

ATC conservation and Trail Management Policy Organized Group Use

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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 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 Trailwide management.

Overview

ATC encourages and endorses most responsible organized use of the Trail by groups. ATC strongly encourages certain requirements and restrictions on such use, to ensure a positive experience for all Trail users and to reduce environmental impacts. Races, competitive events, and fundraisers are generally not permitted, due to their significant negative impacts on other users and the Trail itself.

Policy

“Organized group use” is defined as recreation use sponsored by a nonprofit organization, business, or government agency. Anticipating shifting demographics in the United States and the growing need to ensure the relevancy of the Trail for visitors of all ages and backgrounds, ATC supports carefully managed organized group uses that do not result in significant adverse effects either to Trail resources or the Trail experience. Such carefully managed group uses (a) may accommodate new users, (b) assure resource protection, (c) provide recreation opportunities for both existing and potential users, and (d) protect the opportunity for the traditional “Trail experience” as described in the [Policy on the A.T. Experience and Non-Hiking Recreational Uses of Trail Lands](#).

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Benefits of Organized Group Use

Organized group use, whether for profit or not-for-profit, can have many benefits including promoting safe, responsible use of the Trail and advancing “Leave No Trace” practices, offering enriched appreciation of the outdoors through interpretation of the area’s natural and cultural history, educating youth, promoting development of a conservation ethic through direct contact with wild-land settings, and helping people connect with nature and develop a sense of their own roles and responsibilities within the larger community of life. Other potential benefits include assistance with monitoring Trail conditions, reporting illegal activity, and performing other essential A.T. management services such as trail maintenance, campsite restoration, and contributing to the economies of rural areas and A.T. Communities™.

Challenges Related to Organized Group Use

Poorly managed organized group use on the A.T. can disproportionately impact natural and cultural resources as well as the Trail experience for all hikers—especially along narrow, remote, or difficult sections of the Trail where hiker densities are relatively low. Impacts from group use can be particularly high at campsites and shelters. Since organized group use often may be serial—that is, a group sponsor might field multiple outings over the course of a season

(*e.g.*, weekly summer camp trips)—mistakes are potentially repeated at the same sites time after time.

Requirements for Organized Group Use

A voluntary trip-notification program and, where required, an agency-established permit, should be established for organized groups of 6 or more on overnight visits, and 15 or more on day visits. Consideration of social and natural resource carrying capacities should be made before a permit is issued.

Groups of 6 or more, whether “organized” or not, are strongly encouraged to use group campsites where they exist. Such groups are also strongly urged to register their event using atcamp.org Land-managing agencies, the ATC and A.T. clubs should work toward designating appropriate locations for group camping for groups of 6 or more. To avoid groups “taking over” the limited space available at shelters, any group of 6 or more should plan to camp in tents they carry and within existing tent sites, rather than staying in shelters.

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Races, Competitive Events, Fundraising Events, Emergency Services Training Events, and other Special Event Group Activities

These activities interrupt the normal use of the Trail, and/or cause significant adverse effects to natural, cultural, and experiential resources. To prevent those interruptions and adverse effects, these activities should be prohibited except:

- (1) at a time, location, and manner specifically allowed in law; or
- (2) with concurrence of the ATC and the relevant land-managing agencies, when an activity is an authorized administrative use of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (ANST); or
- (3) when the relevant land-managing agency has issued a valid permit or written agreement authorizing the activity and the activity both supports the purposes of the ANST and will be conducted in a manner such that it does not cause significant adverse effects to the Trail's natural, cultural, or experiential resources.

Additionally, while ATC recognizes that many other organizations are interested in fundraising activities unrelated to the administration of the Appalachian Trail, fundraising of this sort should not occur within the boundaries of the Trail corridor or the Trail management area.

Specific Directions for Special Events and Large Group Use

- Leaders of group events should consider how to best accommodate groups by reducing group size or by other means that would allow use to take place while protecting Trail values.
- Groups spending one or more nights on the Trail should not exceed a total of 10 at any one overnight-use area, and day-use groups should not exceed 25 members at any one location, unless clubs and land-managers designate otherwise in their local-management plans.
- Group leaders are strongly urged to register their event using atcamp.org
- Shelters along the Appalachian Trail normally provide space for no more than 6 to 12 individuals and are not intended for use by groups. As discussed previously, any group of 6 or more should plan to camp in tents they carry and within existing tent sites, rather than in shelters.
- Trail clubs and agency partners should consider designating or constructing campsites

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specifically for use by groups of 10 or less in or near areas where group overnight use at Trail shelters has caused resource damage or resulted in frequent complaints from other Trail users.

- ATC and its member clubs should encourage organizations that simultaneously deploy multiple groups on the Trail (such as summer camps and college outing clubs) to consider their impact on the Trail and other users of the Trail. ATC, Trail clubs, and agencies should assist these organizations in developing alternatives that meet their organizational goals, while preserving the Trail experience for other users.
- Clubs and agencies should develop education and outreach programs to inform users of this policy and to encourage peer influence and voluntary compliance.
- All ATC guidebooks and other publications will be revised as appropriate to be consistent with this Policy.

ATC shall work with clubs and land management agencies to develop procedures to implement this policy.

Note: This Policy incorporates a previously separate Policy on Special Events and Large Group Use

For questions related to this policy please contact the Appalachian Trail Conservancy at www.appalachiantrail.org, or P.O. Box 807, Harpers Ferry, WV, 25425-807.

ATC's mission is to protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.