

Trail Condition & Assessment



Understanding Trail Class and Condition

Ask participants to think about the most heavily trafficked portions of the Trail (Clingman's Dome, Bear Mountain, etc) and then remote areas (perhaps Wilderness areas). Discuss the visitor expectations and likely trail conditions at each location. When available, share a condition class reference of the Trail in the area to see if they feel these areas fit within the matrix.

Wilderness

(This section optional except when offered in region that includes Wilderness) Have participants brainstorm the differences in maintenance techniques for A.T. in Wilderness versus sections that are not formally designated as such. Instructor should be prepared to offer other differences.

Monitor and Maintainer Responsibilities

Reference the position description to clarify if duties include reporting deficiencies or addressing them. Explain why certain deficiencies are best left to crews/more experienced people and where additional training exists to develop volunteers' skills.

Serve as an ambassador to the compliance review process by reminding participants that work beyond routine maintenance should include coordination with the land manager at ATC to prevent harming sensitive natural or cultural resources.

Assessing the Trail

Explain that Trail Assessments occur before the work and in order to plan work. Ask participants to contribute ideas on why that would be important. Responses might include: time management, prioritizing activities, identifying issues that need greater attention or more people, etc.

Discuss why it might be important for a trail maintainer to know the desired condition for their section of trail. Developing your "Trail Eyes" helps you see issues, examine the root cause, and think about possible remedies.

Assessing Structures and Features

Because not all courses will be on sections of trail that offer the chance to see all trail features, it is recommended to either use a slide show or review together pages of the Fieldbook that includes illustrations of trail features, their components, and likely causes of failure.

INSTRUCTION MATERIALS FOR COURSE

- Position Description(s) for org's monitor or maintainer role(s)
- A.T. classification chart
- Trail Information for course location
- Trail Assessment Checklists
- A.T. Fieldbook
- Org's Reporting Tool
- Smart Phone with/without Far Out Guide
- Optional: USFS trail classification chart
- Optional: Wilderness Act



Build and maintain the trail so that it is simple, solid, and safe.

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Put it Into Practice

Teaching "Trail Eyes"

Instructor takes participants on trail and points out observations related to the Trail condition. Three main elements of focus: (1) what issues are seen, (2) what is the root cause, (3) what might be possible to remedy the issue(s). Examples might include:

Sloughing sidehill:

Cause: might be caused by trail creep from unmanaged uphill vegetation or erosion causing trip hazards and hikers seeking safer footing.

Possible Remedy: Reestablish the tread through cutting the backlope and seek to mitigate erosion from water coming down the trail.

Trapped water/mud on footpath:

Cause: water can't escape from the trail due to flat topography or berm on edge of trail.

Potential Remedy: If the landform not flat can the berm be removed so water can drain or—if the landform is flat, would puncheon be an appropriate solution.

Hikers walking around installed features instead of over them:

Causes: features are too tall and create hiker obstacle.

Potential Remedy: Re-build feature to be more effective and traversable, or, more near-term, add "gargoyles" to either side of feature.

Braided trail:

Cause: Hikers taking easier or drier route to avoid wet, rooty, rocky, incised section of trail.

Potential Remedy: Identify and mitigate what is causing the original trail to be undesirable

After introducing "Trail Eyes," instructor has participants work in pairs to assess different sections of trail and/or facilities.

Debrief the Trail Eyes Exercise

Ask what participants saw and inquire about causes of failure. Help participants avoid defaulting to "erosion" or "visitors" being the root cause. Discuss why erosion is occurring. Was there insufficient tread drainage features—not enough, not properly built, or not maintained? Why is the muddy trail 30 feet wide—is the existing turnpike degraded and too difficult to use? Visitors are bypassing the mud but why is the trail located there? Is it that the available corridor for the trail is narrow or could the trail be relocated to a sidehill alignment or can bog bridge be installed?

BEST PRACTICES



Reporting Trail Issues with an Accurate Location

In the course of walking through an assessment, the instructor stops somewhere to say, "Ok, we found this issue and we want to report it. How do we convey where we are?"

If a participant can offer a means of producing accurate geolocation, allow student to share. Otherwise, instructor models finding the GPS coordinates on phone or Guthook App, uses the RIMS App,

Convey the importance of a thorough description and a precise location since mileage guestimates from trailheads and gaps can be difficult to get right.