



APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY POSITION STATEMENT

Regarding H.R. 1349, proposed legislation to amend the Wilderness Act

About H.R. 1349

H.R. 1349, a bill before the U.S. House of Representatives, proposes to amend the Wilderness Act, to allow “the use of motorized wheelchairs, non-motorized wheelchairs, non-motorized bicycles, strollers, wheelbarrows, survey wheels, or game carts within any wilderness areas.”

About the Wilderness Act

In 1964, the Wilderness Act created a thoughtful and reasonable way of protecting America’s most pristine places, recognizing the importance of preserving destinations that offer solitude, contemplation and scenic beauty. More than 50 years later the Act continues to welcome generations of Americans to special places that offer retreat from the hustle-and-bustle of daily life. The Act does not restrict access – wheelchairs are permissible –but defines sensible standards to protect the natural integrity of these extraordinary places in much the same way libraries encourages respectful behavior.

About the National Trails System Act and the Appalachian Trail

In 1968, building upon the values of solitude and scenic beauty, Congress passed the National Trails System Act “to promote the preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open-air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the Nation.” The National Trails System Act created the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, and opened the door to the creation of an impressive national trails system that honors scenic values, history and heritage, and diverse recreational pursuits.

Notably, the Appalachian Trail (A.T.) was designated solely a footpath to preserve and honor the pleasures of walking.

The A.T. is notable as one of the world’s longest continuous footpaths; remarkable for its length of 2,191 miles which passes through fourteen states; and important in that it traverses the crest of one of the most significant land features in the eastern United States - the Appalachian mountain range. More than half of America’s population reside within a day’s drive from some part of the Trail and hundreds of communities within nearby proximity of the A.T. benefit from a strong and healthy outdoor-recreation economy. In 2016 and 2017, approximately three million people enjoyed the A.T. as day hikers and backpackers. The A.T.’s visitor numbers continue to increase.

The Position of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy

Wilderness areas along the A.T. – from the Blood Mountain Wilderness in Georgia, located within an hour's drive of Greater Atlanta, to the remote Great Gulf Wilderness in New Hampshire's White Mountains -- are a significant part of the Trail's allure and public support. The A.T. passes through 25 wilderness areas for a total of 150 miles of the A.T.'s 2,191 miles, equating to approximately seven percent of the Trail.

How the A.T. might be affected by H.R. 1349 is of grave concern and, quite frankly, puts the overall A.T. experience at risk. Could allowances for mountain bikes in wilderness areas supersede the vision and congressional intent to keep the A.T. solely a footpath? Could some sections of the A.T. be required to allow bikes? And if so, what kind of management challenges would that pose? If passed, court challenges are anticipated to sort out several questions. ATC is firm in opposing this legislation rather than risk contrary court decisions. We summarize our objections in three major points:

- H.R. 1349 - which would allow bicycles and other wheel transports in wilderness areas – contradicts the congressional intent of the 1964 Wilderness Act and transgresses the congressional intent of the 1968 National Trails System Act which designated the Appalachian National Scenic Trail for foot travel.
- Bicycles on the A.T.'s narrow treadway would compound visitor management challenges and jeopardize visitor safety. Moreover, the overall hiking experience – the sense of retreat and getaway, the appreciation of the experience, the satisfaction of personal accomplishment – would be significantly diminished if not outright destroyed by the jarring noise and speed of bicycles on the often-steep single track of the A.T.
- Maintenance of the Trail would be affected and made more difficult, potentially discouraging thousands of volunteer trail maintainers. In 2016, 6,588 individuals contributed 256,689 hours toward the maintenance, improvement and construction of A.T. assets – which saved the federal government over \$6 million in contracted labor. Volunteer support is typically conducted through 31 Trail clubs comprised of members who love the A.T. and consider their work important to protecting the attributes of a walking/hiking footpath. ATC predicts that volunteer support for areas that permit bicycle use – causing harmful ruts and degraded vegetation along the Trail – is likely to decrease, fueling an unprecedented negative impact to A.T. volunteerism.

Support for Access and Multiple Forms of Recreation on Public Lands.

While bicycles are incompatible with the nature and purposes of the Appalachian Trail and the Wilderness Act, ATC supports mountain biking and other sustainable forms of outdoor recreation on America's public lands, but not in federally designated Wilderness Areas. Wilderness represents just five percent of the total U.S. land base, and less than three percent of the land base in the contiguous 48 states. ATC believes there are other locations on public lands more appropriate for mountain bike use. ATC's landscape conservation goals support a range of recreation choices adjoining the A.T. corridor as it works to conserve one of the most significant landscapes in the eastern United States.