

Geocaching along the A.T.

Issue: Growth in Geocaching along the A.T.

Background: Geocaching, described as “equal parts sport, culture, and treasure hunt,” involves participants hiding a cache (a stash of goods) in a remote location and recording its exact position using a hand-held global positioning system (GPS) unit. The coordinates, along with a few helpful hints, are then posted on the World Wide Web (www.geocaching.com is the most popular site) for other geocachers to look up. Then, armed with a GPS unit, enthusiasts seek a route to the site to search for the hidden cache.

Geocaching emerged after the government brought an end to “selective availability,” a process by which the U.S. military regularly degraded location signals from its satellites that GPS needed to work. Before, only military units would work accurately, and GPS users could expect their units to be accurate only to about 100 meters. Now, recreational GPS units can guide you to within meters of your destination. This newfound accuracy spawned geocaching, a modern hide-and-seek game for those pursuing a new use for their techno-gadgets.

Current Situation: As of April 2008, 558,643 (compared with 340,000 in December, 2006), geocaches are active worldwide, with the number of sites and participants growing weekly. Because route-finding is part of the attraction of the activity, with the excitement multiplied through the power of the World Wide Web, impacts such as visitor-created trails and damage to specific cultural and natural resources— Revolutionary or Civil War encampment walls and stone piles, as well as rare and endangered species—is growing.

Geocaching has raised a debate among land managers across the country who question both the appropriateness and legality of placing caches on federal, state, or local park and forest lands. Overzealous geocachers, in their mission to hide or find secret stashes, may disrupt sensitive resources, such as natural- or cultural-heritage sites. Some states, such as Maryland, have adopted interim rules allowing this activity with prior permits; others are still evaluating their options or ignoring the issue. Because federal regulations prohibit abandonment of property, disturbance of damage of natural features, and, in some national parks, off-trail hiking, most NPS sites do not permit geocaching. The Office of NPS Policy is now providing guidance to parks for their consideration of permitting for such activities. Both the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are also providing varying levels of policy and/or guidance for managing geocaching.

Proposed ATC Policy on Geocaching

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy seeks to preserve and protect the scenic, cultural, and natural resources of the Appalachian Trail and the Appalachian Trail experience, as defined by the National Trails System Act and ATC policy. To this end, ATC seeks to cooperatively address geocaching with its agency partners, trail maintaining clubs and other interested groups.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy recognizes that geocaching offers a unique and social approach to exploring the outdoors that may appeal to a growing segment of outdoor enthusiasts. At the same time, the Conservancy also recognizes the potential drawbacks of practicing this activity, which may include resource degradation, infringement of property rights, and/or conflicts with trail use ethics. Therefore, to mitigate these concerns, the Conservancy acknowledges that geocaching and similar activities along the Appalachian National Scenic Trail may be appropriate, *but only under the following conditions:*

1. Where geocaching is expressly permitted and managed by the appropriate land manager.
- ~~1.2.~~ Where written permission has been obtained in advance from the appropriate land manager or private land owner, providing a specific timeframe and location for the activity, and
- ~~2.3.~~ Where proper care is taken to avoid damage caused by digging or trampling to vegetation, archeological, cultural or historic resources, trail tread or other fragile resources in the area.

Additionally, any geocaching activities occurring within the A.T. corridor must conform to other ATC and agency policies. ATC strongly supports agency prohibitions where needed to protect Trail resources and the visitor experience. ATC believes that all geocaches that do not meet the above criteria should be removed from Appalachian Trail lands.

The Conservancy's effort to manage geocaching along the A.T. will include the following elements:

- Working with appropriate land management partners to ensure protection of Trail resources from the potential impacts of geocaching.
- Education and outreach for those engaging in geocaching along the A.T., including contact information for ATC regional offices.
- Providing guidance to Trail-maintaining clubs for dealing with geocaches and geocaching impacts.
- Monitoring and cataloging existing caches along the A.T. as well as newly placed caches.