

Keeping Hikers on the Centerline



LEARNING OUTCOMES

Understand types of user-created impacts

Resetting the backslope of sidehill trail when it is "creeping" downhill

Closing use-created trails

Reporting braided trail or features suffering with "walk around"

Addressing user-created fire rings

The Appalachian Trail is a durable path intended for single-file foot travel. The width of the A.T. should be a minimum of 12" and a maximum of 18" in flat woodlands and 24" on side slopes. Trail maintainers help limit user-created impacts by monitoring for and addressing or reporting these items:

Trail Widening: When hikers walk outside of the treadway, they widen the area of impact by trampling trailside vegetation. Frequent trampling leads to soil compaction, and eventually a wider footpath. Trail widening is common in muddy areas.

Trail Braiding: When hikers walk outside of the footpath to navigate around trail features such as steps and waterbars to seek efficiency; this happens most often when the rise of the feature is too high and hikers are fatigued. Braiding also occurs when parallel paths are established in open areas when the original trail is too narrow or too difficult to see footing.

Trail Creep: This is the slow movement of the location of the trail to a slightly new alignment, generally on sidehill trail. It is most often seen where hikers avoid abundant vegetation growth on the uphill side of the trail and walk to the softer outside edge of the trail. Backslope that has sloughed into the treadway or excessive "root ladders" also pushes hikers toward the outside edge as they seek better footing. Trail creep can give sidehill trail an appearance of being convex.

Social Trails and Shortcuts: These paths, not planned by the A.T. club or the land manager, may offer more direct routes to vistas, campsites, or trailheads, and like shortcuts between the curve of a switchback, are almost always prone to swift erosion.

All of the use patterns above are driven by underlying causes that help inform appropriate solutions. These types of user created impacts tend to worsen when left unaddressed.

Prevention and Early Response

Remove Debris:

Remove debris or obstacles from the footpath since blockages on the treadway or ill-suited footing sends hikers off on their own path.

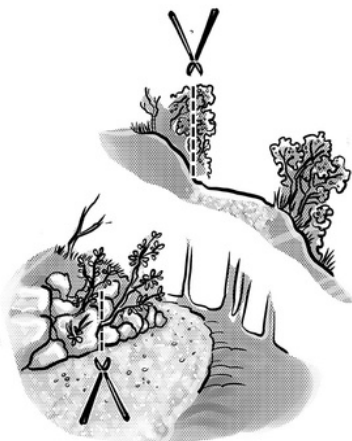
Cut out small roots before they become big roots.

Keeping Tread Clear of Vegetation:

Brushing vegetation in growth seasons, especially uphill of the trail since it tends to push hikers to the outside edge.



Trail braiding is discouraged here with upturned rocks outside the feature and a low rise for steps.



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Prevention and Early Response

Block Shortcutting

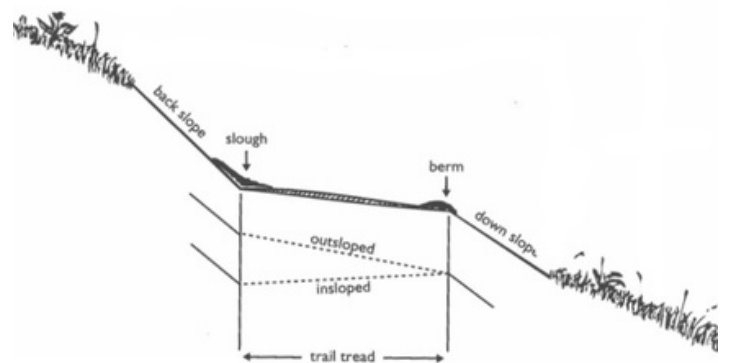
Block any shortcutting of switchbacks, steps, waterbars, or other tread features with items that are difficult to move or walk around. Things like large rocks or downed trees work well. When selecting tree debris, select brushy and branchy material since it presents more difficulty to step over than a log.

Shortcutting can be tricky to resolve and requires persistence by the maintainer.

If social trails and switchbacks continue to be cut, report it to trail supervisor for consideration of other longer-term solutions, such as signage, fencing, or revegetation.

Re-establish Sidehill Trail

Sections of sidehill trail are subject to narrowing as gravity and water begin to release sediment from the backslope into the inside edge of the trail. Hikers, seeking more stable footing, begin walking the outside edge of the trail. By resetting the backslope at a 45 degree angle and redefining the tread width to 18-24" with a 3-5% outslope, maintainers can bring hikers back toward the centerline.



Avoid adding logs to the outside edge of the trail to prevent trail creep since these help trap water on the trail, causing other issues.

Before Sidehill Re-Established



After Sidehill Re-Established



Maintainers may encounter sections with large roots (thicker than a wrist) or large rocks that could prevent them from redefining the tread on their own. These areas should be reported so that they can be addressed with a larger crew.