

Editor's Note: *The following paper, given at the November 1988 George Wright Society Conference on Science in the National Parks in Tucson, Arizona, could be considered as a follow-up to the Superintendent's Corner by Robert L. Arnberger (Everglades National Park), carried in the Winter 1988 issue of Park Science. Arnberger's thesis was that the old 'custodial management' is no longer valid as a way of dealing with today's park problems. This case study of a new approach — in line with Arnberger's «strategic management» position — was thought by science conferees to be worthy of wider distribution.*

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail

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A Neverending Story

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Last year the Appalachian Trail, along with Superman and others, celebrated its 50th anniversary. For the A.T. (as it is fondly referred to by its friends and users), it was the 50th anniversary of a continuous footpath—2100 miles from Maine to Georgia. This remarkable 1937 accomplishment was brought about by an unprecedented volunteer effort; 50 years later volunteers are still its most outstanding feature.

The story of the Appalachian Trail, from its inception in 1921 to the present, is one filled with good fortune, good will, and almost miraculous accomplishments. The people who populate the pages of this story have been men and women of determination and vision. As this story unfolds, future managers and hikers will make it a never ending story.

But if this is to be true, an

unusual cooperative management system, one that respects the unique history and traditions of the Appalachian Trail, must prove successful.

By way of background....

Credit for the concept of an "Appalachian Trail" goes to Benton MacKaye, a forester and regional planner from Massachusetts. He conceived of the Trail in 1921 as a continuous way for travel on foot through the wild, scenic, wooded, pastoral, and culturally significant lands of the Appalachian Mountains. Today the Appalachian Trail stretches some 2,100 miles, from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to Katahdin, Maine.

Volunteers began marking and cutting the Trail shortly after 1921. By 1937, a continuous trail had been laid out and blazed from Maine to Georgia. The route corresponded to the ridge line of the Appalachian Mountains and connected existing trail systems where possible. The Trail was routed through public lands where they existed. Handshake agreements with landowners, often when landowners spotted hiking groups crossing their property, were the primary means of establishing the Trail across private property. A unique foundation of good will, upon which the A.T. continues to rest today, was begun at this time.

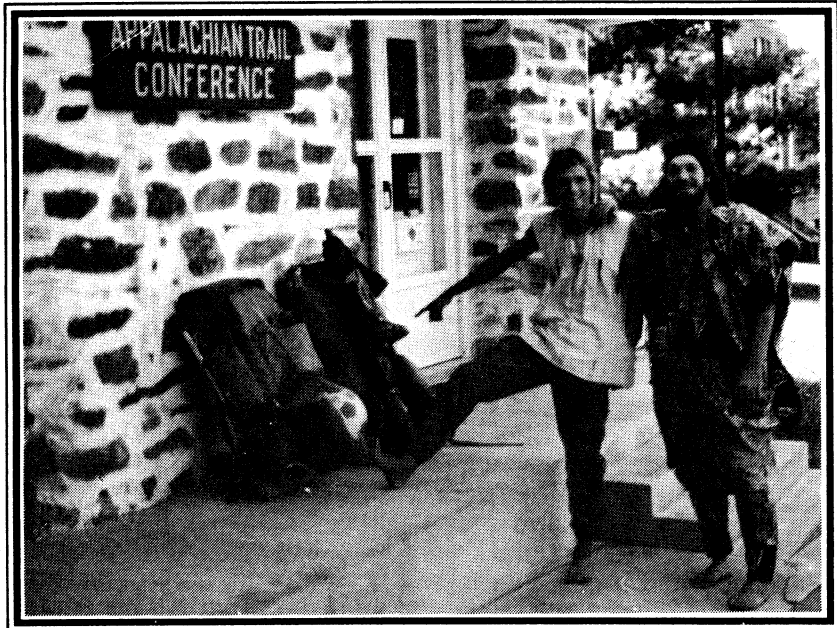
In 1925 the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) was formed to unify and coordinate the efforts of volunteers and hiking clubs. The Conference was and is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and management of the Appalachian Trail and

to the enhancement of volunteerism. ATC serves as the umbrella organization for the 31 local Trail clubs responsible for day-to-day management of assigned sections of the A.T. ATC and the Trail have grown up together.

In 1938, just a year after the continuous Trail was established, Appalachian Trailway Agreements were signed by the National Park Service (NPS) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) with the ATC, to protect lands adjacent to the footpath. This was an important shift. The agreements established a zone extending one mile on either side of the Trail in National Parks and Forests where no new paralleling roads or other incompatible development would take place. Similar agreements were signed with all Trail states in 1939 providing protection to a zone extending one half mile on either side of the Trail on state lands. These agreements marked a new era for the Appalachian Trail, with emphasis shifting from the placement and construction of a physical trail to protection of a conservation zone along the Trail.

Permanent Protection of the Land Base

The idea of a publicly owned Appalachian Trail had been introduced earlier, but it wasn't until 1968 that the National Trails System Act (P.L. 90-543) was passed by Congress, and the Appalachian Trail was designated one of our first two national scenic trails. The Act authorized the NPS to administer the A.T., but encouraged the states to



Nigerian Hikers on Appalachian Trail

move first to protect it. Unfortunately, the quality of the Trail route deteriorated during this period.

Congress amended the National Trails System Act in 1978, increasing NPS authority to protect the Trail. The authorized acquisition ceiling was increased from \$5 million to \$95 million, and eminent domain authority was expanded to allow for protection of a 1000 foot wide Trail corridor. The NPS responded quickly to the mandate of the amendment and developed a corridor planning program and a land acquisition capability. Thus began one of the most complex NPS projects ever undertaken.

The principal NPS role has been to assure a permanent, protected route for the Trail for its full length, filling in the gaps between areas where the USFS and the states have assumed Trail

protection responsibility. Dozens of relocations, accomplished through NPS acquisition of new corridor lands, were planned and have been implemented since 1978 to improve situations where the Trail was poorly located. A corridor design process was fashioned, providing maximum flexibility in final decisions. Thousands of landowner contacts were arranged to individually tailor every section of the Trail. Landowners, Trail club representatives and others joined in refining the route and adjusting the corridor boundaries. The need to provide adequate protection was balanced against the desire to minimize impact on adjacent properties.

Planning and acquisition became intertwined in a complex, sensitive, yet highly successful land protection program. Creativity ran high, and benefits were

duly reaped. Thousands of acres of beautiful mountain land, some containing outstanding natural features, have been brought into public ownership for the Appalachian Trail. Much of this has been accomplished on a willing seller basis and with the involvement and support of local communities. The heretofore inflexible 'federal land acquisition process' has learned new limits of flexibility.

We have had our share of angry, unhappy landowners. I think they are unavoidable, but they have been relatively few. The overwhelming majority of land transactions have been negotiated agreements, and the A.T. enjoys excellent relations with neighboring landowners and local communities along most of its length.

It was clear from the beginning that success of the NPS program and ultimately long-term protection of the Trail were closely tied to gaining the support of neighboring landowners and the communities through which the Trail passes. The A.T. could not afford 2000 miles of hostile neighbors if its history and traditions, not to mention its fledgling 'cooperative management system,' were to survive. The ultimate goal is to have neighbors, communities, and local jurisdictions proud to have the Appalachian Trail as a neighbor and willing to co-

operate actively in preserving its values and perpetuating a healthy natural environment. Effective protection of the A.T. depends upon neighbors viewing its presence as a privilege rather than as an imposition.

This approach has been successful. Since 1978, the NPS has acquired an interest in over 78,000 acres of land in more than 50 counties in 11 states, providing permanent protection for over 517 miles of the Trail. Probably the major unresolved issue in our land protection program involves determining an appropriate level of protection for the Trail through several New England ski areas. The issue of ski area growth versus preservation of remote or sensitive lands in general is highly controversial and volatile throughout New England; the battle lines have been clearly drawn where the Appalachian Trail is involved. While willing to make some compromise in the interest of being a good neighbor, we are seeking a level of protection that we believe is consistent with what Congress intended in passing the National Trails System Act. This, however, is more than the ski area operators want to convey. I think it is fair to say that the ski area operators do not view the presence of the A.T. as a privilege at this moment. But at this stage in the program, with most of our controversies behind us and with significant Trail resources at stake, we are willing to risk trading some neighborly good will for adequate protection

of the Trail. That issue aside, however, Trail protection is 93 percent complete. With over 1700 individual land transactions to date, less than 5 percent have been acquired adversely through the process of eminent domain.

The status of the Trail protection effort must be measured, however, not only in terms of miles of Trail protected or acres of land acquired, but also in terms of the growth of the cooperative management system that assures its future.

The Cooperative Management System

The Appalachian Trail protection program is a cooperative project involving the NPS, the USFS, the ATC, the states crossed by the Trail, local governments, Trail Clubs, other federal agencies, conservation organizations, and landowners. While responsibility for overall Trail administration lies with the NPS, the goal is to assure adequate management through the existence of a cooperative working arrangement among partners. Appalachian Trail neighbors are encouraged to be active partners in management of the Trail.

The cooperative management system is based on a recognition that:

- the existence of the A.T. is largely due to a volunteer effort that began some 60 years ago, and
- management of the Trail by a cooperative network of Trail clubs, NPS, USFS, state agencies, and other partners is both cost effective and philosophically appropriate.

The volunteer role in manage-

ment of the A.T. is unprecedented for a major federally-administered recreation facility, but stems from the long tradition of volunteer A.T. stewardship. This 'major facility,' the Appalachian Trail, is sometimes said to be a resource with a soul as well as a body. More than just the body of lands that it traverses, the Trail's soul is said to be 'in the living stewardship of the volunteers and workers of the Appalachian Trail community.' (...quotes from *'Appalachian Trail Management Principles'* (ATC).)

A whole corps of volunteer caretakers, many of them Trail club members from neighboring communities, is out there looking after the Trail. The many local, state and federal employees along the Trail, landowners, and even hikers, also take great satisfaction in their association with the Trail, and lend their support to the management partnership.

These people, collectively, represent the 'soul' of the Appalachian Trail. They have in common an infectious and enduring affection for the A.T. They all become part of a community of concern for the Trail which is pivotal to its long term protection and to its management as a national scenic trail.

The NPS completed a Comprehensive Plan for the Trail in 1981. The Plan established the framework of the cooperative management system, a primary goal of which is to preserve and strengthen the existing volunteer-based management system through agreement on division of responsibilities between volunteer organizations and agencies at the local level. The Compre-

hensive Plan is supplemented by local management plans developed by local Trail clubs and agency partners. These provide more specific policy and program direction for individual sections of the A.T. Plans are further supplemented by various levels of cooperative agreements, which provide clear understandings of the roles and responsibilities of management partners regarding management and protection of the A.T.

A primary cooperative agreement is the one signed between NPS and the ATC in 1970, authorizing the Conference's traditional management activities on the A.T. That agreement was supplemented in 1984 with a landmark "Delegation Agreement" in which NPS conveyed certain management responsibilities for NPS-acquired lands outside of existing federally-administered areas to the ATC and its member clubs. This represented an unprecedented transfer of management responsibility for public lands from a public agency to a private entity, and was important in solidifying neighbor relations.

ATC has risen admirably to the new management challenge, expanding its programs and its professional staff. The local A.T. clubs are well along in the transition from independent Trail maintainers to responsive community-linked managers. The momentum of the protection program has stimulated a maturing of the volunteer effort into a well-organized, responsive network of managers. Many of the clubs have embarked on ambitious programs to identify and meet their Trail neighbors. Local clubs, through the ATC, are

provided with copies of deeds for all NPS-acquired lands. Club members familiarize themselves with the terms of easements and reserved uses so that they can effectively monitor corridor lands. Landowners who have sold easements for the Trail are encouraged to continue their stewardship of lands near the Trail, thus joining the monitoring effort. Problems can usually be handled by a discussion between monitor and the adjacent landowner. Local police and fire jurisdictions, backed up by the agency partner, provide law enforcement or fire assistance when that becomes necessary. This broadening of responsibility marks another significant evolutionary step in the history of the Trail and a major innovative effort by government to have organized volunteers manage public lands.

The Challenge of Being a "Good Neighbor"

So now that we have the Trail mostly protected, have accumulated all kinds of plans and agreements, and have channeled an impressive volunteer resource into a system of "cooperative management," how is it working? What are the problems and challenges? Does the future look bright?

The Appalachian Trail is a long, skinny, vulnerable national park. It has lots of neighbors and involves many jurisdictions. It is more vulnerable than the average park to incursions and external threats, because the boundary to acreage ratio is so high. There is no core, central zone to which you can retreat. Much as the Park

Service likes to buffer its parks, only so much buffer could be bought. A three mile wide corridor can't be purchased. Every vista, every view, can't be protected through land acquisition. Future protection of Appalachian Trail values rests upon the relationships that are established with national forests and parks, state and local agencies, and the people who own land or reside along the Trail. A high degree of communications and an extraordinary amount of coordination work is required to sustain this web of interrelationships and to focus the energies of potential management partners. Trail clubs, the ATC, NPS and USFS alike share in the responsibility for creating a climate of concern for the Trail. It will be critical to the long-term integrity of the A.T. that the Appalachian Trail community develop some ability to influence what happens on lands surrounding the Trail.

And it is working. Awareness of ongoing threats has aroused in the Trail community a sense of concern and vigilance. Threats will continue, but the Appalachian Trail and the experience of hiking it will have to evolve as the world around the Trail evolves. Lands through which the Trail passes are continuously under pressure for different kinds of development. Even in places where the Trail would seem to be securely protected, such as within the boundaries of National Parks and National Forests, proposed activities could adversely affect the Trail. Requests will continue for permission to cross the Trail with power and communication lines, gas lines and roads. They must be

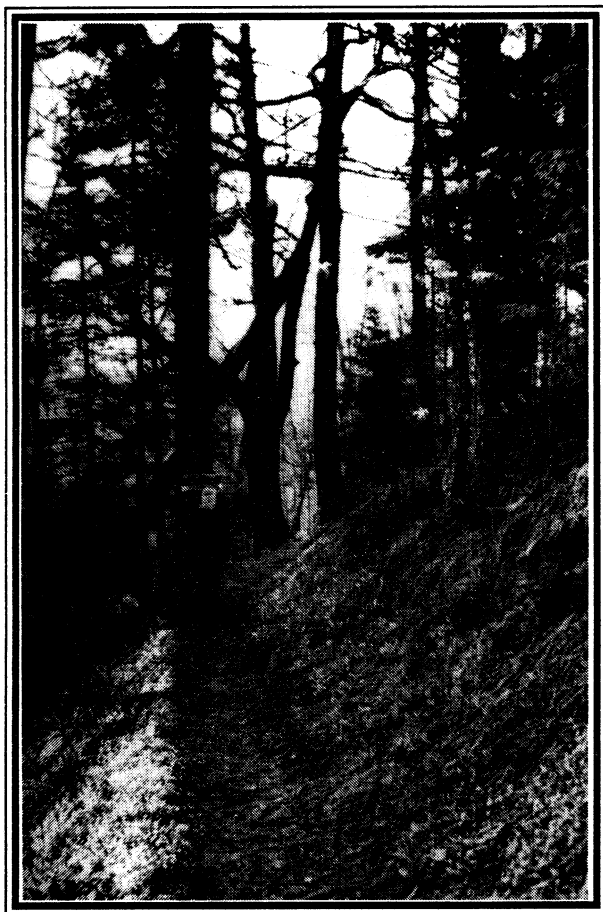
carefully considered, for the A.T. cannot become the Great China Wall of the east coast. Where great public benefit is at stake, our objective becomes to control where and how such crossings occur and to impose satisfactory mitigation, rather than to deny the request. Emphasis also must be on integration with compatible land uses, rather than on an attempt to preclude them.

The other side of the coin from threats to the A.T. is the threat to neighbors posed by the A.T. The gypsy moth offers a case in point. Park Service policy dictates that chemical pesticides will not be used on park lands unless necessary to meet management objectives and no other alternatives exist. This policy has not always sat well with State and county governments or adjoining landowners who want to chemically treat their lands adjacent to the Trail and who believe that non-treatment of A.T. lands will jeopardize the success of their efforts. NPS has bowed to pressure more than once to allow treatment of Trail lands, citing continued good will of our neighbors as one rationale.

I believe the future of the Appalachian Trail looks bright. The cooperative management system is well established and expanding. I think the NPS and the many others who have been involved in the protection of the Trail can take pride and satisfaction in the program and the part they have played in preserving the opportunity for an incomparable recreational experience. A foundation has been laid for continued and growing recognition of the Appalachian Trail as a valued resource and a

good neighbor. Perhaps it also suggests techniques the NPS can

use on neighbor disputes in other situations.



**Thru-Hiker in the Great Smoky
Mountains Section**

[Photo © by Don Fortunato]