

Fire tower vandalized

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BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE — Vandals attempted to burn a caretaker cabin and damaged a fire tower atop Blue Mountain earlier this month, Department of Environmental Conservation officials reported Friday.

DEC is investigating, but officials are unsure if the incident is related to the toppling of the Pharaoh Mountain tower in mid-April.

DEC Ranger Greg George of Blue Mountain Lake said a hiker discovered May 10 that someone had broken into the observer's cabin and dragged all of the furniture and bedding outside where it was burned. Vandals also smashed porch bannisters and tried to burn the cabin, but only succeeded in charring the interior. He said the lock was broken and windows were smashed in the booth atop the fire tower.

Tower legs were not cut as they were on the Pharaoh Mountain structure, nor were there any apparent attempts at structural damage, George reported.

"I wouldn't rule out either possibility — that someone did this to send a message to the DEC or that it was just random vandalism," George said.

The Pharaoh Mountain tower was controversial because it was the last observation station in a designated wilderness area, where state policy dictates signs of human intervention must be minimized. By contrast, Blue Mountain is in a wild forest area, where some man-made structures are allowed.

DEC had recommended removal of the Pharaoh Moun-

tain tower but was awaiting the results of a joint study with the state Office of Parks and Historic Preservation to determine whether it should be granted historic status and preserved.

"We're still very, very earnest about having it put back up," said Erika Melanie Crear, chair of the Save the Fire Tower Committee for Pharaoh Mountain.

She said she would seek donations as well as local and state government support, either to purchase an unused tower or construct a new one. The 74-year-old tower, now damaged beyond repair, has taken on increased importance to people in Schroon Lake who view it as a symbol of self-determination. Crear blamed the radical environmental group Earth First! for both acts of vandalism. Some Earth First! activists have denied responsibility but were unable to speak for every member of the group.

George said a wooden tower was first put atop 3,759-foot Blue Mountain in 1911, and replaced with the existing metal tower in 1917. Over 12,000 hikers signed the Blue Mountain trail register and hiked two miles to the tower last year, he said.

"It probably gets the most visitors of any tower in the state," George said. Fifty-nine state-owned towers remain standing, but none are used for forest fire detection. The Blue Mountain station was last occupied two years ago.

"I think the longer we leave it unmanned the more chances the vandals will have," George said. "The state is missing an opportunity to educate all the visitors who climb to the top."

Both incidents are still being investigated.