



ATC Policy on Organized Group Use

Adopted March 4, 2015 by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy

Introductory Remarks Applicable to all Appalachian Trail Conservancy Policies

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a §501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works closely with Appalachian Trail clubs and public and private partners to ensure the protection and stewardship of the natural, cultural, and experiential resources of the Appalachian Trail National Scenic Trail (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. ATC's mission is: "To preserve and manage the Appalachian Trail—ensuring that its vast natural beauty and priceless cultural heritage can be shared and enjoyed today, tomorrow and for centuries to come." ATC policies are meant to provide guidance for (a) dissemination to the public, (b) use and implementation by the ATC and A.T. clubs, and (c) managers of land-management and other agencies. It is the agencies, however, who work within their defined procedures to propose, administer, and enforce public policy. ATC policies are recommendations developed to support appropriate, coordinated management.

Policy Statement

Definition and Purpose

"Organized group use" is defined as recreation use sponsored by a nonprofit organization, business, or government agency. Anticipating shifting demographics in the United States and the growing need to ensure the relevancy of the Trail for visitors of all ages and backgrounds, ATC supports carefully managed organized group uses that do not result in significant adverse effects either to Trail resources or the Trail experience. Such carefully managed group uses (a) accommodate new users, (b) assure resource protection, (c) provide recreation opportunities for both existing and potential users, and (d) protect the opportunity for the traditional "Trail experience" as described in the 1997 Policy on the A.T. Experience and Non-Hiking Recreational Uses of Trail Lands.

Benefits of Organized Group Use

Organized group use, whether for profit or not-for-profit, can have many benefits including promoting safe, responsible use of the Trail and advancing "Leave No Trace" practices, offering enriched appreciation of the outdoors through interpretation of the area's natural and cultural history, educating youth, promoting development of a conservation ethic through direct contact with wild-land settings, and helping people connect with nature and develop a sense of their own roles and responsibilities within the larger community of life. Other potential benefits include assistance with monitoring Trail conditions, reporting illegal activity, and performing other essential A.T. management services such as trail maintenance, campsite restoration, and contributing to the economies of rural areas and A.T. Communities™.

Challenges Related to Organized Group Use

Poorly managed organized group use on the A.T. can disproportionately impact natural and cultural resources as well as the Trail experience for all hikers—especially along narrow, remote, or difficult sections of the Trail where hiker densities are relatively low. Impacts from group use can be particularly high at campsites and shelters. Since organized group use often may be serial—that is, a group sponsor might field multiple outings over the course of a season

(e.g., weekly summer camp trips)—mistakes are potentially repeated at the same sites time after time.

Requirements for Organized Group Use

A voluntary trip-notification program and, where required, an agency-established permit, should be established for organized groups of 6 or more on overnight visits, and 15 or more on day visits. Consideration of social and natural-resource carrying capacities should be made before a permit is issued.

This policy on Organized Group Use reaffirms the guidance on group size limitations contained in ATC's 1993 Policy on Special Events and Large Group Use, which states that camping groups should not exceed 10 persons at any one overnight use area, and day use should not exceed 25 persons at any one location, except when a land-managing agency regulation establishes a different limit. Organized groups should be well-acquainted with Leave No Trace practices and voluntary Trail stewardship opportunities prior to embarking on their trips, and should practice both while on the Trail.

Groups of 6 or more, whether "organized" or not, are strongly encouraged to use group campsites where they exist. Land-managing agencies, the ATC and A.T. clubs should work toward designating appropriate locations for group camping for groups of 6 or more. To avoid groups "taking over" the limited space available at shelters, any group of 6 or more should plan to camp in tents they carry, rather than staying in shelters.

Races, Competitive Events, Fundraising Events, Emergency Services Training Events, and other Special Event Group Activities

These activities tend to interrupt the normal use of the Trail, and/or cause significant adverse effects to natural, cultural, and experiential resources. To prevent those interruptions and adverse effects, these activities should be prohibited except: (1) at a time, location, and manner specifically allowed in law; or (2) with concurrence of the ATC and the relevant land-managing agencies, when an activity is an authorized administrative use of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (ANST); or (3) when the relevant land-managing agency has issued a valid permit or written agreement authorizing the activity and the activity both supports the purposes of the ANST and will be conducted in a manner such that it does not cause significant adverse effects to the Trail's natural, cultural, or experiential resources. Additionally, while ATC recognizes that many other organizations are interested in fundraising activities unrelated to the administration of the Appalachian Trail, fundraising of this sort should not occur within the boundaries of the Trail corridor or the Trail management area.

ATC shall work with clubs and land management agencies to develop procedures to implement this policy.