

BY JORDAN BOWMAN, ATC DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

Not Merely a Trail

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One of my favorite local walks is a four-mile loop that travels through a hardwood forest, over rolling hills with occasional views of cornfields and pastures, and ends near a silty, meandering river. Walking this path, particularly in 2020, is a relative oasis from a world of uncertainty.

However, it is also a constant reminder of how rare protected natural places are. At the edge of the cornfields, you can see the concrete roof of a strip mall. The nighttime glow from city lights dims the stars during evening strolls. Less than a mile away is a major highway, and the rumble of traffic is a constant backdrop during my walks.

When walking this local path, I am reminded of what brought me to my role at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC): an opportunity to help preserve not only a footpath — an excellent one, at that — but also the landscapes, the communities and the unique experience the Appalachian Trail (A.T.) provides.



Planner and A.T. visionary Benton MacKaye understood the importance of the Trail being more than a footpath, advocating for a “realm” of protected lands.

When Benton MacKaye discussed his vision for the A.T., he stated that “a realm and not merely a trail mark the full aim of our efforts.” He understood, after seeing the rapid expansion of industrialization firsthand, that a 2,000-mile footpath alone, as impressive as it was, would not be enough. In order to preserve the Trail for future generations, a “realm” of forests, clean water and other sources of life surrounding the A.T. must be established, nurtured and protected.

Today, A.T. hikers encounter views that have changed very little since MacKaye’s time. This is largely due to the ATC and its partners, who have ensured that the lands surrounding the A.T. remain protected. And yet there are many other locations along the Trail that have not been as lucky, where the lands around the Trail have succumbed to incompatible development and destruction of natural areas that take away from the A.T. experience, sometimes permanently.

Our focus must now be on the broader goal of securing a realm of healthy forests and wildlife habitats, of sweeping vistas and landscapes, of thriving trailside communities, and a community of nature enthusiasts and Trail volunteers ready to tackle challenges old and new. And the challenges are many: from rapid development, to inadequate infrastructure policy, to the growing effects of climate change, preserving the A.T. realm is not optional if we hope to overcome these obstacles.



“...we need this thing wilderness far more than it needs us.” -Benton MacKaye

When I step onto my local path, I am reminded of what is at stake if we do not prioritize a protected A.T. realm. We need secure natural spaces like the A.T. not only for the environment and recreation, but also for the physical and mental rejuvenation we receive from our time in the great outdoors.

MacKaye once said, “we need this thing wilderness far more than it needs us.” By conserving the A.T. realm of landscapes, experiences and, of course, the footpath itself, we will gift ourselves with something that will benefit us all long into the future.

Your support helps us conserve the Appalachian Trail realm, ensuring it will benefit us all for generations to come.

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Header image by Josh Tullock

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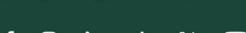
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The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's mission is to protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

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

799 Washington Street, PO Box 807 | Harpers Ferry, WV 25425 | P: 304.535.6331 | info@appalachiantrail.org



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