



Appalachian Trail Centennial Act and Supporting National Trails

BACKGROUND: The National Trails System Act (NTSA) provided the legal framework to integrate the Appalachian National Scenic Trail's (ANST) Cooperative Management System (CMS) into the federal public lands system. This landmark statute, inspired in large part by the Appalachian Trail, has enabled the creation of 32 National Scenic and Historic Trails, over 1,000 National Recreation Trails, and led to the establishment of dynamic conservation, recreation, and educational networks grounded in partnership. The 56 years of the NTSA have been filled with successes and have highlighted opportunities. ATC would like to use its 100th anniversary to advance the development of National Scenic and Historic Trails (NSHTs) by clarifying existing policy, recognizing “Designated Management Partners,” and providing experience-based guidance to Congress on how to further advance the National Trails System through the Appalachian Trail Centennial Act (ATCA).

STATEMENTS OF POLICY: The NTSA was both visionary for its time and conservative in its scope. The ANST is the first federal-NGO “partnership park” ever created and, because of that, has never been statutorily recognized as such, including in the NTSA. NSHTs were always intended to be partnership conservation units, relying on an interplay and sharing of responsibilities between federal “trail administrators,” land managers/owners, and private entities (often non-governmental organizations, or NGOs). These shared responsibilities are why volunteers and “volunteer organizations” (like the Appalachian Trail Conservancy) are authorized under the NTSA for a wide range of activities that, on other public lands, are exclusively allowed for federal employees. These statements of policy will make it clearer to Congressional offices, Executive branch officials, and “private” partners the importance of shared stewardship in making NSHTs successful.

DESIGNATED OPERATIONAL PARTNERS: When the NTSA was written, it wasn't yet apparent that the incorporation of the NGO-led Appalachian Trail would result in the exceptional conserved resource the ANST is today, nor was it clear that the model of conservation would be so frequently sought to be replicated. In the few updates to the NTSA, each was to provide greater clarity and to protect the role of volunteers and volunteer organizations to provide significant support and leadership for NSHTs. Most NSHTs have at least one organization working closely with federal and state partners to develop their trails. These trail leaders are often understood locally, but not nationally. Creating a statutory class for these organizations—Designated Operational Partners—will reflect their deep ties to their cooperatively managed resource and its partners and dispel confusion about what their role is. It will also help them advance the cooperative/collaborative management practices NSHTs rely on as without cooperative management, no NSHT can be successful.

REPORTS TO CONGRESS: The ANST is the most developed of all NSHTs, in part because of the size of its volunteer corps and attention their work garners from Congress. Many other NSHTs have suffered for lack of attention and support, as well as agency-wide understanding of how to support these dynamic conservation networks. The ATCA requires trail administrators to collaborate with cooperative management partners to develop and report to Congress on NSHT visitation, economic impact, recreational amenities, and how to further develop the National Trails System.

CONCLUSION: The ATCA will be a valuable tool for cooperative management, further securing the roles of volunteers and volunteer organizations as well as ensuring that NSHTs receive the same kind of attention and support other public land units do. It will bake into agency decision-making support of the dispersed, expert corps of volunteers on NSHTs and unlock further trail development opportunities.