

# **The Appalachian National Scenic Trail and The Appalachian Trail Conference**

**Karen Lutz, Mid-Atlantic Regional Director  
Appalachian Trail Conference, Boiling Springs, PA 17007**

*The Appalachian Trail is a way, continuous from Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia, for travel by foot through the wild, scenic, wooded, pastoral, and culturally significant lands of the Appalachian Mountains. It is a means of sojourning among these lands, such that visitors may experience them by their own unaided efforts.*

*In practice the Trail is usually a simple footpath, purposeful in direction and concept, favoring the heights of land, and located for minimum reliance on construction for protecting the resource. The body of the Trail is provided by the land it traverses and its soul is the living stewardship of the volunteer and workers of the Appalachian Trail community.*

Definition of the Appalachian Trail, from  
“Appalachian Trail Management Principles” (ATC)

The world-renowned Appalachian National Scenic Trail (A.T.) is, among other things, a 2174 mile-long footpath that traverses 14 eastern seaboard states. It is also a publicly owned corridor that encompasses a rich collection of natural and cultural resources that help to define the recreation experience afforded to the estimated 4 million visitors who hike on the A.T. annually. The land base through which the A.T. passes consists of established federal, state and locally administered park and forest units, connected by a narrow corridor that has been acquired by the national park service. This arrangement has been described as pearls (e.g. established units like Harriman Park, Smoky Mt. and Shenandoah National Parks) on a string (the lands acquired specifically to protect the Trail.)

The A.T. was the first trail to be recognized in the 1968 passage of the National Trail System Act (PL 90-543). One of the more significant provisions of that act was a condition which authorized formal agreements between government land-owning agency partners and other entities including not-for-profit volunteer-based organizations, who are charged to “operate, develop, and maintain” the A.T. There are 30 individual Trail maintaining clubs who function under the guidance and umbrella of the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC).

ATC is governed by a volunteer board of managers and is headquartered in Harpers Ferry, WV, and four regional offices that serve local trail clubs and agency partners. The organization’s purpose is as follows:

*The Appalachian Trail Conference is a volunteer-based organization dedicated to the preservation and management of the natural, scenic, historic and cultural resources associated with the Appalachian Trail in order to provide primitive outdoor recreation and educational opportunities for Trail visitors.*

The Trail and its associated land base are managed under a unique model cooperative management system wherein public agencies and private locally based organizations work together to make and implement decisions about management of the Appalachian Trail. For the Bear Mt. project, those partners include the Palisades Interstate Park Commission (PIPC), New York - New Jersey Trail Conference (NY-NJTC), Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC), and National Park Service Appalachian Trail Park Office (ATPO). This model is often described as a three (or four) legged stool where if one leg (partner) is compromised, the entire stool (A.T.) fails to function. The various roles and responsibilities of each cooperating partner in New York are spelled out in the *Memorandum of Understanding for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail in the State of New York*.

The Appalachian Trail should be designed and constructed in a manner that protects natural and cultural resources and provides a sustainable footpath capable of withstanding the amount of traffic typical in a given location. Trail construction methods should ensure that the footpath is both safe and enjoyable. Designers should make every effort to create a finished product that ‘lies lightly on the land’, a concept that involves considerable artistry and skill to accomplish. Designers should incorporate construction techniques and components to ensure long-term maintenance requirements are minimized. Extraordinary or unique natural and cultural features can be used to anchor the Trail, or as control points. These features might include an outstanding vista, a unique rock formation, a spectacular old growth tree or other attraction that is singularly unique.

Trail users generally fit into three broad categories. These include thru-hikers, overnight users, and day hikers. Thru-hikers are those driven souls who attempt to hike the entire 2174 - mile length of the Trail in a given year. In recent years, a few thousand begin (generally in Georgia, proceeding north with spring) and, of those, 400-500 complete the journey. Thru-hikers typically carry packs full of very high tech gear and clothing weighing about 25 pounds. They re-supply in towns through which the A.T. passes every few days. A typical thru-hiker will walk 15-20 miles each day. Most backpackers opt for shorter stints ranging in length from a weekend, to a long section hike of a hundred miles or more. They might average 10-15 miles in a day. Day hikers might prefer a brief walk of less than an hour, or a long all day trek. Day hikers might carry a small pack with rain gear, water and snacks.

---

---

**Good Sources for more information:**

*Appalachian Trail Design Construction and Maintenance*, (second edition, 2000), William Birchard and Robert Proudman, Appalachian Trail Conference, Harpers Ferry, WV

*Lightly on the land, The SCA Trail-Building and Maintenance Manual*, Robert Birky, 1996, Student Conservation Association, The Mountaineers, Seattle. WA.

*Trail Years, A History of the Appalachian Trail Conference*, Appalachian Trailway News Special 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue, July 2000, Appalachian Trail Conference, Harpers Ferry, WV

*Comprehensive Plan for the Protection, Manangement, Development and Use of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail*, 1981, Appalachian Trail Project Office, National Park Service, Harpers Ferry, WV

*Memorandum of Understanding for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail in the State of New York*

*Local Management Planning Guide*, Appalachian Trail Conference, Harpers Ferry, WV

---

---

<http://www.appalachiantrail.org/>

