



BY JORDAN BOWMAN, ATC DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

# A System of Protection

JUNE 26, 2020

2020 has shown how so many things we take for granted are, in reality, both invaluable and vulnerable; how the commitment to justice can transform the conversations we are having about equality, diversity, and inclusion; and, how places known by many as an “escape” from the pressures and challenges of society are not separate from the realities of the world.

As we look back at the beginning of this year, when details about COVID-19 were relatively unknown, our top priority was — and continues to be — developing guidance to help protect not only individual hikers and volunteers, but the broader impacts to the Appalachian Trail (A.T.) and community at large. We continue to operate on the assumption that no one is safe unless *everyone* is safe.

Of course, this brings up the fact that some people have not felt safe or welcomed in many parts of our society, including the A.T. As protests around the world underline a lack of justice for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities dating back centuries, we at the ATC are reflecting on our own shortcomings in creating better access and a welcoming and inclusive experience for everyone on the Trail. We are committed not only to deep reflection and fostering an environment of inclusion and education about the needs of historically underserved communities, but also to taking decisive action to ensure the A.T. experience fulfills the ideals under which it was created.

None of this can be fully accomplished on our own, as creating and preserving an A.T. experience for everyone requires every aspect of the Trail community to take action. As such, one of our primary roles as advocates for the A.T. is to help ensure the system of partnerships that has made the Trail a reality for over 50 years continues to function. It is only through this [Cooperative Management System](#) of volunteers, conservation professionals, Trail maintaining clubs, and federal, state, and local agency partners that we can effectively maintain, monitor, and protect the A.T. each year. Simply put, the Trail would not exist without the Cooperative Management System as we currently know it.

Last week’s Supreme Court decision in the case of *United States Forest Service, et al. v. Cowpasture River Preservation Association, et al.* highlights the importance of maintaining this System. The case was the most legitimate threat to the partnership’s existence since it was developed during the implementation of the [National Trails System Act as amended in 1978](#). This case was not about whether a pipeline could be installed underneath the A.T., but whether a land management agency like the U.S. Forest Service could permit infrastructure to cross the A.T. on the lands they oversee (National Forests). The Court’s decision by default upheld decades of precedent, keeping the Cooperative Management System intact and ensuring all of us can continue our roles in protecting the A.T. for centuries to come. However, while we are relieved this system remains intact, we also acknowledge that there are still serious concerns about the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and overall pipeline approval process.

The Cooperative Management System is a complex idea with a lot of moving parts, but it boils down to a primary idea: we are all in this together, and only together can we ensure that the A.T. reaches its goal as set forth by Benton MacKaye: “to take breath amid effort to forge a better world.” This can only be accomplished through the expertise, dedication, and hard work committed by this system of partners. Together we will work to ensure hikers and volunteers can safely experience the Trail while minimizing the risks associated with COVID-19. Together we will create a more welcoming environment for hikers of all backgrounds. Together we will monitor for threats not only to the footpath and its surrounding lands, but also to the system of advocates striving to meet the lofty goal of an Appalachian Trail protected forever and for all.

Lead image courtesy of Horizonline Pictures

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The Appalachian Trail Conservancy has taken inventory of the social landscape within the Appalachian Trail community and across the United States, and we believe that by making meaningful changes, the A.T. can be a space that is inclusive, open and safe for all.



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The Appalachian Trail Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) organization. Our CFC number: 12230. Our Tax ID number: 526046689.

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