

Appalachian Trail Cooperative Management

History

After several decades of Appalachian Trail (A.T.) design and construction by A.T. clubs and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) the A.T. became one of the first of two national scenic trails designated under the 1968 National Trails System Act. The purpose of that Act was to provide the means to develop a national trails system for *“the ever-increasing outdoor recreation needs of an expanding population and in order 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 Act promoted the development of trails *“primarily, near the urban areas of the Nation, and secondarily, within scenic areas and along historic travel routes of the Nation which are often more remotely located.”*

The Act formally recognized the Department of the Interior, in consultation with the Department of Agriculture, as the administrator for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. It also recognized the important role of volunteers and nonprofit organizations to support the federal agencies: *“The Congress recognizes the valuable contributions that volunteers and private, nonprofit trail groups have made to the development and maintenance of the Nation's trails. In recognition of these contributions, it is further the purpose of this Act to encourage and assist volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, development, maintenance, and management, where appropriate, of trails.”*

The most significant outcome of the 1968 Act, and its 1978 amendments, was to provide a federal framework to acquire lands and permanently protect a Trail corridor. The Act also authorized cooperative agreements between the managing federal agencies with states or their political subdivisions, landowners, private organizations, or individuals to operate, develop, and maintain portions of national trails located within or outside the boundaries of a federally administered area. There are other enabling authorities that support agreements between federal agencies and non-federal entities.

The involvement of federal agencies in Trail administration required new private-public agreements to ensure consistent Trail management. Information on agreements is found in Appendix 1.

Partners in the Cooperative Management of the Appalachian Trail



The primary cooperative management partners—Trail clubs, ATC, and their agency partners—are the “legs” that support the Appalachian Trail.

Appalachian Trail Maintaining Clubs

31 private, volunteer-based organizations have been given unprecedented responsibility for maintaining their assigned sections of the Appalachian Trail as it traverses 14 states from Georgia to Maine. It is a serious responsibility that the clubs and their volunteers consider a privilege and take pride in.

Remarkably stable over many decades, these clubs are the “institutional memory” of the Trail, able to recollect and act on long-range lessons. They are also the bedrock upon which the creation and continuing maintenance and stewardship of the Appalachian Trail has been based for more than eight decades. Run by people who are dedicated to the outdoors and to the perpetuation of the Appalachian Trail as a volunteer-based enterprise, the clubs represent a built-in constituency that carries out basic construction, maintenance, and marking of the Trail and associated structures; implements other land-management programs related to the Trail and surrounding lands and resources; and tackles critical Trail priorities or combats threats to the A.T. where they are seen and felt most acutely, at the local level.

Trail-club sections are as short as the 2.2 miles in New Hampshire maintained by the Randolph Mountain Club since 2011 and as long as the more than 280-mile section maintained by the Maine Appalachian Trail Club since 1935. Other venerable maintaining clubs include several chapters of the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), which was founded in 1876, and the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, founded in 1920. Those older groups maintained trails that predated the Appalachian Trail. In fact, the N.Y.-N.J. Trail Conference opened the very first component of the A.T.—from the then-new Bear Mountain Bridge across the Hudson River to the Ramapo River south of Arden—in October 1923, while AMC provided about 120 preexisting miles of paths for the A.T. through New Hampshire’s White Mountains.

During those early years before the Trail was a continuous footpath, many new Trail clubs were formed, in large part to build it—hence the “Appalachian Trail” in their names. Myron Avery (pictured at right), ATC chair from 1931 to 1952 and a founder of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, inspired the formation and work of many of these clubs in the Mid-Atlantic States, in the South, and in Maine. Avery is known as the “architect” of the A.T. for providing the tireless leadership and motivation to build the Trail.



Although many of the Trail-maintaining clubs were formed in the 1920s and 30s, a number of clubs received their maintenance-section assignments in the 1960s and later, including the Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers and the Old Dominion Appalachian Trail Club, which began their work in the 1960s and the Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club in 1972. The Cumberland Valley Appalachian Trail Club (CVATC) and the Wilmington Trail Club received their assignments in Pennsylvania in 1990s. The most recent addition to the management structure is the Keystone Trail Association, which assumed responsibility for a Trail section in Pennsylvania in 2016.

The Trail clubs represent the “vigilant citizenry” of the Trail, capable of responding dynamically to Trail needs as they arise. An excellent example of club-based stewardship occurred in October 1995 when Hurricane Opal devastated the A.T. in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia. While a new backcountry ranger in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was telling National Public Radio listeners that the A.T. and other park lands probably would be closed “until the spring of 1996,” volunteer activists in the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club were busy working alongside park rangers removing thousands of blowdowns that blocked the high-country route. The A.T. in the Smokies was opened in three weeks. In Georgia, where the Forest Service did not permit the use of chainsaws in designated wilderness areas, the Georgia A.T. Club managed to open the A.T. in less than two months with hand labor—an astonishing feat that passed almost unnoticed by the general public. There are countless similar examples.

Still, the most traditional responsibilities of the Trail clubs—maintenance of the treadway, including blazing and signage, and of the shelters, campsites, and sanitary systems—remain the most important. Without the performance of these critical tasks, the Trail would soon grow obscure and be lost as a physical entity.

In that sense, the clubs often are viewed as a cornerstone of the A.T. “cooperative management system,” the partnership of the three or four organizations—the club, ATC, and one or more public land-managing agencies, such as the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, or state natural-resource agencies—that must be active on each section to ensure a protected and well-managed Appalachian Trail.

Appalachian Trail Conservancy



The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) headquarters is in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. It is governed by a **Board of Directors** that is focused on the business operations of the organization. ATC’s five-year Strategic Plan can be found here: <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/home/about-us/accountability-and-transparency>. The Strategic Plan has five goals, which shape the work of the organization: Effective Stewardship, Proactive Protection, Broader Relevancy, Engaged Partners, and Strengthened Capacity and Operational Excellence.

ATC’s Board hires ATC’s president/chief executive officer who oversees the management of the organization and departments, including: conservation, finance and administration, marketing and communications, publications, and membership and development. The conservation department includes ATC’s four regional offices, with regional directors who oversee staff and regional programs. The regional offices are generally the primary resource for the Trail clubs.

There are four **Regional Partnership Committees (RPCs)** corresponding to ATC’s four regions, known as New England, Mid-Atlantic, Central and Southwest Virginia, and Deep South. Each Trail-maintaining club selects its own representatives (usually a primary and an alternate) to serve on the regional RPC. At least one member of each RPC is nominated by committee members and appointed to serve on the Stewardship Council (see below).

The RPCs serve as communication links between the Trail-maintaining clubs and ATC and agency partners on policy issues and as advisors to ATC on Trail management and other issues. Each provides a forum for discussion and a venue for reviewing issues, proposals, and policies under consideration.

The Regional Partnership Committees are self-governing within parameters set by the Board. The members of each committee select one member to serve as RPC chair and may have other officers and procedures as the members deem necessary. Each RPC meets at least twice a year, and meetings are attended by ATC and agency staff and other partners. RPC members are expected to communicate information on the work of the committee to their home clubs.

While the RPCs do not create ATC policy, they play an important role in developing and refining Trail management and conservation policies. They also focus on volunteer development and strengthening the Trail clubs. They serve as a voice for volunteers and as active advisory groups for the ATC regional director and the Stewardship Council.

The **Stewardship Council** is a committee of the Board that oversees programs and policies related to stewardship of the Trail and surrounding public lands, including land protection and land-use planning. The Council advises the conservation program on overall strategic direction. It takes a lead role in volunteer development and training, outreach and education, and identifying and mitigating



threats to the Trail. The Council serves as the interface among the Regional Partnership Committees, Trail clubs, the staff, agency partners, and the Board of Directors.

The Council has up to 15 appointed members and includes a broad representation of Trail-management perspectives and expertise. The Council is chaired by a Board member, and other Board members may serve on it. Each Regional Partnership Committee is represented on the Council.

Council members are selected from recommendations made by Regional Partnership Committees, Trail clubs, ATC staff, Board members, and other partners. Council members may not serve for more than three consecutive two-year terms without a respite of one term. Council members should demonstrate the skills and experience required for the highest possible level of effective management for the Appalachian Trail and the surrounding lands.

The Council chair may establish committees or working groups that include non-Council members to accomplish its goals. It currently has four standing committees: Landscape and Resource Protection, Partner Communications and Resource (which includes the RPC representatives to the Council), Trail and Camping, and Youth and Diversity.

National Park Service Appalachian Trail Park Office

With the passage of the National Trails System Act in 1968, the Appalachian Trail became the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (ANST) and a unit of the national park system. The Appalachian Trail Park Office (also known by its NPS acronym APPA), located in Harpers Ferry, has responsibility for oversight and administration of the Trail under the leadership of the park superintendent. While many daily functions are carried out by ATC and the Trail clubs, the NPS has overall management responsibility for the A.T. and is substantially involved in most functions.

APPA retains broad authority for coordinating protection and management efforts along the entire length of the A.T. APPA further executes the Interior secretary's authority by developing and administering cooperative agreements with ATC, other national park units, the U.S. Forest Service, other federal agencies, and state agencies within the 14 Trail states.

APPA's responsibilities include:

- Compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act (Section 106 NHPA), the Endangered Species Act, and other laws and executive orders dealing with protection of flood-plains, wetlands, and clean air
- Issuance of special-use, collection, and right-of-way permits
- Law enforcement and resource protection
- Removal of incidentally acquired structures
- Boundary survey
- Decisions on final corridor design and overall direction to the NPS land acquisition office for completion of the land-protection program
- General oversight of the Appalachian Trail cooperative management system

Ultimately, NPS remains responsible for the lands it has acquired to protect the Appalachian Trail, and the park superintendent is accountable for ensuring appropriate management and use of these federally owned lands and resources.

USDA Forest Service

Approximately 850 miles of the Appalachian Trail cross eight units of the national forest system managed by the USDA Forest Service (USFS).

Eastern Region (R9)

New Hampshire	White Mountain National Forest
Vermont	Green Mountain National Forest

Southern Region (R8)

Virginia	George Washington and Jefferson National Forests
Tennessee	Cherokee National Forest
North Carolina	Pisgah National Forest, Nantahala National Forest
Georgia	Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest

In addition, some of those forests administer approximately 200 miles of Trail and associated corridor lands acquired by the National Park Service in central and southwest Virginia, West Virginia, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Those lands have been transferred from NPS to the USFS under a cooperative agreement between the two agencies and are managed as part of the national forest system.

The USDA Forest Service manages land for many different uses, including timber, watershed, wildlife, range, and recreation. Management policy for different parts of a forest (and for its different uses) is developed in context of each forest's land and resource management plan, known as the "forest plan." The forest plan is equivalent to a local or county zoning ordinance. The forest is divided into different management zones, each with its own set of "management prescriptions" or "standards and guidelines" for management and use.

All national forests traversed by the A.T. have identified an "A.T. management area" or zone devoted to protection of the remote, primitive, and scenic character of the A.T. landscape and Trail-related activities. The A.T. management area is defined by the USFS, using its scenery management system, as the visual "foreground" zone—land that is visible from the A.T. footpath and related facilities, such as shelters and trailheads. The foreground zone may extend up to 1/2 mile from the Trail, depending on topographic screening. Both the NPS and ATC have encouraged the use of the USFS scenery management system on state and private lands outside of Forest Service control.

Each forest is divided into a number of geographically based districts, staffed by a district ranger and other management staff. The district office is often the primary point of contact between Trail clubs and the USFS. Each forest also has a supervisor's office, which coordinates implementation of policy and programs.

State Partners

In addition to the cooperative partners highlighted above, there are many state partners that host and support the Appalachian Trail, including:

Maine: Baxter State Park, Nahmakanta Lake, The Hermitage Nature Preserve, Bald Mountain Pond, Bigelow Preserve, Grafton Notch State Park

New Hampshire: Benton State Forest, Lead Mine State Park, Mount Washington State Park, Crawford Notch State Park, Franconia Notch State Park, Sentinel Mountain State Forest

Vermont: Gifford Woods State Park, Kent Pond, Calvin Coolidge State Forest, Clarendon Gorge

Massachusetts: Clarksburg State Forest, Mount Greylock State Reservation, October Mountain State Forest, Beartown State Forest, East Mountain State Forest, Mount Everett State Reservation, Arthur Wharton Swann State Forest

Connecticut: Housatonic State Forest, Housatonic Meadows State Park, Mohawk State Forest, Macedonia Brook State Park, Ibberson Conservation Area

New York: Depot Hill State Forest, Clarence Fahnestock Memorial State Park, Hudson Highlands State Park, Bear Mountain-Harriman State Park

New Jersey: Abram S. Hewitt State Forest, Wawayanda State Park, High Point State Park, Stokes State Forest, Worthington State Forest, Dunfield Creek

Pennsylvania: Weiser State Forest, Pennsylvania State Game Lands, Swatara State Park, Pine Grove Furnace State Park, Michaux State Forest, Caledonia State Park

Maryland: South Mountain State Park, Greenbrier State Park, Washington Monument State Park, Gathland State Park

Virginia: Sky Meadows State Park, G. Richard Thompson State Wildlife Management Area, Grayson Highlands State Park

Georgia: Vogel State Park, Amicalola Falls State Park

Each of the 14 Appalachian Trail states has a Memorandum of Understanding with the NPS, ATC, and the local Trail club that outlines roles and responsibilities for Trail management and protection.