



Appalachian Trail Landscape Partnership

2019 Annual All-Partners Meeting

December 17-18, 2019 | National Conservation Training Center, WV

Executive Summary

Approximately 70 conservation leaders gathered at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia on December 17 and 18 for the annual meeting of the Appalachian Trail Landscape Partnership (ATLP). The ATLP includes representatives from federal and state agencies, nonprofit conservation organizations and local land trusts who are dedicated to connecting the wild, scenic and cultural wonders of the Appalachian Trail and its surrounding landscape. Co-led by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and the National Park Service, the ATLP celebrated five years during December's meeting.

Meeting Goals

- Deepen our understanding about our respective roles as we collaborate to work at scale through learning from current regional partnerships and discussion.
- Refine next year's communications and messaging strategy to ensure it is impactful while serving the needs of partners and the entire landscape initiative.
- Engage with the next generation of conservation leaders and glean from their experiences and efforts to advance landscape-scale conservation.
- Continue to ensure that all our work, to maximum extent possible, focuses on addressing climate change.

Successes and Updates

Staff and partners briefed the group on several important projects that have taken place in 2019:

- A pilot Visual Resources Inventory in the key areas of Nantahala, NC; the Triple Crown region of VA; South Mountain, PA; and Saddleback, ME.
- The Natural Resources Condition Assessment, conducted by the Center for Land Use and Sustainability at Shippensburg University through a cooperative agreement with the Appalachian National Scenic Trail park office (APPA).
- Advocacy on the federal level for legislation that preserves the A.T. landscape and the re-convening of the Appalachian Trail Caucus.
- Another successful year of the Wild East Action Fund, which supported 14 organizations through land protection grants and seven organizations through capacity building grants.

- The continuation of natural resource monitoring along the A.T., which allows the National Park Service’s Northeast Temperate Inventory and Monitoring Network to determine the status and trends of the condition of park ecosystems.
- The addition of the A.T. to the National Register of Historic Places, with inventories of Tennessee, North Carolina and Georgia scheduled for 2020.

Key Questions to Drive Progress

Sessions during the fifth annual meeting explored the following questions:

- What is the “realm”? I.e., what do we want to conserve, restore and expand?
- What is the relationship between the A.T. Landscape Partnership and regional conservation partnerships that exist within the landscape?
- How do we thoughtfully engage and connect with young conservation leaders?
- How do we strengthen ATLP communications, both internally and externally?
- How do we, as a partnership, explore conservation financing to fund landscape conservation work?
- How does the ATLP best incorporate science and research into its work?

Action Items for 2020

- **Defining the “realm:”** Regardless of whether “realm” is the right word for how we talk about the A.T. landscape, it is important to determine what that identity shed—or “Trail shed” is. How do people identify to and connect with the A.T. and its landscape? Answering that question is a first step in defining what exactly the ATLP hopes to accomplish through greater landscape protection.
- **Working at scale:** There are many regional conservation partnerships within the A.T. landscape. How does the ATLP support these local initiatives, and what are the functions of local initiatives within the larger ATLP? The ATLP as a whole has the opportunity to add value to subregional efforts who are accomplishing on-the-ground work, but we have to define what that value looks like.
- **Engaging with young conservation leaders:** Listening to dynamic young conservation leaders during a panel discussion was a good first step in identifying how landscape conservation work can be welcoming and impactful across an ever-changing and diverse audience. Several immediate ideas that came from the panel discussion included 1) identifying audiences within the landscape; 2) meeting those audiences locally; 3) and connecting with those audiences through a ladder of engagement.
- **Strengthening internal and external communications:** After much discussion around the communication goals and messages for the ATLP, the group determined several ideas for next steps, which include:
 - Re-convening a Communications Workgroup within the ATLP
 - Developing a toolkit with ready-to-go templates

- Creating other educational materials or leave-behinds, like a two-pager with core messages
- Determining a list of segmented markets within the “Realm” with tailored messages
- Tackling visual branding, which is an incentive for people to care
 - Logo
 - Slogan
 - Map of the landscape
 - Fundraising appeals
- **Exploring conservation financing:** An A.T. Landscape-specific Conservation Finance Boot Camp through the Conservation Finance Network could allow staff and partners to become more knowledgeable about applying trends and innovations into A.T. landscape conservation work.
- **Incorporating science into the work of the ATLP:** There have been many discussions around ATC and APPA hosting a Science and Stewardship Summit. With the limited capacity of both organization’s staff, is it possible to explore different ways of meeting the objectives of a summit—through a webinar series, for example? Regardless of the medium, there was group consensus around the need to 1) convene a working group to examine and prioritize scientific inventory, synthesis, and prioritization; 2) remember to consider social sciences and the communications piece (storytelling); and 3) consider how and when to hold the event after sufficient advance work.

What is the ‘Realm’?

Recreational Opportunities/Public Access

- The Trail supports local recreation economies
- People are aware of the A.T. and it is easy to access
- The A.T. is psychologically and physically accessible to broad audiences and users

Local Communities and Corridors to/from the A.T.

- Integrate Trail volunteers into local community efforts and community participants into Trail volunteerism
- Educate both Trail users and community of presence, history and importance of the A.T. and of unique local community and opportunities within that community
- Connect community members with the broader ecological benefits of the protected Trail corridor—e.g. water, climate and wildlife
- Strong and mutually beneficial relationship between Trail users and Trail communities, economic and non-economic
- Use signage and wayfinding to connect the Trail to communities and to help hikers navigate the community to reach amenities and resources

- The community realm is attentive to and engaged in the ongoing preservation of the Trail from external threats
- Overall BHAG: Continue to grow the relationship and trend of Trail to corridor, corridor to communities, communities to landscape as we move to expand “Beyond Benton” in our vision and scope

Visual and Scenic Resources (Both Directions)

- Local, scenic and cultural resources to be conserved within the Trail landscape, especially those resources that support outdoor recreation
- Ask the community what they value and what they want to conserve
- Cultural and ecological inventory
- Exotic plant and animal management based on joint decision making
- Working state-by-state, ID areas of greatest risk and vulnerability and ID partners to work with
- Quantify the value of these resources and translate that to a state-by-state funding ask. Local economic development efforts to raise the profile of these resources (quantitative + qualitative = value of sense of place)
- ID visuals that connect or could connect to the hiker and Trail community
- Use resources for regulation and enforcement
- Maintain, update and expand visuals that encourage easy on-ramps to the Trail from neighboring communities
- Challenges to ID realm with visual and scenic resources include external factors, development pressures, state laws, etc.
- Opportunities include redirecting the Trail to minimize impact on visuals and engaging local artists to showcase and share these visual assets

Cultural Heritage

- Holistic cultural understanding and acknowledgement (redefining “cultural heritage”)
- Examples of stories: Native American tribes; African American settlements; “Beyond Benton”; Revolutionary/Civil Wars
- Connecting the hiker experience to history and culture of A.T. Communities and the A.T.
- Ideas for delivery: Technology; signage; statements of acknowledgement (diverse reach)

Ecological Qualities (Watersheds, Wildlife, etc.)

- Ecological corridors that sustain ecological functions and health at both local and regional scales
- North/south corridor for flora and fauna in a time of escalating climate change
- Protecting and restoring headwater streams and water sources
- Managing for increased carbon storage
- Forest and land management for invaluable ecosystem services

- A.T. Realm as a barometer of health of the Wild East
- Habitat corridor for safe passage and health of plant and animal species at different scales
- A healthy realm with clean air for all species
- Enhance and protect habitat redundancy and resiliency to mitigate threats from storms, fire, flood, disease, and other stressors
- Maintain and enhance the A.T. landscape's ability to serve as a carbon sink
- Preserve and enhance ecological connectivity of the A.T. corridor and surrounding lands to maximize its role as a refuge to migrating plants and wildlife communities

Pastoral lands and Landscapes

- Protect and ensure a gradient—a continuum—a quality of place, into perpetuity
- Perpetuate land uses to maintain the cultural system
- Encourage a cultural rhythm of the seasons (community connections, farmers markets, etc.)
- Get locals to the Trail; get hikers on the Trail to events and festivals
- Broaden the A.T. Community focus
- Enrich, replenish the connection from ridgetop to bottomland

Forests and Wildlands

- Ecological function—ecosystem services and social benefits
- Protect that ecological function (resiliency, connectivity, biodiversity) which in turn protects ecosystem services (carbon sequestration, clean air and water) as well as natural areas allowing people to connect with nature and each other to experience wildness, solitude, night skies, etc.

What's Missing?

- The Visitor Experience: soundscapes; social vs. solitude; odorscapes; air quality; night skies
- Partner Engagement: who is in it?; Trail partners; landscape partners; legislators and policymakers; urban centers
- Relevancy: diversity; public health; education; personal experience
- Commerce: economic stability; geotourism
- Environmental/social justice

Communications & Engagement: Building Support for Conservation Across the Realm

I. What are we talking about when we talk about landscape protection?

- Protecting our heritage and our shared landscape
- Ensuring threats are mitigated
- Recognizing the economic value of this work
- Reminding people that the A.T. is more than just a footpath, and people are part of the “whole”
- Providing for future generations
- Inspiring others through a big vision

II. Who is our audience?

- Policy & decision makers (federal, state and local)
- Intra-agency staff and inter-agency staff
- Tourism bureaus
- Land planners
- Landowners, including rural landowners
- Those who live within the “Realm”
- Foresters
- Board and volunteer leadership
- Organizational staff
- Donors & prospective donors
- Nonprofit partners
- Volunteers
- Hiking Clubs, including A.T. Maintaining Clubs
- Recreationists
- Traditional and non-traditional users
- The “dreamers”
- Researchers, scholars, scientists, etc.
- The media
- Local businesses
- Veterans
- Youth
- Urban centers
- Underrepresented communities
- Public health sector
- Large-landscape practitioners
- People who don't currently care

III. Primary goals of our communications work:

- Recognizing the diversity of resources and values across the landscape through tailored messaging
- Amplifying climate resilience and carbon mitigation messaging
- Ensuring our messaging is not threatening—we do not want our work to appear as a “land grab”—but instead, is inspiring and positive so it connects and resonates
- Ensuring we are communicating a clear motivating factor—i.e. “saving land for the future generation”
- Enabling our partners to leverage the iconic brand of the A.T. through local campaigns
- Attracting funding for land conservation on a local, state and federal level
- Describing and sharing how people can be engaged in this work
- Demonstrating that ATLP’s work is mutually beneficial for Trail Club volunteers
- Communicating how landscape protection supports the needs and interests of urban populations—they are part of the landscape
- Talking less and listening more to our audiences
- Turning recreationists into conservationists (How do we activate this group? How is this measured?)
- Reminding people that all this could change—you are part of the solution to mitigating climate change
- Battling against the dilution of the message

IV. Ideas for next steps:

- Toolkit with ready-to-go templates
- Other educational materials or leave-behinds, like a two-pager with core messages
- A list of segmented markets within the “Realm” with messages that can be tailored
- Visual branding, which is an incentive for people to care
 - Logo
 - Slogan
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ATLP Draft Workplan

Goal 1: Accelerate the pace and scale of science and research informed, A.T. landscape conservation, ensuring the A.T. and its surrounding lands remain the largest contiguous landscape east of the Mississippi.

- Support collaborative efforts to conserve land in focal areas through annual land protection grants from the Wild East Action Fund.

- Build the capacity of local partners to conserve land through annual grants from the Wild East Action Fund.
- Advance Regional Conservation Partnership (RCP) models across the A.T. landscape, including state government driven conservation efforts.
- Conduct a Trail-wide Visual Resources Inventory (VRI) of the A.T., building upon the 2019 VRI pilot conducted at four locations in NC, VA, PA and ME. By the end of 2019, submit a proposal to complete VRI of NJ and PA in 2020 and 2021.
- Showcase efforts of the Northern A.T. Landscape Partnership and its conservation model so lessons learned can be replicated across the A.T. landscape.
- Convene a Science & Stewardship Symposium to learn and build a cadre of scientists and universities that focus research and scholarship on the A.T.
- Continue collaborative focal area mapping efforts and make all analytical tools available to ATLP members.

WHAT'S MISSING?

- Goal articulates “science and research informed,” but few strategies here clearly articulate how science and research can be used in the strategies (i.e. defining/refining focal areas) or awarding grants
- Develop and define scenic code sections (policies) to be used for land conservation at state and local levels
- Need to use science and research to prioritize highest priority conservation needs first. This is the task for next two years, not accelerated conservation. We are not there yet
- Defining/performing the scenic resource analysis is key for public funding
- What is the basis for 50,000 acres? Grants described fund capacity and conservation work, but maybe not science. Prioritize using science to identify conservation metrics and successes
- Complete 30+ visual inventory sites in Nantahala
- Convene a working group to examine and prioritize scientific inventory, synthesis, prioritization, including social science and science values for communications, and consider how and when to hold a symposium after sufficient advance work
- Explore corporate funding partnerships for land protection
- Develop a regional conservation fund to pay transaction costs for donated easements within the A.T. landscape
- Need to add: Assess regional landscape groups (“subregional”) trail wide. Highstead has Maine to Hudson. Chesapeake Conservancy/LandScope has the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Need the rest to south
- Financing—tax credits? Working with A.T. Caucus. Legislative Working Group should attend Funding Bootcamp
- Define “permanently protected” e.g. it is not necessarily transferred into Federal ownership

- 50,000 acres—what kind of acres? E.g. wetlands? Woodlands?

Goal 2: Build community support and engagement in sustaining the A.T. landscape over time, elevating the awareness of the A.T. landscape as a national and global resource to increase the urgency regarding its protection.

- Utilize existing communication channels to tell stories about landscape conservation work to inspire other efforts.
- Establish a Communications Working Group within the ATLP to foster a more collaborative approach to the development and implementation of a partnership-wide communications strategy.
- Initiate consultation with 34 Federally Recognized Tribes.
- Support efforts to list the A.T. on the National Register of Historic Places. Continue work with project partners to refine existing state drafts for ME, NH, VT, MA, CT, NY, PA, WV and VA. Complete inventories of TN, NC and GA in 2020, and MD and NJ in 2021. Continue consultation with American Indian Tribes on this project. When this work is completed, ensure a public communications strategy is in place.
- Through the creation of a Legislative Working Group within the ATLP, explore an A.T. legislative package aimed at supporting outdoor recreation economies while protecting natural resources.

WHAT'S MISSING?

- ATLP should make a national messaging and media strategy a high priority and use it to support regional conservation efforts
- Targeted marketing towards lawmakers and policymakers
- Need municipal outreach—we can't buy it all! "Buy the best, zone the rest."
- Develop A.T.-related code that all states and localities can adopt
- Work with Cherokee Trail of Tears
- Translate the science and data which grounds landscape protection work
- Clarify what we need from each sector, then develop a plan and reach them
- Expand A.T. Caucus
- Advocate for \$3.2 billion LWCF funding
- Synthesize data sets into a few fearful statistics and hopeful statistics to use in marketing/telling the story of importance and urgency

Goal 3: Foster vibrant and supportive communities throughout the A.T. landscape.

- Encourage collective conversations within A.T. Communities that ensure balanced outdoor recreation and landscape conservation efforts.
- Engage with existing state outdoor recreation offices while also researching the status of A.T. states without outdoor recreation offices.

WHAT'S MISSING?

- Develop a strategy to engage with more diverse communities
- Analyze government partners and determine best connections (SCORP? LWCF? Outdoor Recreation offices?)
- Engage other outlets within the communities and leverage and provide grant funding for communities

Goal 4: Strengthen the ATLP by ensuring its foundation is solid and its partnerships are robust.

- Bring together partners from across the A.T. landscape each year to learn, engage in strategic thinking, and build community.
- Attract Steering Committee members of significant stature who can assist with priority needs.
- Expand and diversify participation in the ATLP through intentional outreach.
- Establish effective internal communications with partners.
- Expand financial support for the ATLP by leveraging The Volgenau Foundation grant and seeking additional funding under the guidance of an ATLP Fundraising Advisory Group.
- Build partnership with members of the Steering Committee to focus on shared projects through the establishment of ATLP Working Groups (Communications; Fundraising; Legislative; Mapping; and Science & Stewardship Planning).

WHAT'S MISSING?

- Strengthen ATLP by ensuring strong governance, forward momentum, and robust partnerships
- For 2020 ATLP meeting: a productive product that shows progress and/or implementation to some degree
- Take stock of funding sources and share with this group
- Build a common understanding of mission and vision among partners and reiterate before meetings
- Advocate for alignment of priorities and connect with funders (also advocate for funding)
- Inventory top 250 corporations corporate and social responsibility focus areas and track (they change) and target areas for funding
- Need to add: Start working like a network. Train up the Steering Committee and this group on network systems theory to help us work smarter, not harder. Then, train up subregions
- Consider a backbone organization or staff to coordinate the partnership, to tighten the organization of the partnership
- Internal communications means all ATLP partners are on the same page

- Need Governance and Structure Working Group
- Learn effective organization from other large landscape models, including the Chesapeake Bay Partnership
- Develop a network for academic institutions to be involved in the ATLP
- More structured, empowered and visible Steering Committee
- Need to add: Managing Steering Committee and annual meetings to optimize strategic review of working group progress and achieve demonstrable progress toward conservation goals