have grossly exaggerated the damage done in the incident in question. We who are intimately familiar with the geography of the site, from our frequent use, cannot help but be aware of this deliberate exaggeration, and must wonder about the motives of those who deliberately attempt to magnify a situation which is already serious enough.

It is possible that some DEM officials find hang gliding to be personally irritating, simply because it is one more activity for them to keep an eye on. It must be tempting for them to try to dismiss us for their own convenience, simply because we are a small segment of the public, and therefore they can get away with it.

However, this attitude cannot be tolerated. Hang gliding is a legitimate form of public recreation, and these officials are paid by our tax dollars to not only tolerate, but assist the public in its pursuit of legitimate recreational activities in the state parks.

In short, then, we feel that there is no question but that hang gliding is a legitimate use for state park lands, and that the hang gliding program should be reinstated immediately. For those who are concerned about possible recurrences of the tree-cutting incident, we remind you that it would be a very simple procedure to ascertain that all individual flyers are notified of the consequences of any such action at the time that they are certified to fly the site. (In the past this was not done, simply because both DEM and MassHGA had assumed that "everyone" knew that you can't go around cutting down trees in a state park - apparently an unjustified assumption, but an easily remedied one.)

We hope that you will agree with the points that we have made in this letter, and that when asked, you will register an opinion favorable to the reopening of Skinner as a flying site. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Michael J. Morrissey, President
Massachusetts Hang Glider Association