BY JORDAN BOWMAN, ATC DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

The Scope of A.T. Volunteerism

MAY 29, 2020

Volunteerism is the bedrock of the Appalachian Trail (A.T.) and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC). Our ability to fulfill our mission of managing and protecting the A.T. is largely made possible thanks to the efforts of roughly 6,000 individuals each year.

Reflecting on that huge number — 6,000 people who got up early, took time away from family and friends (over 210,000 hours of work in 2019 alone), and contributed their expertise and sweat equity to help maintain the Trail — shows how far A.T. volunteerism has come and how essential it is.

When the ATC was founded in 1925, just a few hundred individuals had volunteered to plan and construct, piece by piece, a footpath stretching over 2,000-miles of rugged Appalachian Mountain landscapes. When the last blazes were painted in 1937, these volunteers — along with the federal and state assistance — officially connected the footpath from Katahdin in Maine to Mount Oglethorpe in Georgia (the Trail's original southern terminus).

Early A.T. volunteers in Maine.

In the 82 years since, the scope of A.T. volunteerism has expanded in more ways than just the total number of volunteers. Protecting the Trail and its one-of-a-kind experience involves much more than footpath maintenance, and opportunities for a wide variety of individuals and skills across all fourteen A.T. states have been developed to meet these needs. Below are just a few of them:

Preserving the Trail's Natural Resources

Volunteers' work in removing invasive species helps promote forest health around the A.T. and beyond.

Working directly with ATC staff, volunteers tackle a wide array of activities to help ensure the ecology surrounding the Trail is as healthy as possible. They help manage populations of exotic invasive species to promote forest health, maintain open areas that preserve wildlife habitats (and some of the most iconic A.T. vistas) and track populations of rare, threatened and endangered species.

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Community volunteers are essential for growing local support for conservation needs and creating more opportunities for people to experience the outdoors.

Volunteers in Trailside communities and beyond help introduce new audiences to outdoor recreation and conservation opportunities. These volunteers are also advocates for conservation causes large and small, working with local administrations to develop ordinances protecting the Trail and its surrounding landscapes, supporting recreation-based tourism economies, and protecting fresh drinking water and other natural resources.

Greeting and Informing Trail Visitors

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Many volunteers specialize in helping A.T. adventurers young and old prepare for and locate hikes appropriate for them.

Anyone who has stopped by the ATC Visitor Center in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, has undoubtedly met one of our knowledgeable volunteers — and maybe even gotten your picture taken in front of our sign! There are volunteers in visitor centers and communities along the Trail ready to advise hikers on essential hiking gear, Leave No Trace principles, important A.T. updates, and much more. These volunteers also assist ATC staff in developing guidelines and materials for hikers to foster a new generation of well-prepared hikers and conservationists.

Maintaining and Creating a Sustainable A.T.

From repairing eroded sections of the footpath to building new, more sustainable sections of the Trail, maintaining the footpath would not be possible without skilled volunteers.

Whether part of an ATC Trail maintaining crew or one of the 31 Trail maintaining clubs, volunteers ensure the Trail is prepared for over three million visitors each year. From removing fallen trees to making the footpath more resilient to erosion and extreme weather, every step you take on the A.T. is made possible through these volunteers' work.

When talking with longtime A.T. volunteers about why they have returned year after year to help maintain and protect the Trail, we get a variety of answers: the family-like connection built among other volunteers, an opportunity to build skills for careers in conservation, an excuse to spend more time outdoors while also being productive. Yet there is one answer we receive over and over: **the opportunity to give back to a Trail that has provided so much to so many, becoming a part of something larger than themselves.**

Now, as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, our volunteers are preparing for a return to the Trail they love. During the height of the national response to the pandemic, volunteers were asked to postpone all Trail repairs. Now, as ATC's COVID-19 task force nears completion on its safety guidelines for maintainers, these volunteers look forward to once again providing much-needed care for the footpath and its surrounding lands.

APPALACHIAN TRAIL
VOLUNTEER

Image courtesy of H. Dean Clark

Even though there has been a brief interruption in volunteers' work due to COVID-19, there is one thing we are absolutely sure of moving forward: as long as there is an Appalachian Trail, we are committed to mobilizing and supporting an army of volunteers ready to maintain and protect it forever and for all to enjoy.

Help ensure our A.T. volunteers have the support they need to maintain and protect the A.T. by making a donation today!

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ATC'S OFFICIAL BLOG

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Learn more about ATC's work and the community of dreamers and doers protecting and celebrating the Appalachian Trail.

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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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