



THE  
**WILD SPACE**<sup>-EST</sup>  
BY WENDY K. PROBST

AN AERIAL VIEW OF KATAHDIN BY MARK WARNER

**T**o Brian Armstrong, the fact that the Appalachian Trail exists is “nothing short of a miracle.” Incredible vision and passion created this thing and keeps it going today,” says the producer of the National Geographic documentary film *America’s Wild Spaces: The Appalachian Trail*.

“This film explores, what I call ‘the nature of the Trail,’” explains Armstrong. “That includes what hikers face, where they go, and what they experience, but also the things about science and nature within the A.T. corridor.” The film does not follow a particular hiker or a group of hikers as they traverse the entire A.T.; instead it divides the Trail into four sections and follows what Armstrong calls, “a different type of hiker journey through each section ... a journey that reveals unique community aspects of that section of A.T. and that explores an aspect of the environment particular to that part of the Trail.”

The idea for the film came as Armstrong brainstormed, during his drive to work one day, for an appropriate and compelling subject for the Wild Spaces series, which primarily focuses on America’s National Parks. All at once it struck him that the A.T. not only linked several national parks but was a completely unique national park in itself. Once he pitched the idea to National Geographic, Armstrong says the response was “Of course! Why didn’t we think of that before?” And it’s so close. Sometimes the best ideas are hidden right under your nose.” This is the eighth film in the series, which has covered the Everglades, the Grand Canyon, and Yellowstone among others. “I think Yellowstone was the most surprising for how much of it people don’t know; 97 percent of visitors don’t leave the black top—but the backcountry is around two million acres—and spectacular. In a similar way, the A.T. runs through the back door of America—and relatively few people know its grandeur,” says Armstrong.

Though there have been many other Trail films made, what sets this documentary apart is that it’s the first made-for-broadcast film about the Trail ever completed. After meeting with the staff of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and the Appalachian Trail Park Office, Armstrong came away feeling that the film was going to be something quite special. “This was new,” he explains, “I couldn’t believe I was going to be doing this show for Geographic that no broadcaster had thought to do before. I all at once felt privileged and extremely responsible to do it right.” It was at that point that he made the decision to take on more than twice the workload himself. “I realized we’d need more time than our regular budget would usually allow,” he says. “By being the cameraman (as well as the producer), I freed up funds to spend much more time on the Trail than we otherwise could have done.” His list of credits also includes: director of photography, sound recordist; light manager; location scout, animal wrangler, tripod carrier, music director, caterer, First-Aid officer, fire lighter, camp cook and window washer; and believe it or not, the list goes on. “Television is a collaborative medium that benefits from the input of others, but invariably we have a small team of two or three, so we all take on at least some of these jobs and more,”

says Armstrong. “For the A.T., I couldn’t have done it without my associate producer Katie Cleary—her list of jobs would be even longer than mine.”

The goal of the film was to keep the focus on the Trail itself and use the hikers to gather valuable information about its character, instead of focusing on an individual or group. “I would say that most of the documentaries I have seen on the A.T. were made by hikers, for hikers. I think ours is one of the first to be made by Trail community outsiders for an audience who knows very little about the A.T. before viewing,” says Katie Cleary. But Armstrong and Cleary also explains how hikers are at the core of the story behind the film. In fact, hikers are ever present as it moves from one to the next in its progress along the Trail from Georgia to Maine. “The hikers are the heart and soul of the Trail, and our documentary,” explains Armstrong, “but we don’t use the Trail to teach us about hikers, we use the hikers to help us learn about and experience the A.T.”

**M**aking the film was not always easy, even from the start. By the time they received the “green light” to begin production the 2008 A.T. hiking season was in full swing and many hikers had already left Springer on their way north. “Katie spent a lot of time trying to track people down as they moved along the Trail. Fortunately, Laurie Potteiger from the ATC has an amazing knowledge of who’s out there and where—that was totally invaluable,” says Armstrong. Cleary concurs that they depended heavily on getting background information and approximate locations of potential hikers to focus on in order to piece together their storyline. “Laurie made catching up with them possible,” she says. Getting all the appropriate permits to film along the Trail was also quite a daunting task for Cleary.

Getting equipment on and off the Trail was another challenge. Cameras and other heavy equipment had to be carried in. “It was the only way,” says Armstrong who describes their assistant, Cameron Krug as priceless in these situations. “We all carried extremely full packs, but Cameron we just loaded up like a human mule and away we went. As long as we fed him 10 times a day he was happy,” says Armstrong. “I think I was amazed by how hard the A.T. is. I moved to D.C. from Colorado and after living in a town at 8,000 feet above sea level, I was of the mindset that mountains had to be above the tree-line to make you hurt. The A.T. really proved me wrong. It likes to find the highest peak and the hardest route up it,” says Cleary, who laments the loss of her own camera, which fell off a cliff in New Hampshire during filming.



PHOTO BY CHRIS COOK



From left: Brian Armstrong, Katie Cleary, Gary Hill, and Cameron Krug. The National Geographic crew celebrated with Hill in Millinocket following his thru-hike.

PHOTO BY IAN ANDERSON

In one instance, as the crew hiked up Baxter Peak, they were not only challenged physically, but were coordinating with their aerial photographer, whose plane was being chased by the tail end of a hurricane. At one point they lost communication with the airplane, but the weather held off just long enough to get the film they needed. “We got it in spectacular fashion. The hikers who finished that day were wonderful. We’re very grateful for their cooperation and patience. I hope us being there with them added to their experience and didn’t take anything away from their accomplishment,” says Armstrong.



**Hank and Andrea Southgate referred to their southbound hike as ‘their longest bird walk’—certainly a novel way to view a thru-hike ... Benton MacKaye would have loved them, and I think they provide a wonderful model for future hikers to emulate.**

—Laurie Potteiger

PHOTO BY MICHAEL SORROW

**A**s part of the America’s Wild Spaces series, the A.T. is what Armstrong calls a perfect fit. But he says, “it also has its own unique theme. The A.T. is ‘the people’s trail’ and that clearly defines this film and makes it stand out.” Cleary agrees and says that it was obvious that the people of the Appalachian Trail are its most valuable resource. “We start with hikers on Springer Mountain in Georgia and they really pull us through the story. Hikers are what the A.T. is all about,” she says. While making the film, the crew noticed that a majority of the hikers seemed to already know who they were, what they were doing, and where they were headed next. “Most people who know even just a little about the A.T. talk about the phrase ‘trail magic’. Well, I’d like to introduce [the] term, ‘trail gossip,’” says Cleary. She says that though it was hard to keep a low profile, most of the hikers were generally excited to see the crew. “It was really fun to chat with them and hear their stories ... I really like the bit in the [film] about Hank and Andrea Southgate, the couple who memorized the calls of native A.T. birds. People like them really capture the character of the Trail.” Arm-

strong also says that the reception from the hikers was great.” he says, “I think we got a great cross section to represent the A.T. experience.”

The crew finished the film and the Trail trying to keep up with hiker Gary Hill as he reached the summit of Katahdin. They needed a thru-hiker that would be summiting around the third week of September. “Laurie told them that an ATC volunteer was thru-hiking and was in New Hampshire and that my estimated Katahdin summit date could probably work out. Brian called me while I was at Chet’s Place, a hostel in New Hampshire, and we hooked up,” says Hill. Armstrong was in awe of Gary Hill’s attitude and his accomplishment. “He did the entire A.T. at 70 years of age,” says Armstrong. His thoughtful and respectful approach to the whole experience gives the conclusion of our film a wonderful, reflective quality and his attitude and accomplishment is truly inspiring.” For his part, Gary thoroughly enjoyed working with the National Geographic crew and was impressed with their physical stamina as well as their unobtrusiveness and respectful manners.

Feedback from preliminary screenings of the film has been very good so far, and Armstrong feels very strongly about this particular accomplishment. “I’ve been making films as a producer for National Geographic for 10 years... pretty much all over the globe. This A.T. show rates, not in my top 10, but in my top two,” he says. The documentary is due to air on the National Geographic Channel on November 10th at 8 p.m..

After finishing the film, of all the wild spaces on the Trail, Cleary feels that Maine is clearly the wildest, “I remember looking at a map of the Maine section of the Trail near Katahdin and thinking the cartographer forgot to draw roads. We flew over Katahdin in a small plane a day or two before we climbed it. I learned quickly that no one forgot to draw roads—there just aren’t any. It’s really rugged and beautiful,” she says. Armstrong has decided that there are actually two wild spaces on the A.T. “As well as our ground work, we filmed spectacular aerials along the full length of the A.T. This footage showed what many already know, that the New England section of the Trail is one of the most rugged, remote, and visually spectacular sections of any trail in the world. The other wild space, to me, is inside the brain of the thru-hiker,” he concludes. “People are dramatically affected by accomplishing this feat, and to do it, many reach deep inside to find the will to keep on going. Everyone’s story is different—but I think all are united by an inner strength that they discover along the way. That’s pretty wild.”

**For more information visit:**

[www.channel.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.channel.nationalgeographic.com)



**National Geographic asked me to identify a hiker with an ‘epic’ quality to their adventure. I thought the ideal [person] should also be a hiker who was an A.T. volunteer ... and Gary’s emails from the Trail during his thru-hike conveyed such excitement and a sense of discovery that I thought these qualities would translate well on film.**

—Laurie Potteiger

PHOTO BY DAVID McNEILL