

# THE NEXT BIG STEP

BY JORDAN BOWMAN

WHILE A THRU-HIKE EVENTUALLY ENDS, THE JOURNEY AS AN APPALACHIAN TRAIL ADVOCATE NEVER DOES.



Jordan with his wife Alison at the end of his thru-hike in 2014

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HE DAY I SUMMITED KATAHDIN was perfect. Almost. It was the middle of July, yet I could see my breath in the crisp Maine morning air. My wife, Alison, was able to fly in and join me for the final climb alongside hikers I had shared over 2,000 miles of bumps, bruises, sweat, tears, and laughter with. Partly cloudy skies allowed for 100-mile views without the heat and glare of the sun beating us down as we traversed Katahdin's barren mountainside. As I approached the Baxter Peak sign marking the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, I was cheered on by Trail friends old and new, including two fellow thru-hikers I met all the way back in Georgia.

I touched my cheek to the Baxter Peak sign, worn smooth by harsh Maine winters and hundreds of hands preceding mine. And then, I experienced two powerful emotions familiar to so many thru-hikers: an overwhelming joy of having accomplished a months-long journey through some of America's most beautiful (and challenging) countryside; and a sense of loss now that it was all over.

Those conflicting emotions lasted for weeks after leaving the A.T. behind and returning to the "real world." Every question I received about the Trail brought back a flood of wonderful memories from my journey but was also like tearing off a bandage before the wound beneath had time to heal. What I could not see then through the haze caused by these emotions was that, by experiencing such a full picture of the Trail's beauty — not just its gorgeous landscapes and ever-growing family of hikers, but also the support of trailside communities and, of course, the unstoppable corps of volunteers and nature lovers that keep the Trail's one-of-a-kind experience intact — I had not taken my last step as a thru-hiker. Instead, all these experiences had prepared me for the next step on my journey: becoming an advocate for the Trail and everything it stands for.

By being a voice for the Trail, I was able to quiet the voice reminding me daily that I was not living on the A.T. and, instead, replace it with a passion to ensure the Trail experience would be protected — or even improved — for those who followed in my footsteps through the Appalachians. Even more importantly, I understood that after experiencing a journey that so many yearn for year after year, one of the most selfish things I could do would be to move on from the Trail without giving back. I owed every volunteer who happily sacrificed a piece of their life to ensure the Trail is ready for others to enjoy, whether for a thru-hike or that first, hours-long adventure that sparks a lifelong passion.

I have had the great fortune of being able to make conserving the A.T. my career, but being an advocate for the Trail doesn't require you to make a career commitment. Here are just a few ways that thru-hikers — and anyone who loves the Trail — can channel their passion from their experience into its protection.

## BECOME A VOLUNTEER

Very little is more satisfying than maintaining a section of the A.T., helping ensure that the footpath and other Trail infrastructure is repaired and protected against erosion and visitor impacts. For millions of people who are near the A.T., it's easy to find monthly (or sometimes weekly) opportunities by joining one of the 31 Trail maintaining clubs or finding an opportunity near you at: [appalachiantrail.org/volunteer](http://appalachiantrail.org/volunteer)\*. For those who live farther away, consider joining one of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's (ATC) six volunteer Trail Crews for a week rehabilitating a section of the Trail — learn more at: [appalachiantrail.org/crews](http://appalachiantrail.org/crews)\*

## BECOME AN ATC MEMBER OR DONATE

Becoming a member or donating to the ATC helps us with all our work to maintain and conserve the Trail. From paying for new equipment for Trail Crews to developing educational materials that help A.T. visitors hike more sustainably, your donation goes a long way to helping us fulfill our mission of protecting the A.T. forever, for all. Become a member or donate at: [appalachiantrail.org/give](http://appalachiantrail.org/give)

## SPEAK OUT ABOUT LEGISLATION THAT WILL AFFECT THE TRAIL

Every year, there are important decisions made at local, state, and federal levels that could help (or hurt) the ATC's ability to protect the A.T. experience, including the Trail's surrounding landscapes and communities. When these issues arise, contact your elected officials to let them know what the Trail means to you and why they should make its protection a priority. You can also voice your opinions by submitting op-eds or letters to the editors of local and nationwide media.

## USE YOUR STORY TO SHOW THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSERVING THE TRAIL

Having experienced the Trail in a way that many others have not, thru-hikers can relay the importance of protecting the aspects that make the A.T.'s continuous journey unique. Thousands, if not millions of people follow the adventures of thru-hikers every year as they strive to complete the full Trail. As you share your stories with others, use this opportunity to show the importance of giving back to the A.T., recruiting others to help protect the Trail and helping ensure the next generation can have a life-changing A.T. adventure.

These are just a few ways you can take the next step on your path as an A.T. thru-hiker, one that will continue beyond the physical limits of the footpath itself. By being a Trail advocate, you can proudly say that you not only walked the entire Trail — you helped every future A.T. hiker experience the magic of a walk in the woods.

Jordan Bowman is the ATC's director of communications

\*Due to the current COVID-19 crisis, all volunteer work on the Trail has been temporarily suspended. Visit [appalachiantrail.org/covid19](http://appalachiantrail.org/covid19) for updates and information, and to find out when volunteer opportunities will re-open.

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