Appalachian Trail Conservancy

ATC Conservation and Trail Management Policy
Visitor Use Management

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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

A Visitor Use Management Policy is needed to manage the increasingly heavy use of the Trail and to reduce the degradation of the physical and experiential resources of the Trail. ATC's policy is to collaborate with land managing partners and A.T. Clubs to balance resource protection with reasonable access through use of the IVUMC VUM framework for planning. With ATC as the lead, these partners will collaborate to manage the Trail resource in a way that will carry out the applicable legislation and other foundation documents, remediate damage from overuse, prevent future overuse and manage visitor behavior.

Background

Section 1: Need for an A.T. Visitor-Use Management Policy

Visitor use on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (A.T. or Trail) is steadily increasing. In some locations, increasingly heavy use has significantly degraded the desired A.T. condition—i.e., the sum of the physical and experiential resources of the Trail.

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Section 2: Principles/Underlying Values Regarding Visitor-Use Management

The Appalachian Trail is an iconic public recreational resource open to visitors for travel on foot. The intent of an A.T. Visitor-Use Management policy is to preserve the desired A.T. condition, maintaining high-quality visitor experiences and protecting natural, cultural, and infrastructure resources within the corridor of A.T.-managed lands, on the Trail, and at overnight and day-use recreation sites. Key management considerations drawn from a variety of legislative, agency, and Conservancy documents and policies[1] include:

- The A.T. is to be managed as a footpath in as simple a condition as possible, providing an opportunity for primitive recreation, utilizing a minimum level of development to protect Trail resources;
- The A.T. links a wide variety of habitats and provides a natural and cultural setting to allow visitors an opportunity to connect directly with the natural world as part of a journey on foot, experiencing the Trail by their own unaided efforts;
- Management of visitor use will reflect an awareness of the unique needs of long distance hikers, while maintaining the Trail for hikers of all distances;
- Hiker regulations should be restricted to the extent reasonably necessary to protect the physical Trail and associated amenities, natural and cultural resources, the experience and enjoyment of Trail users, and the legally mandated interests of land-managing partners;
- Management actions should not unnecessarily limit opportunities for challenging recreation and self-reliance;
- Management actions will discourage activities that would degrade the A.T.'s physical, natural, and cultural resources or social values, including use by groups or organizations involved in promotion, sponsorship, or participation in spectator events or competitive activities, or by organized groups that by their size or commercial interest generate use that is inconsistent with the concept of a simple footpath; and,
- Management actions should take into consideration the interests of local communities, the diverse cultural and historic heritage of regions surrounding the Trail, and the wide variety of ways visitors experience the Trail.

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[1] Appalachian National Scenic Trail–Comprehensive Plan (1981), Appalachian Trail Conservancy Five-Year Strategic Plan (2014), Appalachian National Scenic Trail—Resource Management Plan (2008), "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning" (B. MacKaye, 1921), 1968 National Trails Systems Act (as amended, 1978, 1983), Appalachian Trail Management Principles (1977), NPS Director's Order #45– National Trails System, Foundation Document—Appalachian National Scenic Trail (2015)

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Public engagement through methods described in the Interagency Visitor Use Management Framework (IVUM) summarized in Section 4 below will be integral to any visitor-use decisions that impact public access and/or use of the Trail and its facilities.

Responses to visitor-use challenges will vary with each location and each specific issue. Tools and strategies to address those challenges will be evaluated through the lens of the principles and underlying values noted here. The outcome is intended to achieve a desired A.T. condition at locations where there may be undesirable impacts due to visitor use. Through the adaptive management process outlined below, specific management actions can be considered and implemented to attain these desired conditions.

Section 3: Primary strategies to manage visitor use include the following general principles:

- **Distribute use across time and space**
  - Concentrate use on sustainable, expansion-resistant trails and campsites to limit the total size of impacted areas.
  - Disperse use in areas where there are sustainable, durable surfaces, to reduce lasting impact.
  - Close and rehabilitate locations that permit unsustainable impacts or are no longer required.
  - Redistribute or reduce use during peak hiker season, in high-use locations, or when impact potential is high.
  - Redistribute use, provide viable alternatives, or limit use (e.g., set access-point or travel-zone quotas).

- **Improve resource resistance—increase the durability of trails and campsites**
  - Construct, reconstruct, or maintain impact-resistant trails and campsites; e.g., construct side-hill trails and campsites, install anchored campfire rings.
  - Implement a campsite impact-containment system in compliance with desired condition metrics.

- **Modify Visitor Behavior**

  - Teach and encourage visitors to use Leave No Trace™ skills and ethics for hiking and camping. Educate hikers before they arrive and while they are on the Trail. Develop planning resources and educational materials that can be accessed on line and on the Trail.
  - Encourage visitors to camp out-of-sight or a minimum distance from trails and campsites in areas managed for dispersed camping.

○   Prohibit visitors from participating in certain practices and/or require (or discourage) them to utilize certain equipment when traveling and camping (e.g., safe food/trash storage, woods tools).

Management Action Spectrum: Managing visitor use relies on a spectrum of actions developed specifically for each situation. Actions occur on a gradient intended to achieve the desired balance of protecting the resource and maintaining the desired visitor experience, while placing the least constraints on the individual hiker. Here are examples of several possible strategies, from least to most restrictive:

● **Increase camping capacity**—Redesign existing campsites; construct new campsites that protect natural resources and minimize resource impacts.
● **Increase treadway durability**—Locate Trail route on sustainable grade and surfaces. Install structures as necessary to reduce loss of treadway surface through water erosion and foot traffic.
● **Education**—Provide guidance such as Leave No Trace™ ethics and practices to visitors on the Trail via various methods, including ridgerunner/caretaker presence, Trailhead/parking area ambassador, visitor-use information on Trailhead kiosk boards; at off-Trail locations, such as ATC headquarters, Monson visitors center, regional offices, and at off-Trail backpacking and Leave No Trace courses; and through ATC and Trail Club publications and ATC Leave No Trace hangtags—as well as consistent and broadly distributed on-line information.
● **Redistribute use through persuasion—**Encourage alternative hiking strategies (such as flip-flop itineraries for long-distance hikers, off-season hikes, weekday vs. weekend hikes, off-peak start times, etc.), and communicate those alternatives to the public. Promote voluntary registration and other communications strategies that can provide awareness of crowded conditions on certain dates and locations. Encourage voluntary adherence to IVUM-determined limits of the number of hikers at key locations and times (Katahdin in September, Springer in March, etc.)
● **Implement use restrictions by regulation or policy—**e.g., camping at designated sites only. Prohibit camping at specific locations (distances from shelter and treadway, above treeline, etc.). Require use of approved bear-resistant canisters for food storage. Non-quota registration/permit. Limit group size. [Note that the above are currently in use on various portions of the A.T.
● **Implement access limits by regulation or policy—**e.g., Mandatory user registration. Trailhead quotas. Travel-zone quotas. Mandatory campsite registration. Closure of access points. [Note that those options are in place in various western national parks or federally managed recreation areas.]

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Section 4: Process for Implementation of Visitor-Use Management Tools and Techniques

ATC recognizes the long-standing effectiveness of the Appalachian Trail Cooperative Management System and wishes to coordinate and facilitate visitor-use management activities with all stakeholder agencies, A.T. clubs, and local jurisdictions along the A.T.

Due to the nature of A.T. communication and cooperation, the framework developed by the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council (IVUMC)[2] is the preferred adaptive management method to define, develop, implement, and review actions intended to address visitor-use challenges while respecting the principles and values noted in Section 2 above. The IVUM framework represents best management practices developed by partner agencies across widely varying resources and facilities. The framework includes public comment where necessary, is based on research and field studies, and requires post-implementation reassessment to determine effectiveness.

The IVUM framework consists of four core elements:
- **Build the Foundation**—Understand what needs to be done and how to organize the planning effort. Partners define the desired conditions of Trail segment and/or location.
- **Define Direction**—Describe the conditions to be achieved or maintained and how conditions will be tracked over time with quantifiable metrics that will be revisited in subsequent steps.
- **Identify Strategies**—Decide on strategies to manage visitor use to achieve or maintain desired conditions.
- **Implement, Monitor, Evaluate, and Adjust**—Implement management actions and adjust based on lessons learned.

Framework actions can address visitor management on a variety of scales: a single shelter or camping area, a segment of Trail, or an entire management region (i.e., national forest or management zone).

Policy

It is the policy of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) to collaborate with land-managing partners and A.T. clubs to manage visitor use on the Appalachian Trail in a way that will balance

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[2] IVUMC is a cooperative effort involving six federal agencies (Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Park Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) to develop a shared framework for managing visitor use. Details of the framework can be found here: http://visitorusemanagement.nps.gov/VUM/Framework

resource protection with reasonable access, consistent with promoting and ensuring the desired A.T. experience for Trail visitors while protecting and preserving natural and heritage resources.

ATC is the primary organization for addressing the balance described above. It has a responsibility to take a leadership role in managing visitor use Trailwide. Land managing agencies have responsibility for lands under their jurisdictions, and ATC intends to collaborate with Trail-management partners on A.T. visitor-use management actions using the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council framework.

Strategies to respond to specific visitor-use management challenges will be developed by ATC, Trail clubs, and land-managing partners through the process described in the IVUM framework. The Trail managing partners will consider the principles and values of A.T. management described by, but not limited to, state and federal legislation, foundation documents, local management plans, forest plan standards and guides, state MOUs, and other management strategies and tactics. Visitor-use management strategies should protect and restore the natural, cultural, and developed resources that have been damaged from overuse; achieve or maintain the desired A.T. condition described by existing partnership documents and policies and be developed through the IVUM framework.

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.

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