



Appalachian Trail Management Policy

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| Title: Food Storage Policy | | |
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Introductory Remarks Applicable to All Appalachian Trail Conservancy Policies

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a §501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works closely with Appalachian Trail volunteer maintaining clubs (“Clubs”) and other public and private partners to ensure the protection and stewardship of the natural, cultural, and experiential resources of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (known as ANST, A.T., or “the Trail”). Approximately fifty federal, state, or other public agencies have authority or jurisdiction over lands and resources within the protected A.T. corridor. ATC has a central management role by virtue of its Cooperative Agreement with the USDI National Park Service and its close working partnership with the USDA Forest Service and other agencies. ATC’s mission is: “To protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.”

ATC’s Trail management and conservation policies are meant to provide guidance for (a) dissemination to the public; (b) use and implementation by the ATC and the Clubs; and (c) recommendations for land-managing and other agencies. It is the agencies who work within their defined procedures to propose, administer, and enforce public policy. ATC policies are recommendations developed to support appropriate, coordinated Trail wide management.

Brief Policy Overview

ATC advocates strongly that backpackers carrying food use an approved food storage container along the entire Appalachian Trail. ATC strongly discourages the use of the “food hang” to secure food. ATC encourages the land managers to adopt policies either strongly encouraging or requiring backpackers to carry an approved food storage container and to prohibit the use of the “food hang.”

Statement of Policy

Background

In recent years, bears have returned to habitats along the A.T. corridor where humans had formerly eradicated them. For this and other reasons, ATC, land managers and the Clubs are receiving an increasing number of reports of negative encounters between hikers and wildlife, typically black bears. Most of these are related to bears attempting to access hikers’ food. In many cases, bears have been able to gain access to hikers’ food secured using a food hang. Bears are highly intelligent and adaptable creatures, and some have figured out how to defeat even fully compliant food hangs.

These occurrences have resulted in negative consequences for both bears and human hikers. Although they are naturally afraid of humans, black bears can lose this fear as they begin to associate human scents with the reward of food. As they become habituated to human food

sources and become a nuisance, they may need to be trapped and moved by game protection officials and in some extreme cases even killed. Bears who access human food often scatter the food and packaging widely, requiring the Clubs to devote time to cleaning up the litter. In extreme (and so far, rare) cases, a bear can injure a hiker. Further, the complete loss of food, and possibly the destruction of a tent or other gear, can create a hike-ending situation for a hiker. Sometimes, the best solution available is to close the site or A.T. section to overnight use.

Current Status

Traditionally, five methods have been used on the A.T. to deter bears and other wild creatures from getting to backpackers' food. Three are typically provided by the land manager or maintainer: Cable Systems, Metal Poles with Arms and Bearproof Metal Boxes. The final two, Bear Resistant Containers (Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee [IGBC] approved or similar) and food hangs (sometimes called rope hangs) are typically carried by the backpacker. Each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages. These are detailed in the Appendix.

Due to extensive work by land managers and the Clubs, one of the first three methods has been installed at approximately 40% of A.T. designated overnight sites. It may be possible to install one of these methods at some more sites, but various logistical concerns mean that not many more can be installed. This means that for backpackers using other approved sites, as well as those using these sites at peak times when the storage facilities are full, broken, etc., the only alternatives for food storage are the food hang or an approved bear resistant container.

The classic food hang means a bag containing food and other consumables suspended from a tree branch at least 12 feet above the ground, 6 feet below the tree branch and 6 feet from the tree trunk. Experience on the Trail has shown the food hang to be an unsatisfactory method of securing food. First, it is quite difficult to execute a food hang properly. At many locations it can be difficult to find a satisfactory tree or other structure to use. Many backpackers lack the skill, knowledge, or patience to execute a proper food hang. Secondly, bears are highly intelligent and adaptable creatures, and some have figured out how to defeat a fully compliant food hang. See the Additional Resources for documentation of these findings.

These realities mean that using an approved bear resistant container is the best food storage option that will provide backpackers maximum protection for their food, maximum flexibility to use in areas where other storage options are unavailable, and maximum protection against bears becoming habituated to human food.

Prior to this Policy, ATC has recommended on several communication channels that all A.T. hikers use an approved bear resistant container for overnight food storage anywhere on the Trail. This has included instructions on how to prepare to hike the trail, a video on how to store food properly and a 2016 Advisory to Appalachian Trail Clubs on Animal-Deterrent Food Storage Systems. ATC believes that the time has come to promulgate a formal policy on Food Storage.

IGBC Certified Bear-Resistant Containers

ATC recommends that the list of certified bear-resistant containers promulgated by the IGBC be used to determine products suitable for use on the A.T.¹ While the list was developed with grizzly bears in mind and there are no grizzly bears on the A.T., ATC believes that the products on the list are equally suitable for preventing access by black bears. ATC does not believe it is necessary or would be productive at this time to develop a separate list for black bears on the

A.T. However, ATC reserves the option to add to, delete or otherwise modify the IGBC list for use on the A.T. if it can be shown there is good reason to do so.

It is important to point out that these containers are *bear-resistant*, and not bear-proof. As some of the materials in the Additional Resources point out, no food storage system is truly bear-proof. However, when properly used, they are much more likely to resist attempts by determined bears and other wildlife than the food hang. So, on balance, eliminating the food hang on the A.T. as an acceptable method of securing food will result in fewer bears becoming habituated to human food and a safer backpacking experience for humans.

Developing Container Rental Options

Some approved bear-resistant containers are expensive to purchase. One cheaper alternative to purchase is renting a container. An additional benefit is educating A.T. backpackers about the advantages of carrying a bear-resistant container and the proper ways to use them. Successful rental programs have been available for many years on western U.S. trails where bear-resistant containers are required.² In addition, several commercial outfitters will rent bear-resistant containers. ATC wishes to encourage the development of container rental programs in and near the A.T.

ATC Policy

- ATC strongly recommends backpackers and others who camp overnight on the Appalachian Trail use an approved food storage method to store their food and other consumables that will be attractive to bears. Acceptable options for hiker food storage include the following land-manager provided systems available at some camping sites: cable systems, metal pole with arms and bearproof metal boxes; and personal bear-resistant containers carried by the backpacker.
- ATC strongly recommends backpackers and others who camp overnight on the Appalachian Trail carry their food in a bear-resistant container on the entire Appalachian Trail. This allows for flexibility in cases where another food storage method is unavailable.
- ATC adopts the list of certified bear-resistant containers promulgated by the IGBC as products suitable for use on the A.T. ATC reserves the option to add to, delete or otherwise modify the IGBC list for use on the A.T. if it can be shown there is good reason to do so.
- ATC will encourage the development of bear-resistant container rental or loaner programs on or near the A.T. with land managers, the Clubs, and other interested parties.
- ATC will develop programs to educate backpackers and other users of the A.T. on the benefits of using bear-resistant containers, including partnerships with land managers, the Clubs, and other interested parties.
- ATC continues to request that all users of the A.T. report all encounters with bears along the Trail, using this form: <https://appalachiantrail.org/report-bear>

Note: This Policy replaces and supersedes an Advisory to Appalachian Trail Clubs on Animal Deterrent Food Storage Systems dated May 13, 2016.

¹ IGBC was formed in 1983 by representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Geological Survey, and representatives of the state wildlife agencies of Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming.

² These include Olympic, Rocky Mountain, Sequoia, and Yosemite National Parks.

Appendix

1. Bear Deterrent Food Storage Methods for the Backcountry

| Method | Advantages | Disadvantages | Notes |
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| Land Manager Provided | | | |
| Cable Systems | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminates extensive tree damage and trampling associated with campers putting up their own food hangs. • If present, a much larger proportion of campers will hang their food and do so far more successfully than if they set up their own hangs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be expensive to install and maintain. • May break over time (the more complex they are the more frequently they break). • Trampling damage/erosion under the cable system can be extensive. • Cables/lines can get tangled. • Difficult to access components for maintenance and repair. • Generally not available between shelter sites. | May delay bears, but rodents and raccoons often access food with these systems. |
| Metal Pole with Arms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somewhat effective. • Requires little subsequent maintenance. • Relatively easy for campers to use. • Limits trampling impact to confined area. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate cost and installation effort. • Habituated bears and other wildlife may learn to climb them. • Requires upper body strength to use. • May be difficult for campers to retrieve food. • Noise disturbance due to clanging poles and chains. • Generally not available between shelter sites. | <p>Considered a delaying tactic by some land managers.</p> <p>“Unnatural” appearance in backcountry setting.</p> |
| Bearproof Metal Boxes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly effective from bears, rodents, and other wildlife. • Easy to use. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher up-front cost. • Heavy, bulky to transport. Impractical to install in remote locations. | <p>Highly effective method if used properly.</p> <p>Informational signs may dissuade trash or</p> |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentrates trampling impact to confined area. • Low maintenance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campers may leave trash and unwanted food in them. • May require regular trash monitoring by managers. • Capacity is finite. • Generally not available between shelter sites. | <p>discarded food from being left in them.</p> <p>“Unnatural” appearance in backcountry setting.</p> |
| Visitor Provided | | | |
| Food Hang (a.k.a. rope hang) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No manager-provided facilities are needed. • Lightweight. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campers must have knowledge, skills, and equipment to effectively use these. • Requires both time to do them correctly and the availability of appropriately sized and shaped trees (may be unavailable). • This method can lead to rope damage to trees and ground cover trampling. • In documented cases, bears have defeated even a “perfect” food hang. | <p>Habituated bears in several locations have learned how to access campers’ hung food (chewing through lines, pulling from above, sows sending cubs up tree or on shoulders).</p> <p>Use currently prohibited on several western trails and a few areas of the A.T.</p> <p>ATC 2021 Policy advocates for eliminating the food hang on the entire A.T.</p> |
| Bear Resistant Containers (IGBC approved or similar) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy, quick, convenient. • Can be used and accessed in any location, including between shelters. • Effective for all animals. • Can double as seat, etc. • No cost to managers if visitors provide their own. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be expensive to purchase (although less expensive options exist) • Bulky/heavier to carry. • May be difficult to fit all food and consumables into them, depending on number of days of food. | <p>Highly effective method if used properly.</p> <p>Requires extensive education and outreach effort by managers.</p> <p>Camper compliance varies.</p> <p>Compliance increases if required.</p> <p>Rental programs have been successful.</p> |

2. Additional Resources

- Article on bears returning to the A.T. corridor - <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/150626-black-bears-animals-science-nation-conservation>
- IGBC list of approved bear-resistant containers - <https://igbconline.org/programs/bear-resistant-products/>
- Notice of bear-resistant container requirement in Chattahoochee–Oconee National Forest in Georgia - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/conf/alerts-notices/?cid=stelprd3830815>
- Pilot bear-resistant container loaner program by the ATC in Georgia - <https://appalachiantrail.org/explore/plan-and-prepare/bear-canister-lending-program/>
- Pilot bear-resistant container loaner program by Green Mountain Club in Vermont - <https://www.greenmountainclub.org/education/bear-canisters/>
- ATC's Bear Canister Lending Program for the A.T. in Georgia - <https://appalachiantrail.org/explore/plan-and-prepare/bear-canister-lending-program/>
- Ineffective & outdated: Six reasons to not hang a bear bag - <https://andrewskurka.com/argument-against-hanging-bear-bag/>
- How Bear Canisters Fail - <https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-gear/hiking-gear/not-bear-or-idiot-proof-documented-canister-failures/>