



ATC Conservation and Trail Management Policy Guidance on Road Closures and Access Control

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.

Overview

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.

Guidance

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

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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 because they are exceptionally dangerous.

Begin by establishing or revisiting and update an inventory of roads:

- utilized by clubs for the direct management access of their section of Trail, including roads on private land, if any.
- Providing unneeded or unwanted access to the Trail, or Trail lands.

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.

Club planning around closures and access should include two primary objectives: (1) protecting the Appalachian Trail from vehicular access wherever possible; and (2) providing for valid existing rights of access.

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:

- Does the land-managing agency partner or club have an active, ongoing need for the access road?
- 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?
- What is the best method and where is the best location, for constructing an access barrier?
- Is the closure going to be permanent or only designed to restrict access by the general public?
- If use of an access road will be restricted by a gate, who will be given keys?
- Are signs, information programs, or other measures also warranted?
- Have local law-enforcement and emergency-response personnel been notified?
- Will an agency partner contribute financial assistance, manpower, equipment, and/or materials?



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NPS Policy—The National Park Service has regulations in force that prohibit the use of motorized vehicles on the Appalachian Trail.

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.

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