

## Introduction

Relocations of the Appalachian Trail have resulted in some A.T. sections which are not up to their full potential, and in out-of-date mapping of the Trail. This, in turn, has led to unexpected and unnecessary conflicts with other resources, and confused A.T. hikers. To control this problem, the ATC and the USFS have directed their planning efforts toward achieving a stable, optimal A.T. route, with clear and mutual understanding of relocation and maintenance needs.

The Appalachian Trail Optimal Location Review (OLR) is a process for systematically and objectively determining the best location for the A.T. The OLR will also help to refine the A.T. corridor and set priorities and boundaries for acquisitions for the corridor, coordinate USFS management strategy, identify safety, maintenance, and law enforcement problems, and generate solutions to the various problems identified.

To accomplish these goals, the reviewers must balance the traditional A.T. philosophies and objectives which define the A.T. experience with Trail maintenance and resource protection considerations. This balance will result in an A.T. which will combine challenge and beauty while "lying lightly on the land"—the fulfillment of the A.T. experience.

This booklet outlines the Optimal Location Review process.

## Philosophy

The Goal of the Optimal Location Review is: to achieve the best possible route for the A.T. regardless of land ownership or construction needs, the decision to be based purely upon the desired A.T. experience.

So, go for the best location, particularly for corridor acquisitions, even if it requires a long or uncertain wait. Acquisition for short-term solutions should be avoided. Conditions change, given time, and the best location can eventually be obtained.

The Specific Objectives of the OLR are:

- To locate the A.T. accurately on 7 1/2-minute-series topographic maps;
- To identify accurately the location of all A.T. problem and opportunity areas;
- To explore the alternatives for solutions;
- To select the best alternative to solve each issue;
- To set project priorities; and
- To implement the solutions.

Participants in the Review: Representatives from the Club, USFS District, and ATC Field Office with responsibility for the Trail section reviewed should be on the OLR Team.

Criteria Used to Identify and Evaluate Problem and Opportunity Areas: The ATC Stewardship Manual, *Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance*, provides a uniform guideline for Appalachian Trail designers allowing for creativity when addressing different localities and situations. The Stewardship Manual and A.T. Comprehensive Plan should continue to provide the standard for the Trail. Trail design is a complex combination of physical realities, art, standards, philosophy and psychology. It cannot be overemphasized that a good working knowledge of the information in the Stewardship Manual is necessary to make the decisions involved in the OLR.

New acquisitions for protection of the Appalachian Trail should be designed to meet the following minimum standard:

The desirable minimum width for the Appalachian Trail Corridor is 1,000 feet, *i.e.*, 500 feet on either side of the Trail. Occasionally, this width may be less where intervening topography provides an adequate buffer. A corridor greater than 1,000 feet wide may be necessary in some areas to protect significant scenic, natural, or historical areas along the A.T.

### OLR Procedure

1. Decide on the OLR Team.
2. Team members all read the ATC Stewardship Manual, *Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance* and the A.T. corridor definition (page of this booklet).
3. Reach common understanding of recreation and resource objectives for the A.T.
4. Review and map the current A.T. route.
5. Check the USFS A.T. Acquisition Inventory and search records for complaints, plans, *etc.*
6. Solicit input from all club members, adjacent clubs, and agency personnel.
7. In the office:
  - a. Decide on total section to be reviewed, *i.e.*, that section in common to all team partners.
  - b. Divide total section into sub-sections, each reviewable in one day;
  - c. Examine sub-sections for obvious problems;
  - d. Discuss known problems not obvious on maps;
  - e. Establish priorities within sections, starting with the sub-section with the most critical opportunity or problem, and plan on conducting field work in the same order.
8. Obtain information, maps, and equipment needed for the field trip.
9. In the field:
  - a. OLR Team members review and analyze sub-sections in an unbiased manner—"question everything;"
  - b. Carefully check present A.T. location, map opportunity and problem areas, and alternatives considered;
  - c. Record data about the present route, opportunity and problem areas, and alternatives needed for documentation of decisions;
  - d. Analyze alternatives selected, and agree on the best solution; and,
  - e. Set OLR Team priority for each issue.
10. Document findings using form provided and circulate to appropriate parties for review. (Revise drafts as necessary.)
11. OLR Team, Club officers, and District Rangers meet to:



- set overall project priorities;
- plan project budgets to implement solutions; and
- decide who will do which project.

12. Implement the solutions.

**Tips for a Painless, Meaningful, Efficient OLR**

1. The entire length of the A.T. needs to be reviewed. The purpose of the team approach is to provide various perspectives during the issue analysis. A section considered "pat" may well offer some surprise opportunity or problem areas.
2. The OLR Team members need to be involved from the beginning to the end of the process to avoid confusion and encourage efficiency.
3. The Club OLR Team members' historical knowledge of the Trail is invaluable because of USFS personnel turnover. Remember also to consult the A.T. section maintainer! USFS OLR Team members should be thoroughly grounded in multiple-resource management. They will be able to share knowledge that may prevent future conflicts between the Trail and other resources.
4. The OLR Team members, after reading the Stewardship Manual, should reach a common understanding of what is meant by resource damage, safety hazards, and opportunities for enhancement of the Trail.
5. The length of the sub-sections to be done in one day should be moderate. Do not underestimate the amount of field time necessary to do a thorough job. Corner location and orientation in the field can sometimes be very time consuming. Exploring alternatives often involves bushwacking. Experience with the process will allow revisions to the schedule.
6. When land acquisition is to be considered, the responsible agency decision maker needs to see the situation on the ground.
7. Routine maintenance is not the subject of this review. However, chronic maintenance problems may indicate the need for a relocation and should be examined.
8. Be sure you have all the maps, land line information, aerial photographs, and equipment (compass, altimeter, camera, flagging, measuring tape, clinometer, and backpack to carry it all) you need before going into the field. This can save two or three trips later.
9. Be sure the sections most in need of review are done first. USFS funds are limited.
10. The OLR should also be considered as an opportunity to conduct various other inventories.
11. The initial office meetings are important to identify obvious issue areas like proximity to private land, roads, leasing applications, power lines,

developments, *etc.* Be careful not to overlook issues which do not appear to be "major." The more carefully you do this initial stage, the more smoothly the review will go.

12. To streamline the process and maximize the number of sub-sections done before USFS money runs out, clubs can:
  - a. accurately map their A.T. section in advance\*,
  - b. divide their A.T. section into sub-sections to be reviewed in one day; and,
  - c. begin preliminary opportunity and problem identification.

(\*Mapping workshops can be arranged to learn this skill.)

### **Opportunity Examples**

Vistas; Balds; Meadows; Unusual topographic and geological features; Waterfalls; and other scenic or historical features which could be reached through an A.T. reroute or side trail are some examples of opportunities for enhancement of the A.T. which should be considered during the OLR.

### **Problem Examples**

Here are some examples of problems resulting in unacceptable or inferior trail which need to be considered during the OLR:

- A pronounced lack of traditional recreation qualities;
- Road walking, particularly if extensive in length;
- Incompatible use such as ORV and horses;
- Existing or potential residential or commercial development near the Trail, or other impact;
- Resource damage, *e.g.*, erosion and Trail widening;
- Chronic, recurring maintenance demands or problems;
- Hazards to the public;
- Arbitrary or circuitous routing;
- A.T. routing across private property; and
- Excessive steepness resulting in hazardous footing or extreme maintenance problems.

### **Setting Priorities**

Opportunities and problems will generally fall into two categories:

1. Issues involving land ownership (A.T. on private land, A.T. on government line, corridor inadequate; or,
2. Issues involving safety, resource damage, resource conflicts, and/or aesthetics.

Some in category two may move to category one if a substantial relocation is necessary. At this point in the Trail protection program (1986), problems in category one are important because of funding limits.

Set project (issue) priorities as follows:

Critical: Continuity of the A.T is threatened or major safety hazards exist. Special



appropriations or assistance from the Trust for Appalachian Trail Lands are needed immediately.

High: Projects should be initiated through normal channels with high priority.

Medium: Projects should be initiated through normal channels but evaluated in light of other needs.

Low: Projects should be listed and pursued on a routine basis. Acquisitions should involve willing sellers only.

Study: An opportunity or problem has been identified, but the best solution is not obvious and time is available for careful consideration of the options.

### **Documentation of OLR Findings**

It is very important for documentation to be THOROUGH and EASILY UNDERSTOOD. After priorities have been set, the information may not be used for several years and the OLR Team members may not be available to clarify uncertainties. Therefore, documentation of the OLR is a very important portion of the process. Careful documentation will serve as the basis for new land acquisition justifications, relocation environmental assessments, and will reduce the likelihood of rehashing the same problems in the future.

The review of each sub-section should result in a 7 1/2-minute-series topographic map accurately showing the A.T.'s location, the location of each opportunity or problem area, and, where feasible, the alternatives considered for solution of the issue. (A standard set of OLR map symbols is reproduced inside the back cover of this booklet.) Be sure to identify the map name on the map (if only using part) and on the OLR form.

Each map should be accompanied by the appropriate OLR documentation form. (A standard form is included with this booklet.) A separate form for each issue, numbered and keyed to the map, should include a clear description of why a problem area is unacceptable or an opportunity is desirable (including appropriate measurements of extent of the issue, grades, photographs if helpful, *etc.*). It should also include a discussion of the pros and cons of each alternative considered for solution of the issue, the decision reached, and the signatures of the appropriate Club officer and District Ranger.

The USFS District will keep on file a listing of projects (issues) by priority for submission into the budget process for funding.

A copy of the OLR sub-section write-ups and maps (the documentation) should be filed with the Club, the USFS District and Forest Lands or Recreation staff, the ATC Field Office, and ATC headquarters.