

CHAPTER 3 (B)

SPECIAL EVENTS AND LARGE-GROUP USE

“During the 1972 A.T. Conference at Plymouth, I led a hike of 60 conference members up to Liberty Springs. We met a group of 90 going in the opposite direction. People spread out through the forest, trampling an area about 100 feet wide, to pass through and around each other.”

—Anonymous Hike Leader

Use of the Appalachian Trail by large groups, commercial outfitters, sponsored spectator events, and races or endurance competitions generates impacts that are inconsistent with the concept of a simple footpath. Large groups can cause serious damage to soils along the margins of the foot-path and trample vegetation over wide areas when they congregate at views and lunch spots. An encounter with a large group of people on the Trail also can have a detrimental effect on the experience of a hiker seeking solitude or a small group of hikers seeking to “get away from it all.”

Additionally, ATC, Trail clubs, and agency partners receive frequent complaints about groups monopolizing shelter space, leaving no space available for others. The individuals registering these complaints invariably make reference to the Trail community’s emphasis on providing a Trail environment where individuals can seek solitude and personal accomplishment.

Policies on large-group use and commercial activities along the A.T. depend partially on the direction set by the land-managing agency. Restrictions on group size and purpose are most strict within established national parks and designated wilderness areas. Clubs should work closely with public landowning agencies to promote clear direction at the local level on special events and large-group use.

Although large-group use is generally inconsistent with the purposes of the Trail and should be discouraged in most cases, occasions might arise when such uses serve desirable ends and can be considered as a permitted use. In these instances, local A.T. managers should consider various approaches for minimizing the impacts of the proposed use upon the Trail environment and the experience of other visitors.

Existing Policy

ATC Policy—ATC’s Board of Managers adopted a group-use policy in November 1987. In November 1993, the policy was amended slightly to clarify the wording. The amended policy reads as follows:

- Local clubs should consider how to best accommodate groups by

reducing group size or by other means that would allow use to take place while protecting Trail values.

- Groups spending one or more nights on the Trail should not exceed 10 members at any one overnight-use area, and day-use groups should not exceed 25 members at any one location, unless clubs designate otherwise in their local-management plans.
- Shelters along the Appalachian Trail normally provide space for no more than six to 12 individuals. As a courtesy to other users, groups whose numbers meet or exceed the capacity of a Trail shelter should make arrangements to camp in accordance with local policies.
- Trail clubs and agency partners should consider designating or constructing campsites specifically for use by groups of 10 or less in or near areas where group overnight use at Trail shelters has caused resource damage or resulted in frequent complaints from other Trail users.
- ATC and its member clubs should encourage organizations that simultaneously deploy multiple groups on the Trail (such as summer camps and college outing clubs) to consider their impact on the Trail and other users of the Trail. Where practical, ATC, Trail clubs, and agencies should assist these organizations in developing alternatives that meet their organizational goals, while preserving the Trail experience for other users.
- Clubs and agencies should develop education and outreach programs to inform users of this policy and to encourage peer pressure and voluntary compliance.
- All ATC guidebooks and other publications will be revised as appropriate to be consistent with this management principle.

Note: I did not find anything in the 2006 document that was inconsistent with the previous draft so I am just going to stick with what that said:

NPS Policy - The National Park Service strictly limits special events, assemblies, military maneuvers, and commercial activities in national park units and often must do an environmental assessment before issuing a permit for such activities. These “special events” are prohibited unless “there is a meaningful association between the park area and the event, the observance contributes to visitor appreciation or understanding of the park, and a permit has been issued by the Superintendent.” (*Code of Federal Regulations*, Title 36, Section 2.50)

A.T. Comprehensive Plan states:

- Commercial endeavors designed to profit from visitor use are not an acceptable component in the Trail corridor.
- Management actions will discourage activities that would degrade the Trail's natural and cultural resources or social values, such as use by groups or organizations involved in promotion, sponsorship, or participation in spectator events or competitive activities, or by groups which by their size or commercial interest generate use which is inconsistent with the concept of a simple footpath.

Considerations For Planning

Inventory—Unless the club has developed or plans to develop group-use sites, no inventory is necessary. If the club does maintain any group-use sites, a short list of these sites and any restrictions that may apply is sufficient.

Setting Club Policy—In developing club policies for large-group use, clubs should emphasize that large groups are in most cases incompatible with the purposes of the Trail. The club may wish to sanction large-group use on a case-by-case basis, but in doing so, the following ideas should be considered:

1. Can organized groups use the A.T. in the “off season” (before Memorial Day or after Labor Day)?
2. Are there constraints to late-spring use by large groups (such as impacts to soft soils, vegetation, or rare plants during spring thaws)?
3. Can large groups find their own overnight accommodations off the A.T.? Does the club maintain group-use sites where large groups can be accommodated?
4. Are there particular sections of the A.T. that have modest slopes, well-drained soils, and/or rocky treadways that can accommodate heavy use?
5. Does a particular group have good leadership and internal control to ensure responsible use?
6. Is the proposed use likely to conflict with popular use areas?
7. Does Trail-club literature request large groups to contact the club prior to going out on the Trail?

Action Plan—No action plan is necessary.