
PROTECTING THE A.T. HIKING EXPERIENCE IN GEORGIA



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY1

GUIDING QUESTION FOR TRAIL MANAGERS2

PROBLEM DRIVERS2

 Volume of Visitors..... 3

 Concentration of Visitors in Time and Space..... 7

 Visitor Behaviors - Lack of Leave No Trace Practices..... 11

 Resource Resistance, Siting, and Construction..... 15

 Managerial Setting..... 16

VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT PLANNING PROCESS AND METHODS17

 STEP 1: ESTABLISH THE NEED FOR ACTION 17

 STEP 2: DEFINE THE DESIRED BIOPHYSICAL AND EXPERIENTIAL CONDITIONS 18

 1. Review Existing Guidance 18

 2. Choose Indicators and Metrics for Three Management Zone Types..... 18

 3. Delineate Management Zones..... 22

 STEP 3: COMPARE CURRENT AND DESIRED CONDITIONS 23

 STEP 4: IDENTIFY APPROPRIATE MANAGEMENT TACTICS TO ACHIEVE THE DESIRED CONDITIONS 24

 STEP 5: IMPLEMENT, MONITOR, EVALUATE, AND REVISE 25

DECISION-MAKING CRITERIA26

TACTICS27

ANALYSIS OF VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT TACTICS29

 ELIMINATED TACTICS 29

 RECOMMENDED TACTICS 32

RECOMMENDEDATIONS.....39

APPENDIX A: Legislative Directives for Visitor Use Management on the Trail41

APPENDIX B: Existing Guidelines for the Desired Conditions of the Appalachian Trail.....42

APPENDIX C: Presentation to Establish the Need for Action.....51

APPENDIX D: All Desired Condition Indicators Considered.....62

APPENDIX E: Campsite Inventory Data Collection Fields64

APPENDIX F: Comparison of Current and Desired Conditions by Zone.....67

APPENDIX G: Capacity Estimates Methodology69

APPENDIX H: Visitor Use Management Group Participants.....78

APPENDIX I: References79

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The natural resources and unique recreation opportunities provided by the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (A.T. or the Trail) are endangered by five interrelated threats: an increasing volume of visitors, the concentration of visitors in time and space, insufficient adherence to Leave No Trace practices among visitors, the creation of campsites and trails at nonresistant locations, and the disconnect between visitor expectations and management objectives. Through a combination of heavy, concentrated use and a failure to employ low-impact backcountry behaviors, visitors damage vegetation, water, soil, and wildlife. Loss of solitude due to crowding and aesthetic damage to natural surroundings diminish the visitor experience and displace users seeking backcountry settings. While the A.T. in Georgia already receives high levels of use, management partners anticipate additional visitors of all types after the release of *A Walk in the Woods* (AWITW), a film based on Bill Bryson's popular book about hiking the Trail. Managers expect this influx of visitors to exacerbate existing social and ecological issues.

A visitor use management (VUM) group comprised of representatives from the U.S. Forest Service (Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest), the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, and the Southern Regional Office of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) convened over three months to address both existing and future visitor use impacts. The group followed a multistep planning process to define the desired experiential and biophysical conditions of the trail in Georgia and evaluate strategies and tactics for achieving the desired conditions. The group first identified specific and measurable metrics that define the social, biophysical, and managerial setting trail managers will strive to achieve. The group aligned those desired conditions with the established purpose of the Trail and existing mandates. Using the best available data, the group quantified the gap between current and desired conditions. After identifying a full range of potential strategies and tactics to achieve the desired conditions, the VUM group systematically weighed the value tradeoffs associated with each option before reaching consensus on the most appropriate management actions. Recent recreation ecology findings, campsite impact and visitor use data, field observations, and professional experience guided the group's decisions.

The VUM group recommends that the Appalachian Trail management partners in Georgia implement the following tactics to mitigate or prevent unacceptable damage to the Trail's experiential and biophysical resources:¹

DISTRIBUTE USE ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

1. Design and implement a zone-based voluntary registration system for all overnight users
2. Limit parking at Woody Gap

IMPROVE RESOURCE RESISTANCE AND PROTECT OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOLITUDE

3. Adopt a campsite impact containment system in compliance with desired condition metrics
4. Allow sunlight to reach selected campsites by removing trees

MODIFY VISITOR BEHAVIOR

5. Educate hikers before they arrive: Develop planning tips for an enjoyable experience on or off the Appalachian Trail
6. Place a caretaker at appropriate high use overnight camping areas
7. Require overnight visitors to carry a bear canister between Springer Mt., GA and Damascus, VA
8. Provide hiker prep courses and accredit external hiker prep course curricula
9. Create a one-page hiking guide to be distributed on-trail by volunteers

¹ Any projects or work will adhere to Forest Service process, including National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations, and will be subject to local workloads, funding and other unforeseen shifts in priorities. As a result of these processes, some details of the proposed recommendations are subject to change.