

## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from, and should reflect, park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- **The Trail Itself.** The white-blazed Appalachian National Scenic Trail, which as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts, reflects the vision of its creators, ongoing dedication of its passionate volunteer force, and epitomizes American spirit, ingenuity, and idealism. It now stands as the longest continuously marked and protected trail in the world.
- **Volunteers.** Volunteers are the heart and soul of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. They pioneered and continue a grassroots tradition of service for the Trail and engage in every aspect of its stewardship. Individuals from all walks of life take great pride in their specific trail duties, yet collectively work together toward a shared vision.
- **Partnerships.** The Appalachian National Scenic Trail's model management system is the embodiment of the cooperative spirit. The cooperative management system allows for diverse perspectives and skills from numerous partners to achieve common goals in service to the Trail and visitors.
- **Visitor Experience.** The Appalachian National Scenic Trail offers the opportunity to experience simplicity, self-reliance, adventure, discovery, and connection with nature as a means of slowing down in a fast-paced society. Through the intimate setting of a fern-filled woodland or the sweeping expanse of an alpine ridge, a personal experience on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail has the power to transform and uplift the human spirit, whether traveling solo or as part of a group of fellow hikers.
- **Natural Resources.** The Appalachian National Scenic Trail threads a diverse array of habitats, such as subalpine forests, open balds, rocky outcrops, meadows, and wetlands, providing a haven for abundant flora and fauna, including rare, threatened, and endangered species. The Trail's uninterrupted north-south aspect, long length, and varied habitats provide a living laboratory that serves as an important barometer of climate change and ecological health as well as an avenue for adaptation.
- **American Heritage.** Traversing a mosaic of landscapes inhabited by peoples over thousands of years, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail is home to countless irreplaceable cultural and historic resources. The combination of the Trail, its travelers, and the resources through which it meanders offers an exceptional opportunity to understand American heritage and values through time.
- **Community.** The Appalachian National Scenic Trail inspires rich connections between people and local communities through the common currency of shared experiences and passions about outdoor recreation, open space, and preservation of Trail values for future generations.



Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



# Foundation Document Overview

## Appalachian National Scenic Trail

ME, NH, VT, MA, CT, NY, NJ, PA, MD, WV, VA, TN, NC, GA



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### Contact Information

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## Park Description



The Appalachian National Scenic Trail—commonly referred to as the A.T. and referenced throughout this document as simply the Trail—is a public footpath that traverses more than 2,100 miles of the Appalachian Mountains and valleys between Katahdin, Maine (northern terminus), and Springer Mountain, Georgia (southern terminus). The Trail winds through scenic, wooded, pastoral, wild, and culturally resonant lands along this ancient mountain range. More than 99% of the Trail’s corridor is protected by publicly owned lands.

The Trail has a celebrated grassroots origin. The A.T. idea gained momentum in 1921 with the proposals of Benton MacKaye, a regional planner from Massachusetts. He envisioned a trail as a means to preserve the Appalachian crests and to provide a retreat from increasingly industrialized modern life. The Trail was designed, constructed, and maintained in the 1920s and 1930s by volunteer hiking clubs, brought together by a volunteer-based nonprofit—the Appalachian Trail Conference, now known as the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. Formed in 1925 and based in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy continues to work in partnership with the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), states, local communities, and a federation of 31 volunteer-led hiking clubs. This partnership, along with the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps, combined forces to open a continuous trail by August 1937.

The national significance of the Trail was formally recognized in 1968, when the National Trails System Act established the Appalachian National Scenic Trail as one of the first national scenic trails in the United States. Specifically, this legislation directed the National Park Service, in consultation with the U.S. Forest Service, to administer the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. The National Trails System Act was amended in 1978 to also authorize funds for the two agencies and the states to protect the entire route with public lands. Today, federal and state agencies remain important in the stewardship of the Trail, and volunteers maintain their long-standing and central role as the heart and soul of the Trail.



- **Scenery Along the Treadway.** The Trail offers opportunities to view stunning scenery in proximity to the most populated areas of the United States. Within the boundaries of the protected trail corridor, visitors may see native wildlife and flowers, rustic cultural features, seasonal variations, and dynamic weather patterns in environments such as southern balds, pastoral lands, diverse forests, wetlands, rugged outcrops, and mountainous alpine areas.
- **Views Beyond the Corridor.** Traversing the height of land, Trail visitors are afforded sweeping views of vast landscapes extending beyond the Trail corridor and are exposed to the splendid range of landforms and history along the Appalachian Mountains. Enjoyment of far-reaching views and deep starry nights are dependent on clean air and clear skies.

- **Natural Resource Quality and Ecological Connectivity.** The Trail corridor passes through eight separate ecoregions, linking extensive forest landscapes and an extraordinary variety of aquatic and terrestrial habitats over a distance of more than 2,100 miles. The Trail unifies understanding, management, and protection of representative natural resources at a scale that no other single entity can provide, while offering visitors the chance to see, hear, and feel nature all around them.
- **A Journey through American Heritage.** The lands along the Appalachian National Scenic Trail are rich in history and include the stories of people—American Indians, pioneers, settlers, farmers, as well as early trailblazers and trail advocates such as Grandma Gatewood—and places, wars, industry, and agriculture. The Trail provides a direct physical link between nationally significant areas such as Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, and Green Mountain National Forest.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **The Trail Itself.** The Trail treadway and many of its supporting structures are significant cultural resources that have continuously evolved in response to broad national trends in recreation, conservation, society, and political history.
- **The Empowered Volunteer.** For a century, volunteers under the leadership and guidance of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy have led nearly every aspect of the Trail’s development, management, maintenance, and protection. In 2013, approximately 6,000 volunteers contributed nearly 250,000 volunteer hours, valued at more than \$5 million. The Trail community is a clearinghouse for conservation skills development and is regarded as one of the most capable and professional conservation volunteer forces in the United States.



- **Enduring Collaborative Spirit.** The Trail’s cooperative management system is recognized as the model for national trails and unrivaled in its scale. Local partnerships are the basic building blocks of this intricate system spanning 14 states, 8 national forests, 6 national park units, 2 national wildlife refuges, 24 wilderness areas, 8 national natural landmarks, 3 national historic landmarks, approximately 60 state protected areas, 88 counties, 164 townships and municipalities, and many other areas. The collaborative spirit among these diverse organizations allows for the protection and perpetuation of a national and international treasure.
- **Experience.** Within reach of millions, the Trail attracts visitors each year for hikes as short as an afternoon’s walk and as long as an extended thru-hike from Georgia to Maine. The Trail offers visitors the opportunity to connect with nature and others, relax, and reflect. The Trail also allows people to challenge themselves, physically and mentally, through self-reliant backcountry recreation and long-distance hiking that are among the best in the world.
- **Education.** The Trail and its protected landscape provide opportunities for learning for a broad spectrum of visitors and audiences. Through partnerships with schools, teachers, and educational organizations, the Trail offers access to a variety of educational experiences that enable people to learn about, appreciate, understand, and study the Trail’s natural and cultural heritage and help foster the next generation of stewards.

Trail Map





Purpose

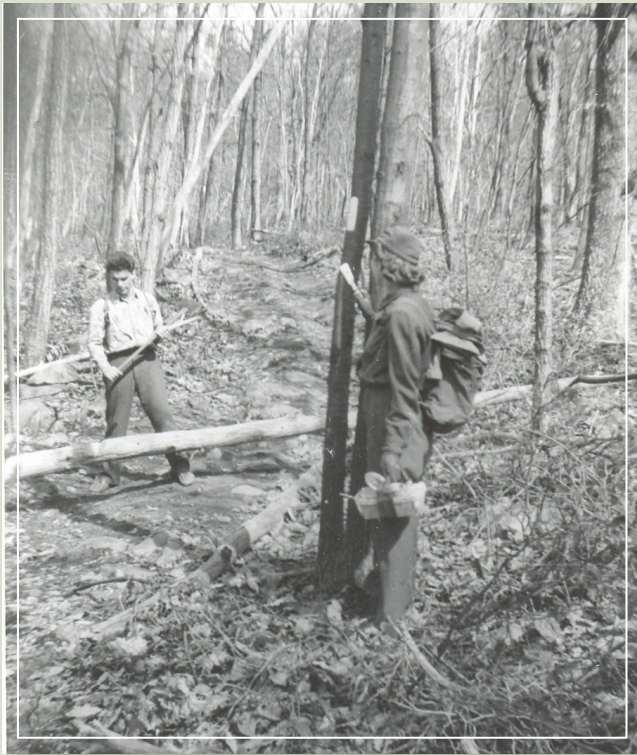
Significance



*The APPALACHIAN NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL is a way, continuous from Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia, for travel on foot through the wild, scenic, wooded, pastoral, and culturally significant landscapes of the Appalachian Mountains. It is a means of sojourning among these lands, such that the visitors may experience them by their own unaided efforts. The Trail is preserved for the conservation, public use, enjoyment, and appreciation of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural and cultural quality of the areas through which the trail passes. Purposeful in direction and concept, favoring the heights of land, and located for minimum reliance on construction for protecting the resource, the body of the Trail is provided by the lands it traverses, and its soul is the living stewardship of the volunteers and workers of the Appalachian Trail community.*

Significance statements express why Appalachian National Scenic Trail resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Conceived, designed, and constructed by volunteers, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail is unprecedented in scale and collaboration. It is one of the longest continuously marked, maintained, and publicly protected trails in the United States and was also one of the nation’s first national scenic trails.
- The Trail is one of the greatest testaments to volunteerism in the nation. Volunteers are the soul of the Trail and, since 1921, have contributed millions of hours to the creation, conservation, promotion, and management of America’s premier long-distance footpath.



- The Trail is an internationally recognized example of a public-private partnership. Hundreds of agencies and organizations, diverse in size and membership, collaborate in the Trail’s management. Their initiative and dedication are fundamental to the preservation, traditions, and integrity of the Trail.
- Traversing 14 states through wildlands and communities, the more than 2,100-mile world-renowned hiking trail and its extensive protected landscape protects the most readily accessible, long-distance footpath in the United States. The Appalachian National Scenic Trail offers healthy outdoor opportunities for self-reliant foot travel through wild, scenic, natural, and culturally and historically significant lands. It provides a range of experiences for people of all ages and abilities to seek enjoyment, inspiration, learning, challenge, adventure, volunteer stewardship, and self-fulfillment, either in solitude or with others.

- The Trail’s varied topography, ecosystem diversity, and numerous view points offer a visual showcase including wild, natural, wooded, pastoral, and historic environments. The Trail offers opportunities for scenic enjoyment, ranging from the subtle beauty of a trillium to tranquil ponds and streams to the grand view of mighty Katahdin.
- The north-south corridor of the Trail, traversing the highest and lowest elevations and myriad microclimates of the ancient Appalachian Mountains, helps protect one of the richest assemblages of temperate zone species in the world and anchors the headwaters of critical watersheds that sustain more than 10% of the population of the United States.
- The Trail corridor is one of the nation’s most significant cultural landscapes, revealing the history of human use and settlement along the Appalachian Mountain range and the resulting distinct regional traditions. Visitors to the Trail have the unique opportunity to interact with the communities and resources representing these diverse eras in U.S. history and prehistory.

