

Law Enforcement on the Trail

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On a sunny Sunday afternoon, newly appointed chief ranger Todd Remaley is sitting in his living room, his wife Rebecca busy in the kitchen and his daughter Nadia quietly playing nearby. He has turned away from the various papers scattered on his desk to answer a few questions about law enforcement on the Trail, a crucial component of Trail protection as well as hiker safety.

“The A.T. got its first ranger several years after it became a National Scenic Trail,” Remaley explains. Signed by Congress in 1968, the National Trails System Act designated the A.T. as a National Scenic Trail, thus placing it under federal protection. “A decade later, the federal and state land protection program for the Trail really got under way, and the agencies moved ahead on acquiring interests, creating the corridor,” says Remaley. A few years later, the federal, state and non-profit management partners recognized a need for coordinating law enforcement

and emergency response on Appalachian Trail lands, and the first ranger position dedicated to the A.T. was opened.

While the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and its partner maintaining clubs have officially taken on most management and maintenance responsibilities for the Trail through cooperative agreements with the federal agencies, both the National Park Service and the USDA Forest Service retain the responsibility for law enforcement on lands within their jurisdiction.

“Law enforcement is one of the most critical non-delegated responsibilities retained by the National Park Service (NPS) A.T. Park Office,” says Remaley. “The Trail and the Trail community are microcosms, or reflections, of greater society. Many of the problems that occur in society can and will occur on A.T. lands. Law enforcement officers with the appropriate authority can respond to problems and transgressions.”

Ensuring law enforcement and emergency response along the Trail is no small

task. The 2,175 miles of the Trail pass through many jurisdictions and lands managed by local, state or other federal entities; these entities often retain the responsibility for law enforcement and emergency response on their lands. The task of the A.T. rangers is to coordinate with these entities and ensure that they have the information necessary to respond to issues on A.T. lands. “Through cooperative agreements and regular communications, I try to assist these agency partners with their responsibilities and the unique challenges associated with the Trail,” explains Remaley.

When asked if park rangers can act on their own authority to address issues on the Trail, Remaley smiles. “Many people don’t understand the responsibilities and authority of land management agencies’ law enforcement officers. The confusion seems to be compounded with the complexity of land ownership along the Appalachian Trail. In short, National Park Service law enforcement rangers are federal agents. We have as much authority regarding violations on NPS lands as police officers do within their jurisdictions. We can give warnings, tickets, and we can apprehend and arrest suspects if such action is warranted,” says Remaley.

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail actually has two dedicated ranger positions: that of chief ranger and field ranger. “The focus of the field ranger is in the implementation of the law enforcement program. They respond to law enforcement incidents that fall under NPS juris-

Ranger Remaley discusses foot travel only regulations with a couple “off road enthusiasts”; Right, Remaley is poised for conversation with an illegal hunter.





Top: Careful detective work is necessary while investigating timber theft from A.T. corridor lands in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania; below, drugs and paraphernalia confiscated from overnight campers on the corridor.

diction. The field ranger position was created four years ago in response to the backlog of law enforcement cases, and their primary responsibility is to respond to new threats on A.T. lands. This requires communication and cooperation with agency partners as well as club volunteers,” says Remaley.

Having been field ranger for the A.T. for the past three years, Ranger Remaley is well acquainted with the challenges that can be found in the field. “While crimes against people do occur, the most frequent type of crime is encroachment on government land. The most common encroachment problems are the illegal use of off-road vehicles (ORVs) onto the Trail

corridor as well as Trail neighbors trying to extend the boundaries of their own property onto government land,” says Remaley. Each year dozens of new incidents are reported, and investigations are opened; and most of these cases are successfully addressed.

Because of the nature of the threats to A.T. lands, a strong corridor boundary program is essential to successful law enforcement and protection of the corridor. The corridor boundary program, headed by ATC’s Sally Naser, is responsible for marking and maintaining the NPS boundaries. “Clearly marked and maintained boundaries reduce the risk of encroachments,” says Naser, “they also

make it possible for our club volunteers to monitor those boundaries and report encroachments or other types of violations. Without a clearly marked line, our volunteers often wouldn’t be able to tell whether a trash pile or an ATV trail was within the corridor or not.” ATC is responsible for ensuring that the boundaries of the NPS A.T. corridor are clearly marked, maintained and monitored; the clubs have been delegated responsibility for monitoring, but not for maintenance and marking.

Although they are not obliged to, club monitors can greatly help in mitigating minor violations. For example, the dumping of yard waste (clippings, branches) by a Trail neighbor onto the corridor lands is a common minor violation. Sometimes the dumping includes household trash, which is somewhat more serious. “This can often be resolved by a simple conversation with the Trail neighbor,” says Ranger Remaley. “I encourage corridor boundary monitors to take opportunities to speak with Trail neighbors and explain that they are volunteers, that they assist with management of the lands, and to also explain the purpose and need to protect such lands. Often this dialogue is enough to encourage cooperation and deal with minor violations.”

While the resolution of all violations begins with the lowest level of enforcement action needed to gain compliance, major violations are ones where the re-

source damages, or crime against a person, necessitate legal actions. “Responses to these situations can include high fines, expensive restitution, and arrest with subsequent jail time. Some examples of major violations I have handled on the Trail are break-in and theft from motor vehicles, poaching of wildlife, drug use, and assault,” says Remaley.

As chief ranger, Remaley will likely spend a little less time out in the field, and more time ensuring the necessary coordination and management of emergency response and enforcement with other partners along the Trail. A lot of the coordination happens before incidents ever occur. For example, by coordinating with partners to plan, map and discuss the best entry routes for emergency responses on the Trail, the rangers can maximize hiker safety and minimize resource damages. “The coordination and communication amongst the various agencies is the biggest challenge to law enforcement on the Trail,” Remaley says.

Remaley believes that changes in technology may offer opportunities to improve communication and coordination between management partners, and improve the management of the law enforcement program in general. “For example, GIS [Geographic Information System] technology has many applications for better communication and sharing of information,” Remaley explains. “GIS systems allow the production of maps tailored for specific needs: the scale and the features shown on the map are chosen to suit specific purposes. Emergency re-



Trail neighbors extending their lawn into the A.T. corridor is a common minor encroachment.

sponse planning is again, a good example. We can use the GIS system to make maps and share these with management partners to help ground our planning and collaboration.”

“Another example will be the opportunity to use remote monitoring cameras,” says Remaley. “They will be available to all Trail management partners to monitor ongoing encroachments and provide documentation of the trespass. I have been investigating this technology and am excited about the prospects for this tool and its applications in addressing known problem areas along the Trail.”

Who should hikers or Trail enthusiasts contact in case of problems or emergencies on the Trail? “Most importantly, emergencies need to be reported to local

authorities using the 911 system,” recommends Ranger Remaley. He adds that follow-up reporting after the emergency has subsided should be directed to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy by writing to incident@appalachiantrail.org or by calling (304) 535-6331.

In case of issues that are not emergencies, but would seem to warrant a law enforcement response (for example, ATV tracks across the corridor, trash or other dumping), hikers may also use the above contact information. Corridor boundary monitors and club members are asked to document and report problems through the appropriate club authority. Reports will be forwarded to law enforcement attention and follow-up contact will occur as necessary.

