

DIG THE FALLS

The Innocent Waterfall in the Age of Misplaced Blame

By John Haywood

Please note: This opinion article speaks bluntly and takes on the harsh reality of the dangers of disregarding the hazards at waterfalls. It is not meant to be derogatory in any way. It is meant to be an eye-opener in an effort to save lives.

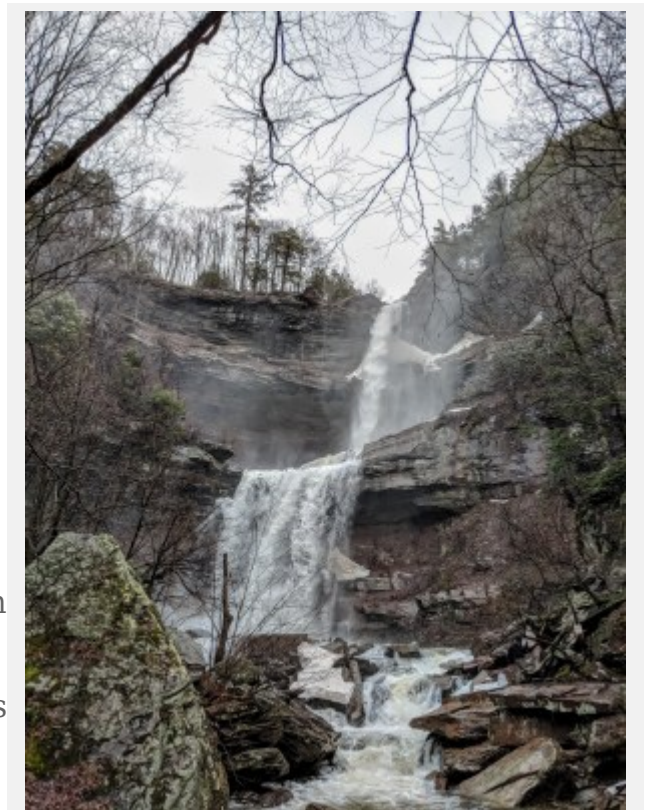
Waterfalls are not deadly. They do not seek to kill or harm; they simply exist. Waterfalls are innocent.

What is deadly at a waterfall is poor decision-making, a lack of respect for the terrain, and the absence of personal responsibility. Alcohol, drug use, and horseplay are additional factors.

A recent New York Times article titled “The Deadly Waterfall in the Instagram Age” seemed to place the blame on Social Media and increasing crowds for the rise in incidents at Kaaterskill Falls in New York (which has also been featured on national television as a must-see waterfall). There is no doubt that Social Media has led to the increase in popularity which naturally leads to increases in visitors to such places; however, what this article fails to address is the lack of personal responsibility that often leads to accidents.

I’ll add that while that article addressed how Instagram posts by others could draw people to the waterfall and to the same dangerous spots, it also contained photos of people near the edge at the top of the falls. How is this any different?

Just because a waterfall becomes popular doesn’t mean it has to be dangerous. One cannot solely blame Social Media for those who intentionally wander past the myriad fences and signs telling visitors to stay back, and warning of danger. Yes, some people need that selfie because they saw it online from someone else, but how is the waterfall or Social Media to



Kaaterskill Falls. Photo by Stanley Rusin

blame for that person making the conscious decision to ignore the warnings? Social Media only brings them there.

Granted, the signs and fences have not always been there, but neither has Instagram; there have been accidents there in the past for the same reasons there are accidents there in the present.



Numerous warning signs can be found at Kaaterskill Falls.

Reading the article, time and again the incidents noted occurred when people were somewhere outside of the established trails. It should go without saying, but must be stated, that there are accidents that occur regardless of how careful someone is. In an incident in the Adirondacks, a young boy was killed when a boulder came loose from the hillside at the base of a waterfall and struck him.

People say “Signs are needed!” and then signs are added but ignored. “Fences are needed to keep people back!” only for visitors to hop over the fences. “The trails need to be improved!” Done, but people leave the established trails! The latest attempt is to officially prohibit people from getting too close to the edge at Kaaterskill Falls. But here’s the thing, by improving the trails and surrounding areas, accessibility has been increased leading to larger crowds.

The response can’t be “The State needs to do more to keep people safe at these places!” The State has spent over a million dollars at this one location alone. What is needed is for people to use good judgement and not venture into unsafe areas. It can’t be said enough.

What has to be done to make people realize they will be hurt or killed if they put themselves in dangerous situations?! Do we need rangers stationed there just to tell people the hazards and keep people away from the danger? Should rangers stalk Social Media and send tickets to those who get their selfie in an unsafe area? There are not nearly enough rangers to begin with as their numbers shrink and the crowds increase!

At what point do we hold the individual accountable for their own actions rather than a waterfall or Social Media? If someone consciously decides to approach the edge of a 100-foot high waterfall, or attempts to climb the slippery hillside next to a waterfall where no trail exists, the blunt truth is that it is on them.

We can start by recognizing the dangers of these places in the articles that we see glorifying them. Let readers know of the risks involved, and of the accidents that have occurred. Give visitors a dose of reality in hopes that they take it to heart and use just a little more caution so they get home safely.

In summary; yes, Social Media is responsible for the increased crowds, however those who act in an irresponsible manner and blatantly disregard the warnings, fences, signs, and history of prior incidents are responsible for their own actions.

Following are safety points to keep in mind when hiking and especially when visiting waterfalls.

Wear proper footwear. Sandals or flip flops are not made to hike in and lack traction. Hiking shoes, boots, or sneakers with good traction are your best bet. Bring a trekking pole for added stability.

DO NOT GET CLOSE TO THE EDGE OF A WATERFALL OR CLIFF. A number of hidden dangers exist there. I'll be the first to admit that in my early days I was guilty of this in order to get a photograph, but no more. That rock can be slippery or unstable and in the blink of an eye, you're gone. I have fallen on slippery rock and wet leaves a few times and it



People and dogs have been seen on this ledge which is well beyond the fences and warning signs.

happens lightning quick. A life is not worth a photo or a selfie.

Heed the warnings on the signs. The signs and fences are there for your safety and more than likely were placed following someone's death. Do not climb over or around fences and stay out of protected areas.

Do not let children or pets wander near the edges or sides of waterfalls. (I have seen both)

If you are going to tackle a big hike, make sure you are in good physical condition. Many waterfall hikes lead to the top which may require above average physical exertion. If you sit at a desk all day at work and don't exercise at all, you could be at risk of injuring yourself if you overdo it. Likewise, it's not a good idea to hike if you are on crutches. (Again, seen it)

Be responsible for your own and others' safety. Don't be a trail tyrant, but if you see someone acting dangerously, maybe give a little reminder. It may save a life.

For more New York State waterfall locations, please visit our [New York waterfalls map](#).

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