Photo by Gary Sizer

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Building a Climate-Resilient A.T. Landscape

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The following post is part of our series on climate change and the Appalachian Trail. For other parts in the series, click the links below.

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"To build a foot trail several hundred miles long through the scenery of the Appalachians on the crestline of Maine to Georgia: this is the first pursuit which several hundred young persons have accomplished during the last ten years. Such is their first long step in the longer pursuit of becoming harmonized with scenery…"

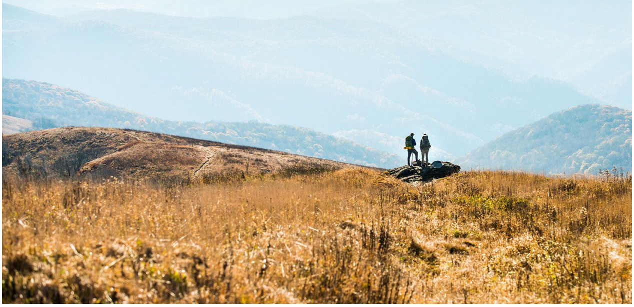
-Benton MacKaye, 1932

One of my favorite memories from my youth was when my father took me on a rain-soaked backpacking trip on the Appalachian Trail (A.T.) in the Nantahala National Forest. We slogged for miles through muddy Trail, until we reached our planned campsite on Cheoah Bald. Visibility was low and the downpour drove us into our tents early, raindrops drumming on the stretched nylon.

Yet when I was awoken hours later by the post-rain silence, I emerged from my tent to find a view that remains etched into my memory. Where once there was mist covering the view, now there were endless waves of mountains, painted silver by the moon now freed from cloud cover. When a gentle breeze rolled through, the swaying of hundreds of thousands of trees made it seem like the mountains themselves were breathing. It was a moment that showed me how the Trail was (and is) more than a footpath sprinkled with pretty views. It helped reveal the power and awe the surrounding A.T. landscape provides.

That power of this landscape extends beyond the beauty and inspiration that I and millions of others have experienced while on the Trail — it is through the protection of the A.T. landscape that we ensure the Trail continues to be resilient in the face of climate change.

Partnering for Landscape Protection and Climate Resiliency



A massive amount of collaboration and shared dedication is required to ensure A.T. landscapes are conserved, a vital part of the ATC's plan to help mitigate the effects of climate change on the A.T. and beyond. Click here to learn more. Photo by Horizonline Pictures.

For decades, landscape protection beyond the narrow "corridor" of federally protected lands around the A.T. — measuring only 1,000 feet wide in many locations — has been a key component of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's (ATC) work. Yet as development increased around the Trail and the impacts of climate change on land and humanity became more apparent, it became vital to develop a more coordinated approach.

This led to the creation of the A.T. Landscape Partnership (ATLP), a coalition co-convened by the ATC and the National Park Service. Today it is comprised of over 100 partner organizations, from state and federal agencies to land trusts to conservation non-profits. Since its establishment in 2015, the members of the ATLP have helped secure more than 100,000 acres of land across the A.T. landscape, significantly boosting the protections of the A.T. that, in some locations, still only has a protected corridor of roughly 1,000 feet.

"The scale of this project is just so massive," said Dennis Shaffer, Director of Landscape Conservation for the ATC. "It's akin to some of the other large landscape protection projects like Yellowstone to Yukon, or Crown of the Continent. When you're working at this scale, figuring out how to identify and invest in critically important areas is a major undertaking. It has taken years and it will continue to take years."

> "It would be difficult to protect a scenic viewshed along the A.T. without hitting on a lot of other values important to climate change mitigation."

Beyond the View

Through collaborations with key partners, such as The Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society, and the Open Space Institute, the ATLP has pursued multi-year studies to better understand the influence landscape conservation can have on climate resiliency — a goal that can be pursued simultaneously with protecting the beauty of Appalachian vistas.

"It would be difficult to protect a scenic viewshed along the A.T. without hitting on a lot of other values important to climate change mitigation," said Shaffer. "Much of the Trail's landscape scores very high in terms of resiliency, carbon storage, and pathways for wildlife migration and future habitats. When we protect a view, we are hitting multiple targets at the same time, including improving our climate resiliency."

One of those key targets is also increasing the connectivity of the landscape. The A.T. has a wide array of connected lands — national forests, national parks, state forests, state parks, state game lands, etc. — but they are not always connected in the areas that are the most critical and would be most beneficial for mitigating the effects of climate change.

To highlight the importance of increasing connectivity, Shaffer points to an area along the A.T. he refers to as an "opportunity lost" — the Mid-Atlantic.

"If you look at a map of migration routes, like this one produced by The Nature Conservancy, you'll see a 'pinch point' in the Mid-Atlantic region where there simply aren't as many protected forest lands," he said.

"That's indicative of opportunities lost because it's channeling wildlife habitat and migration routes through a narrower field. It also means the forest is less resilient and will have a harder time recovering from the impacts of climate change."

Pinch points like the one found in the Mid-Atlantic underscore the critical importance of protecting landscapes like the Kittatinny Ridge along the A.T. in Pennsylvania. Designated a Global Important Bird Area, Kittatinny Ridge serves as the migration route and nesting area for millions of birds each year. This ridge is a key example not only of habitat protection but also ensuring that as much connectivity as possible is maintained between forests.

The efforts to preserve Kittatinny Ridge achieved a significant victory just this past year when The Nature Conservancy announced that 1,100 forested acres had been added to this key landscape. Located at Cove Mountain Preserve on the banks of the Susquehanna River, this acquisition not only helps protect the resiliency of the area's forests: it also preserves the views enjoyed by thousands of A.T. hikers each year from nearby Peters Mountain.

The 1,100 acres added to the Cove Mountain Preserve along Kittatinny Ridge will protect a critical landscape that has been targeted for potential development in recent years. Click here to learn more. Photo by Kelly M. O'Neill.

By securing (and ideally, expanding) key areas like Cove Mountain Preserve — and, as a result, increasing the connectivity of the landscape through effective conservation practices — it will be possible to rebuild and bolster the role of the A.T. landscape as a climate-resilient corridor.

Looking Forward

The next several years are a critical time for the ATLP, as key indicators show immediate action must be taken to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change. To better ensure it succeeds in its goal of protecting key resilient lands, the ATLP is forming a climate advisory group charged with two key goals: gather the science needed to better identify priority protection and stewardship focus areas along the Trail; and help make the case as to why the A.T. should be considered an East Coast climate corridor, both in the eyes of the public and of potential partners who can help secure these key landscapes. And their support will be essential for one reason in particular.

"There's no question, probably the biggest challenge is just the financial resources required to make meaningful progress," said Shaffer. "We've been seeing more and more focus on land management and stewardship, especially around this idea of carbon sequestration and maintaining ecological function. But the financial resources that are required on a scale of this magnitude — 2,000 miles long, tens of miles wide — is a huge undertaking, a huge challenge."

But the ATLP also understands the unique opportunities for engaging new audiences and supporters for landscape protection along the A.T. due to its geographic location, within a day's drive of nearly two-thirds of the U.S. population. The term "connectivity" has been used throughout this article, primarily regarding the landscape itself. But just as important is helping people find and understand the connection we have as a species to this landscape, and how our efforts will have a direct impact on its long-term survival.

"The A.T. landscape, being in proximity to these major population centers, puts us in the unique position to build connections between the protection of our natural resources and human populations, a factor that can't be ignored," said Shaffer. "It definitely gives us a platform to introduce new people to the benefits of the land beyond recreation, and to create new allies in the protection of a landscape that can contribute to so many positive, powerful things, including the mitigation of climate change."

For many people, simply experiencing the A.T. and its surrounding landscape is enough to begin understanding the power the Trail holds — much in the same way I did so many years ago on a moonlit night on Cheoah Bald. Through the work and dedication of the A.T. Landscape Partnership, it is a power that will echo throughout the Trail for generations to come, even in the face of monumental challenges like climate change.

Your donation supports our work to fortify the Appalachian Trail against the effects of climate change, helping ensure it will continue to benefit us all for generations to come.

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Preserving the "Oxygen" of the Trail

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OFFICIAL BLOG

The A.T. and Climate Change: Reviewing the Basics

As we continue our series on climate change and its effects on the Appalachian Trail, it is important to lay the groundwork for several key topics.

OFFICIAL BLOG

A Climate-Resilient A.T. Depends on Effective Federal Policy

Engaging in the creation of federal policy to protect the lands we love is one of the most effective tools to help mitigate the impacts of climate change on the Appalachian Trail.

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