CHAPTER 4 (H)

Road Closures and Access Control

Appalachian Trail lands are susceptible to encroachment due to the narrow, linear shape of the A.T. corridor. Encroachments usually are associated with some form of vehicular access. Careful planning and design of road closures and other means of access control can minimize improper or illegal uses, such as motorized recreation, timber theft, and dumping.

Access problems often are complex, requiring detailed site studies and planning. Access points must be located, valid rights must be recognized, and illegal and unauthorized access must be controlled, without obstructing legitimate access. Land ownership and legal access rights are key factors in any situation where a road closure is being considered.

If no legal rights for access exist, and the land-managing agency has no current use for a road, a permanent closure can prevent future management problems. The roadway can be rehabilitated and seeded, and a physical barrier constructed to discourage access. Depending upon the site, the most effective permanent barrier may be a boulder closure, a vegetative barrier of planted trees, a log barrier, a “tank trap” or excavated portion of the road, a gate, or a combination of the above.

If a private party retains a legal right-of-way for access within the A.T. corridor, or if a land-managing partner uses an access road for a purpose not in conflict with the A.T., gates are the most effective means of selective access control, although signs also may discourage some potential vehicle operators.

Problems also may arise where there is unrestricted access onto A.T. corridor lands from public highways and roads that are maintained by state highway departments or local road and bridge departments. The state highway department official or county road supervisor will usually be willing to look at an access control problem but may not be in a position to take corrective action alone.

Existing Policy

**ATC Policy**—ATC consistently has advocated closure of roads on A.T. lands whenever and wherever possible. Existing legal rights of access must be recognized, and close coordination with a land-managing agency partner is a prerequisite to any action. Counties, boroughs, and towns often have jurisdiction over roads and a formal decision under the appropriate authority may be required before a road may be closed by ATC and the Trail club.

ATC opposes the use of any kind of cable closing. Cable closings are exceptionally dangerous and have been the basis for liability claims and lawsuits.

**NPS Policy**—The National Park Service has regulations in force that prohibit the use of motorized vehicles on the Appalachian Trail. In general, the National Park Service is supportive of all road closures, provided valid existing rights are recognized.

Considerations for Planning

**Inventory**—The road inventory described in Chapter 4 (F) is sufficient. The Trail club should review the inventory and identify problem areas associated with roads and roads that need to be closed. A detailed site map may be necessary to identify “hot spots” where many points of access exist.

**Setting Trail Club Policy**—A Trail club policy for road closures and access control should be focused
on two primary objectives: (1) protecting the Appalachian Trail from vehicular access wherever possible; and (2) providing for valid existing rights of access. The policy statement should recognize the importance of coordination with land-managing agency partners, local jurisdictions, and adjacent landowners.

**Action Plan**—For each site identified by the Trail club as an access-control problem, the club should analyze means to control the problem. In some areas, this may be simply a matter of notifying the agency partner. In other areas, the club may need to take the initiative. The following steps should be considered in most situations prior to any action:

1. Does the land-managing agency partner or club have an active, ongoing need for the access road?
2. Are there any existing legal rights of access held by private parties or any existing or past designations of the road as a public road by a local government? (Often an old “town road” is still a public way even though it is infrequently traveled, and it will remain a town road until it is formally abandoned by the town.) Are parties with legal rights willing to agree to restrict access?
3. What is the best method and where is the best location, for constructing an access barrier?
4. Is the closure going to be permanent or only designed to restrict access by the general public?
5. If use of an access road will be restricted by a gate, who will be given keys?
6. Are signs, information programs, or other measures also warranted?
7. Have local law-enforcement and emergency-response personnel been notified?
8. Will an agency partner contribute financial assistance, manpower, equipment, and/or materials?