

Appalachian Trail Overnight Site Facility Assessment Tool Guide

September 2023

Purpose

Changes in surrounding land use, visitor use levels and expectations, improvements in backpacking gear, A.T. Club or agency resources, and environmental and social conditions routinely affect manager decisions about existing overnight use areas and their supporting structures. Some current Appalachian Trail (A.T.) facilities may be significantly divergent from agreed A.T. values and policy that have been developed over past decades. The Overnight Site Assessment Guide process described below collects and compactly presents basic information regarding the location, condition, design, management and use of *existing* overnight facilities for use by trail managers in long range planning efforts

Who Should Use This Tool?

The Facility Assessment Tool may be used by Trail Clubs to assess their existing inventory of overnight facilities, and/or to make a preliminary assessment of an overnight facility or structure that is being considered for significant repairs, replacement, relocation or potential removal.

Background

The background and histories of shelters and other overnight site facilities on the A.T. are as interesting as the current variation in design and use patterns of the more than 260 A.T. overnight sites.

Some of the overnight facilities are [incidentally acquired structures](#) such as backcountry camps that exist today on Trail lands that were acquired through Trail protection efforts over the past 50 years, and were not originally created to support the Appalachian Trail hiking experience as eventually described in the *Comprehensive Plan* and other seminal documents. Others were part of a pre-A.T. trail system and/or were added to a Club's current inventory of overnight facilities without land manager or Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) guidance during the time when the A.T. management partnership was in its early stages. Still others may have been adequately sited and constructed when they were initially built, but access to a site and/or visitor use patterns, activities, and behavior may have changed. Original materials or designs may now result in overly high maintenance costs or are inappropriate for current backcountry settings. Lastly, with increased awareness and focus on natural resource management and protection, and local evaluation of the A.T. Experience, some sites may not be in locations that will ensure the long term protection of nearby sensitive natural resources or resist user-created site expansion.

Shelters, specifically, can play a large role in a Club's identity, history and sense of purpose. No Club wants to have its cherished structures subject to seemingly arbitrary standards, nor would the Trail benefit from a cookie-cutter approach to site design, siting and management. Collaboration by all

Diversity in appearance of the Trail and related facilities...is welcome within established standards.
Comprehensive Plan for the Protection, Management, Development and Use of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail

partners will result in a sensitive and nuanced approach to assess a facility's characteristics in regard to sustainability and suitability as a Trail resource.

Long term maintenance of unsuitable overnight structures perpetuates the retention of inappropriately sited, designed and/or constructed facilities within the overnight site system simply by virtue of their age and custom; and continued maintenance may not be in alignment with current policy, desired visitor use, natural and cultural resource protection, and/or health, life and safety requirements.

Comprehensively Assessing Facilities

Working with ATC and Trail Clubs, APPA has completed a baseline inventory and physical condition assessment of all the associated A.T. contributing facility assets along the Trail--including structures at overnight use areas which may also be used in conjunction with this tool.

ATC's [1995 Policy on Managing the Trail for a Primitive Experience](#) defines and directs managers to provide the desired A.T. visitor experience. While this policy is helpful, it addresses the entire A.T. in a general way. Further, due to changes in surrounding land use, visitor use levels and expectations, improvements in backpacking gear, trail club or agency resources and environmental conditions, existing overnight use areas and their supporting structures may be significantly divergent from agreed A.T. values and policy. Overnight use areas should be evaluated using a consistent process in long range planning efforts.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA): The A.T. has been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and as such, modifications to a structure or site will include a review of potential impacts to both historic and biophysical resources (as well as other factors noted in [ATC Overnight Site Planning Guidance Document](#)). *Overnight use areas have been identified as one of five contributing resource types to the A.T. National Register District, and therefore warrant particular consideration.* While biophysical standards are well established, as of this writing (2023), guidance and best practices for historic and cultural review, protection and/or preservation are under development. Consult with land-management team members for the most recent information.

Desired Experiential Conditions: In 2015, ATC, trail clubs and agency partners began working within the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council's (IVUMC) framework for managing visitor use. As part of that framework, beginning in 2021 a more nuanced experiential zoning process was applied by each A.T. Club and their land management partners to describe desired biophysical, social and managerial settings for A.T. segments and most overnight sites. These desired condition zones are organized in the [A.T. Experience Zone Matrix](#) and range from Zone 1 (Wilderness) to Zone 6 (Urban). A relative few A.T. overnight sites are in Zone 1, most A.T. overnight sites are in Zones 2 (Semi-Primitive), 3 (Natural) and 4 (Semi-Natural)--with the preponderance of sites being in zones 2 and 3. For more info about the IVUMC Framework, see this [summary](#) and contact the ATC Director of Visitor Use Management.

The type, location, size, density, and design of overnight site facilities have a significant impact on visitor use, biophysical resources, and the A.T. experience. The desired conditions zone containing the structure(s) under evaluation should inform decisions about overnight use areas and their supporting facilities so they maintain or work toward achieving the desired experience.

For projects seeking funding for renovation or significant maintenance, conduct formal evaluations using ATC's [ATC Overnight Site Planning Guidance Document](#) guidance document, which includes references to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements. Additionally, appropriateness and experiential value as A.T. visitor resources are also assessed. To assist in this effort, ATC and its partners have developed this [Facility Assessment Tool](#) to help evaluate existing A.T. overnight use areas.

The Assessment Tool seeks to identify sites that:

- Are located where they are subject to inappropriate use or are an attractive nuisance
- Continue to degrade biophysical resources
- Are unneeded given visitor use patterns and the density of adjacent overnight sites
- Do not support desired conditions described in the [A.T. Experience Zone Matrix](#)
- Do not meet criteria outlined in ATC's guidance document, or are in conflict with ATC or land manager policies.
- Management partners cannot reasonably support the ongoing maintenance or management of the facility with available resources.

Using the Overnight Facility Assessment Tool

The [Facility Assessment Tool](#) referenced by this document develops succinct ratings for key overnight facility attributes, and it is intended to be a scoping tool as part of a project planning process and/or as a review of a Trail Club's or trail section inventory of overnight facilities. *It serves to structure for discussion each of the rated criteria as part of assessing the long term and continued viability of the facility as part of the Trail's inventory.* The Guide evaluates overnight facilities in the following areas:

- **Location and Use:** is the overnight site on public lands, away from motorized access areas, does it have a history of inappropriate use, or consistently over or under utilized? Does it serve to only support A.T. related activities?
- **Resource Protection:** are impacts to the biophysical and cultural resources minimized and sustainable?
- **Design and Materials:** does the overnight structure's appearance harmonize with the surrounding area?
- **National Register Historic District:** Is this structure a unique or integral part of the Trail's historic fabric? Note: Since the A.T. has been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, all overnight use areas are considered contributing historic resources.

- **Management and Policy:** are the overnight facility assets presently included in existing A.T. management planning processes (Local Management Plan (LMP), Facility Management Software System (FMSS), etc).
- **Associated Facility Features:** is human waste managed appropriately, is a reliable water source nearby? Does the overnight site have significant additionally constructed features that are not part of the desired visitor experience appropriate for the management zone?

The Assessment Tool lists attributes in the above categories and provides trail management partners with a range of evaluative response options (*e.g.*, Green, Amber, Red). Assessment results offer perspective on which attributes are most critical when considering long range planning efforts. The evaluation is best performed by A.T. Club members and land managers who have a high degree of knowledge about the facility's current condition, history of use, and other Trail facilities in nearby locations.

The desired experience zone that the site is within should inform decisions about siteing, design, and long-term visitor use management. Participants in the capital planning process or other proposals to modify, replace, relocate or remove overnight site facilities are strongly encouraged to use the Assessment Tool in conjunction with other capital planning resources to thoughtfully and collaboratively consider the structure's value as a long term Trail resource. To achieve the best results for your project, reach out to your ATC regional staff and land management agency contacts early and often in your planning efforts.

Other References:

Marion; [*Camping Impact Management on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail*](#)

ATC Policy: [*Managing the Trail for a Primitive Experience*](#)

[ATC Experiential Zone Matrix](#)

[ATC Capital Project Planning Process flow chart](#)