

ATC Conservation and Trail Management Guidance on Special and Unique Areas

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a §501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works closely with Appalachian Trail volunteer maintaining clubs (“Clubs”) and other public and private partners to ensure the protection and stewardship of the natural, cultural, and experiential resources of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (known as ANST, A.T., or “the Trail”). Approximately fifty federal, state, or other public agencies have authority or jurisdiction over lands and resources within the protected A.T. corridor. ATC has a central management role by virtue of its Cooperative Agreement with the USDI National Park Service and its close working partnership with the USDA Forest Service and other agencies.

Overview

A number of sites along the Appalachian Trail are special or unique because of their biotic, geologic, cultural, and/or scenic values. These sites, even if they do not qualify for specific protection under the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, or the Wilderness Act, still deserve special recognition and management. Land-managing agencies often give these areas special designations, such as the Gulf Hagas Preserve in Maine, and manage them with a higher level of protection from use and development.

These areas may require special emphasis to protect the natural resources from over-use by hikers as well as from abuse by others. A designation of a special or unique area can afford a higher level of protection for an area and allows a Trail club to alert its management partners to the presence of resources and features along the Trail that are important to the Trail community.

Areas that might be identified as special or unique areas include:

- Stands of old-growth timber or virgin timber, such as the old-growth white pine stand in The Hermitage in Maine.
- Areas above timberline or alpine tundra sites, such as Mt. Washington in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.
- Sites of historic events, such as Fox Gap and Turner Gap in Maryland.
- Unusual geologic formations and landforms, such as McAfee Knob on Catawba Mountain in Virginia.
- Areas where unusual flora or fauna exist, such as the azalea gardens on Wayah Bald in North Carolina.
- Scenic areas, such as Laurel Fork Gorge in Tennessee, Sterling Forest in New York, or Mt. Pleasant in Virginia.

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The preservation of these features is essential to the quality of the Trail experience, and steps should be taken to ensure that the resource values are protected. Many methods exist to protect these resources, including signage, ridgerunner programs, and, as a last resort, law-enforcement action. Some resources may be unable to withstand intensive use, and it may be necessary to relocate the Trail away from a special or unique area.

Guidance

ATC has no official policy concerning the identification and management of special or unique areas, other than to encourage individual Trail clubs to recognize the importance of such areas and include them in the local management plans.

Trail club planning should document the club's intent to give these areas a higher level of protection. The club also needs to identify any special management principles, such as locating the Trail footpath closer to or away from a special or unique area, that will apply in identified special and unique areas. Any programs developed by agency partners should also be recognized.

Identification is the first step for long-term management. Some areas may require little or no action; others must be policed for litter and vandalism, monitored for evidence of over-use, or noted and publicized in guidebooks and other publications to enhance the Trail experience. Those actions would normally be part of a long-range plan.

A Trail club can begin by making or revisiting an inventory list. Many, but not all, special and unique areas are identified in Appendix C of the NPS *A.T. Comprehensive Plan*.

NPS Policy—The National Park Service recognizes four management zones on its lands: natural, historic, park development, and special-use zones. Of these, the natural and historic zones are most applicable to the Appalachian Trail and are identified in the individual resource-management plans for each of the existing national park units.

NPS recognizes that special designations apply to parts or all of some parks to highlight the additional management considerations that those designated areas warrant. These designations include: research natural area, experimental research area, wilderness area, national wild and scenic river, national natural landmark, biosphere reserve, and world heritage listing. These designations do not reduce the Service's authority for managing the parks, although in some cases they may create additional management requirements or considerations. The NPS Appalachian Trail Park Office will consider proposals for special designations of areas on a case-by-case basis.

Many national parks identify management zones to describe desired resource and visitor experience conditions. No specific zones have been identified for lands acquired by the Appalachian Trail Park Office, which relies on the local management plans of each Trail club to



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define management objectives for each section of the Trail. Virtually all of these lands, however, would be classified as natural “backcountry” under the National Park Service planning system. ATPO will consider proposals for special designations of areas on a case-by-case basis. The National Park Service uses the term backcountry to refer to primitive, undeveloped portions of parks. This refers not to a specific management zone, but rather a general condition of land that may occur anywhere within a park. Backcountry use should be managed in accordance with a backcountry management plan (or other plan addressing backcountry uses) designed to avoid unacceptable impacts on park resources or adverse effects on the visitor enjoyment of appropriate recreational experiences.

For questions related to this policy please contact the Appalachian Trail Conservancy at www.appalachiantrail.org, or P.O. Box 807, Harpers Ferry, WV, 25425-807.

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