



2020 All-Levels Volunteer Survey

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Executive Summary

Administered between March and June 2020 through A.T. clubs, the survey had 738 respondents with 562 completions. Responses came from volunteers of 30 A.T. maintaining clubs. The response ratio for each club will determine the accuracy of club-level data. However, for A.T. volunteer analysis trailwide, ATC is 85% confident (+/- 3%) that the results accurately represent the total number of A.T. volunteers annually, making this the most comprehensive survey of A.T. volunteer skills ever conducted. In the following analysis ATC only looked at fully completed survey responses.

Eight percent (80%) of respondents are current section maintainers. Respecting that some respondents hold multiple roles, volunteer Leaders, both field and organizational, made up 35% of respondents. Roughly 60% of the most prominent volunteer cross section, section maintainers, do not hold any other role.

Volunteer Capacity

Steady growth in new volunteers for section maintenance, advanced trail work, certified sawyers, and organizational leadership suggests consistency in recruitment and training in these arenas. A heavy concentration of volunteers in the arena of work trip leadership for more than 15 years demonstrates there may be need for training and development now or in the near future to plan for leadership succession. Based on departure rates of volunteers in all activity categories and the additions of volunteers in those roles in the same periods of time, it appears that volunteer recruitment is sufficient to backfill position departures. However, because this survey wasn't expressly geared to past volunteers, it is difficult to know if the ratio of departures captured for this survey is complete.

Most volunteers feel that their club could use a few more volunteers to support the responsibilities their club undertakes for the A.T. People in volunteer leadership roles are twice as likely than all volunteers to say that more leadership level volunteers are needed for the work the club undertakes for the A.T.

Volunteer Organization

In many ways, the survey validated what A.T. managers have long known: that section maintainers, working independently or as a couple, are essential to sustaining the Trail. Sixty-five percent (65%) of section maintainers get into the field 3 to 6 times a year, and almost 20% get out twice per month. While many (60%) maintainers also participate in club routine maintenance workdays twice a year, there are 20% of section maintainers who only ever work independently and do not participate in club work days.

Volunteer Organization *continued*

Related to club-organized workdays, almost ten percent (10%) of volunteers only go out with regular work trips and do not work independently. These folks likely thrive on the social dynamics as much as the work accomplished. Perhaps as profound are the 8% of volunteers who go out weekly on club-led work trips. Given that not all clubs offer weekly work trip opportunities, the percentage of volunteers working weekly is likely much higher for clubs that offer this option where the social capital is of the familiar relationships is stock in showing up regularly.

Almost 50% of volunteers do not perform advanced trail work. A fifth (20%) of volunteers perform trail work about once a year as part of a trail crew, while people trained as field leaders or with advanced trail skills do this work more frequently.

Volunteer Training

When asked how training is tracked, volunteers provided an array of responses. This may be because each club handles it differently, but if responses and understanding also vary within clubs, a central approach to tracking training could be of mutual benefit to all A.T. partners.

Observed in the confidence scales, ATC and A.T. partners could readily equip volunteers with enhanced training in the following skills with a high proportion of volunteers are “just getting started” or “somewhat familiar” so that they can operate confidently independently. Most obvious is boosting awareness of sensitive plant populations and appropriate management for routine maintenance volunteers, as well as removing graffiti.

The survey aimed to assess gaps in confidence and skills that should be addressed. In particular, between 30% and 50% of respondents at all confidence levels could improve understanding and practice of basic trail maintenance functions including:

- annual vegetation clearing,
- resetting the backslope of sidehill trail tread, and
- care and installation of rolling grade dips when conditions for dips allow.

In assessing sustainable approaches for mitigating a muddy trail section on a ridge in flat terrain where trail-widening is observed from hikers are trying to keep their shoes dry and out of the mud, the most prevalent responses include getting water off the trail and stepping stones, as a preferred long-term solution.

When asked, most volunteers working on routine trail and facility maintenance, say they were absolutely (20%) prepared or mostly prepared (52%) for their volunteer activities. Just 8% of those same kinds of volunteers said they were not at all, or not really prepared, and another 20% said they were “kind of” prepared.

Volunteer Training *continued*

This mirrors the response we received when asked about improvements that could be made to volunteers' experience. More than a fifth indicated that additional training would be an improvement.

Most training is being delivered by volunteers to volunteers, and most of that training occurs on the job. Because of this, and because as many as 20% of all volunteers work independently, A.T. partners need to assure adequate training is offered and documented.

Of expert level volunteers, about 20% indicate a willingness to help instruct or facilitate future training opportunities, so that this model of peer-led learning continues.

Reported Skills Training of A.T. Volunteers

Skill	% Trained in Skill	Best Training	2nd Best Training	3rd Best Training
Routine Maintenance	92%	OTJ with Supervisor or on Trail Crew	Club Workshop	USFS/NPS
Facility Maintenance	84%	OTJ with Supervisor or on Trail Crew	I have never received training	
New Trail Tread	47%	OTJ with Supervisor	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	ATC / ATC Trail Crew
Check-Steps / Check-Dams	45%	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	OTJ with Supervisor	Club Workshop
Raised Treadway	43%	TIE: OTJ with Supervisor; OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	Club Workshop	
Intro to Stonework	42%	OTJ with Supervisor	ATC / ATC Trail Crew	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance
Cribbing/Retaining Wall	39%	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	OTJ with Supervisor	ATC Trail Crew
Repair Tools	39%	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	Other	OTJ with Supervisor
Re-naturalize Social Trail and User-Created Campsites	36%	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	OTJ with Supervisor	Club Workshop
Sign Posts / Kiosks	35%	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	OTJ with Supervisor	Books
Staircases, Ladders, Styles	30%	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	OTJ with Supervisor	Other
Rigging	30%	OTJ with Supervisor	Club Workshop	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance
Puncheon	28%	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	OTJ with Supervisor	Other
Stonework, Advanced	28%	TIE: OTJ with Supervisor; OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	ATC / ATC Trail Crew	Club Workshop
Boardwalk	26%	OTJ with Supervisor	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance	Other
Mechanized Equipment	16%	Other	OTJ with Supervisor	OTJ with Experienced Volunteer, Friend, Acquaintance

OTJ: On the Job

Volunteer Engagement

Most volunteers feel that their club could use a few more volunteers to support the responsibilities their club undertakes for the A.T. People in volunteer leadership roles are twice as likely than all volunteers to say that more leadership level volunteers are needed for the work the club undertakes for the A.T.

Volunteers say their experienced could best be improved by:

- 1) Training (22%)
- 2) Club Organization and club communications structural improvements (20%)
- 3) Better elevating the concept of volunteerism and making it a priority internally in our organizations, and externally to the broader public (18%)

Universally, people volunteer because they like being outside and in nature. Cascading from that, volunteers also say they do it because they enjoy the work, the sense of accomplishment they feel for what they do, and they like giving back to the Trail.

When current volunteers think of barriers to volunteerism, the most prominent themes are that other people have too many obligations to take on the time commitment of volunteering in support of the A.T. Thus, they exclude the possibility of these people as volunteers at all.

However, among folks who are motivated and may have time, potential transformational opportunities to raise the profile of A.T. volunteering are also uncovered in survey responses. Observations around [a lack of] awareness (40%) and training toward confidence, described as lacking experience or skill, (40%) acknowledge the need for invitations and initiation to new people. This could come expressly through specific on-boarding, training opportunities that both promote the organization's work and equips people with skills to integrate more readily into roles. Keenly, volunteers acknowledge that access barriers (14%) may need to be identified and addressed to realize full potential in volunteer engagement in the A.T. project.

Recommendations

- Offer available trainings to meet interest and identified need.
- Ensure A.T. maintenance volunteers are trained to consistent minimum standards going forward.

Examine potential for enrichment sessions in the near-term to ensure volunteers know the purpose and value of clearing annual growth on the uphill side of the Trail particularly if available field time is limited, and develop skill and confidence in resetting sidehill backslope.

- Assess central method for tracking A.T. volunteer training.
- Elevate awareness of A.T. volunteerism through promotion and “intro to” training events.

Explore club orientation events that provide entry level skills as a component of recruitment.

- Cross-post club training events among A.T. volunteer network.
- Retain mechanisms for in-field skill development through volunteer-led instruction.