

## **Case Story: Melding Views of Diverse Stakeholders into an Enduring and Inspiring Plan for the Future of the Appalachian Trail**

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**Context:** Begun in 1925, the historic Appalachian Trail was developed by volunteers, opened as a continuous trail in 1937, and designated as the first National Scenic Trail in 1968. It is managed and maintained collaboratively by an elected Board of Managers, the A.T. Park Office (within the National Park Service, Dep't of Interior), the 30+ person Appalachian Trail Conservancy Staff and 31 trail-maintaining clubs located along the 2100 mile span of the trail running from Georgia to Maine.

**The Challenge:** The combination of challenges inherent in managing, maintaining and preserving the trail, including the constant growth of surrounding communities, increased number of hikers and other less compatible users (e.g. ATVs, cell towers), and evolving environmental concerns, was exacerbated by the disparate views, goals and values of its diverse stakeholders. Creating agreement and support for management strategies and priorities had become nearly impossible. Economic challenges resulting in salary freezes and program cuts was making reprioritization of goals a necessity.

**What We Did:** We met with representatives of the Board, staff and ATPO to understand the challenges, clarify objectives, and identify members to serve as a steering committee that would work with us to outline a specific plan. Together, we generated a plan that included:

- Gathering and analyzing information about stakeholder views via survey and interview
- Designing a 'summit' that would bring together representatives of all stakeholder groups to
  - Identify and agree on a Vision for the trail and its management in the future
  - Fully understand the current challenges, threats and opportunities
  - Generate possible strategies for moving toward the Vision
  - Agree on the highest priorities and strategies to be adopted

We designed a three-day 'Summit', held in a beautiful rustic Department of Interior facility in Shepherdstown, W. VA. that was attended by 150 people representing all of the trail-maintaining clubs, ATC Staff and Board and the US ATPO, including Directors. Facilitated by us (and a small army of data runners/crunchers), the Summit provided opportunities for all in attendance to participate in discussions regarding the future of the trail. Specifically, they:

- Shared their own stories of what drew them to the trail
- Learned the current state of the trail and challenges of trail management
- Explored issues related to the relationship between clubs, government, land managers and staff
- Identified specific issues and problems that needed to be addressed & resolved
- Generated and rank ordered suggestions for management priorities going forward

**Outcomes:** After acknowledging and discussing the tensions and differing points of view across the parts of the organization, those present were able to generate a shared vision for the future of the Appalachian Trail itself. In addition, they were able to agree on specific strategies and actions to be taken and how these would be prioritized. These included:

- Increasing protection of the trail
- Developing new sources of funding for programs that enhance the hiking experience
- A new level of unity and support across all stakeholders

*"Those may seem like obvious priorities,.....but it was important for a group of people representing all the partners to work through this process together", ATC Chairman of the Board and Executive Director*