CHAPTER 3 (C)

Public Information, Education, and Outreach Programs

Although it was built and maintained privately at first, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail was always intended for use by the broad spectrum of the public and is now located almost entirely on public lands.

As stewards of the Trail, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the Trail-maintaining clubs, and agency partners seek to make others aware of the Trail and its possible attractions for them, promote access to the A.T. for all, and motivate users to treat the Trail, its resources, and other users properly for the greater enjoyment of all. At the same time, greater awareness and use of the Trail increases the number of potential Trail club members (including a new generation of maintainers and managers) and ATC. Good community relations are an asset in corridor monitoring and land protection, as well as a means of strengthening the local organization with new talents for managing the diversity of activities now associated with the Trail project. Public information, or public relations, always supports some other purpose of the organization.

Trail users obviously want and need information about the Trail. The news media (and commercial publishers of travel and recreation books and other materials) are also interested—many will publish hike and work-trip notices; most are always interested in the type of “good-news,” local volunteer work that is the mainstay of A.T. club activities. Regular contact is also perhaps an organization’s best insurance against irresponsible reporting in times of crisis, minor or major.

Existing Policy

ATC Policy—ATC has an obligation as a nonprofit organization and as a cooperative management partner to provide full, factual, and unbiased information about the Trail as a national public resource. In fulfilling this obligation, a series of 11 official guides to the A.T. are published by ATC and three of the Trail clubs, supplemented by an annual summary of mileages between important points (the Appalachian Trail Data Book); a magazine for members; technical manuals for maintainers; promotional and educational brochures for the Trail user; and other books, posters, maps, and related merchandise. These materials, obviously, are intended for direct communication with users, potential users, and supporters.

ATC also engages in and encourages indirect communication through the news and educational media, the commercial publishing industry, and the entertainment business. In its day-to-day promotional activities, ATC seeks to leave a positive impression of both itself and the maintaining clubs and encourages media contacts with them. In emergencies affecting the Trail and its reputation, ATC also serves as the media liaison for the A.T. community.

ATC is reaching out beyond its traditional audiences to engage new volunteers in environmental monitoring through the A.T. MEGA-Transect and other programs, and to encourage future Trail users, volunteers, and supporters through a place-based educational program known as a Trail to Every Classroom as well as through community partnerships being nurtured along the Trail. ATC’s volunteer clearinghouse provides an online opportunity for Trail clubs to reach out to potential volunteers by posting work trips and other projects.

NPS Policy—The Park Service will provide timely and accurate information to the public and news media in accordance with applicable laws, departmental policy, and director’s orders. The NPS A.T. Park Office regularly makes itself available to the news media as the spokesperson for the federal interest in the Trail and underwrites a limited number of publications (brochures and maps) of interest to the
recreation-minded public at large. In addition, the NPS A.T. Park Office takes part in and provides a large portion of the funding for the NPS Junior Ranger program, which develops educational activities for youth, and the Trail to Every Classroom program that helps teachers use the A.T. as a resource both within and outside of their classrooms.

Considerations for Planning

Inventory—Basic elements of a Trail club public-information program might include a brochure, a means of responding to requests for information, and a list of news-media outlets within 50 miles of its Trail section. Agency partners, ATC, and appropriate legislators (federal, state, and local) should be added to the list for distribution of news releases. This inventory also should identify the person(s) within the club responsible for each public-relations activity. A basic “press list” for the area may be obtained from ATC, but local officials and other important persons who would be interested in Trail club activities should be added. Any club activity involving the Trail has the makings of a potential news release, from a relocation opening to the receipt of a grant.

Even if a Trail club does not currently sponsor outreach, education, or interpretation programs, an inventory of desirable sites for small-group hikes, particularly those suitable for novices and intermediate hikers, is a good first step towards a future program. Club representatives interested in outreach and educational programs may find that agency partners and ATC are able to provide technical or financial support.

Setting Trail Club Policy—Trail clubs should determine how best to inform and educate the public about their organizations and the Trail, and should develop strategies to recruit new members and volunteers. Consider whether the club should have its own brochure, whether its Web site is effective, and whether the club should have an active membership-recruitment program. One person should be identified as the spokesperson to the media for the organization. Club policy also should explain how to respond to requests for information. If appropriate, the Trail club should highlight its existing or potential role in Trail outreach and education programs.

Action Plan—The Trail club needs to recruit a club member or committee of members to assume responsibility for the execution of each of the elements of its program: developing a brochure, maintaining the club’s Web site, developing a press list, writing and distributing news releases when appropriate, responding to information requests, and maintaining informative ties with community leaders. If the Trail club has undertaken an education or outreach program, club members will need to assume roles in organizing programs, creating displays, attending community events, or developing guided hikes and activities.