



# BAXTER STATE PARK AUTHORITY



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November 19, 2014

Ron Tipton, Executive Director  
Appalachian Trail Conservancy  
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P.O. Box 807  
Harper's Ferry, WV 25425-0807

Wendy Janssen  
Appalachian Trail Park Office  
PO Box 50  
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425-0050

Dear Ron and Wendy,

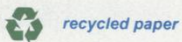
I'm writing to document increasing concerns we are having with the accommodation of Appalachian Trail hikers within Baxter State Park.

### Background

Baxter State Park hosts the northernmost 15 miles of the Appalachian Trail, including the terminus of the 2,180 mile trail at Baxter Peak on Katahdin. The Appalachian Trail (AT) within Baxter Park utilizes existing hiking trails that are part of the 225 mile Park trail system. While much of the AT is designated as a National Scenic Trail, within the boundaries of Baxter State Park the AT has no federal designation and is under the control of the Baxter State Park Authority. Baxter State Park is managed as a large public trust and is governed by the Baxter State Park Authority. The Authority is guided in the administration of the Park by the Trustor's formal deeds and communications that specify how he wished the Park to be managed. The trust communications provide no direct reference to the AT or its accommodation within the Park.

Northbound (NoBo) hikers following the white blaze exit the 100 Mile Wilderness, walk a short distance east on the Golden Road, cross the trucking bridge spanning the West Branch of the Penobscot River and usually stop to purchase a few items at the privately run Abol Bridge store before hiking further east to get back on the white blazed trail and head into the Park. Crossing a footbridge over Abol Stream with unobstructed views of Katahdin, they encounter a sign denoting the Park boundary. About 100 yards further, they find a kiosk with A.T. information and a self-explanatory sign-up sheet for AT hikers staying overnight at the Birches Distance Hiker site. From mid-July to late

Ron Tipton & Wendy Janssen, AT Conservancy Letter  
November 19, 2014  
Page 1 of 9 (including enclosures)



“TO PRESERVE AND PROTECT”

October an A.T. Steward is contracted by the Park and typically greets everyone passing by this location. (See enclosed Map)

Baxter Park has maintained consistent statistics for several decades on the use of the Park by AT hikers. The AT has seen significant and steady increases in use since the 1970's. In 2013, total number of thru hikers and section hikers using the AT in Baxter was 1,862 or approximately 3% of our total Park visitation of 63,474 individuals. (See enclosed charts showing cumulative totals)

In 1962, Percival Baxter purchased the final acreage he would buy in creating Baxter State Park. In 1997, the Baxter State Park Authority, using money from Park trust funds, purchased lands along the West Branch of the Penobscot, including the section of the AT corridor on which the AT information kiosk sits. Today, the A.T. continues to grow in popularity while Baxter State Park has also experienced many changes in visitation and operational policies since the 1930's. When Earl Schaffer first thru-hiked the A.T. access to the trail, camping equipment, availability of accommodations and communication technology were all very different. The Park has consistently supported the management of Katahdin as the northern terminus of the AT in a positive and responsive manner while still remaining true to our mission and responsibilities.

Although the Appalachian Trail is not a designated commitment in our Trust mission, we have enjoyed a long relationship with Appalachian Trail hikers, and the managers of the AT the ATC and the NPS. Over the years, we have implemented a number of policy, structural and administrative functions in order to effectively accommodate the somewhat unique needs of AT hikers entering Baxter Park. Some of the ways we meet the needs of the impact of AT hikers on the Park are listed below:

- The Park provides **The Birches camping site**: 12 spots saved for distance hikers on a sign-up basis. This is the only situation in which campsites are available in BSP without prior reservation.
- The Park funds a **15-week position** stationed near Abol Bridge and dedicated solely to greeting AT thru hikers and authorized to assist hikers by obtaining advance reservations in public campgrounds when The Birches is full or for hikers who want to join family members. Park support of this position includes salary, housing, uniform and radio issue.
- The Park maintains an **information kiosk** built and located to provide information for distance hikers along the AT Corridor on the West Branch Lands
- **Park Information & Education staff provide annual training on BSP policies for all MATC ridgerunners.**
- The Park produces and distributes an **informational brochure** developed specific to Distance Hikers visiting BSP
- The Park provides **Website info posted** for Distance Hikers and relays updated information to ATC Harper's Ferry

- The Park provides a “**One Pager**” developed and mailed to NH and ME hostels and other info outlets each season to provide up to date information on prices, policies and camping and hiking in Baxter Park.
- **Extensive and ongoing radio communications** pertaining to AT hikers July – October, including assisting with arranging pickups, informing family, obtaining campsites, etc.
- The Park maintains **consistent AT use statistics regarding** numbers of SoBo/NoBo thru hikers, SoBo, NoBo section hikers, flip floppers, number of AT distance hikers camping in Birches, etc.
- Attendance when feasible to **MATC/ATC sponsored agency partner events**
- **One year round supervisory field ranger + one year round administrative staff are tasked with liaison duties for this user group.**

#### Current Issues

While there are refreshing exceptions (including the former thru hikers we hire as AT Stewards!), most staff would agree that as a group, AT hikers require special attention and resources in order for us to uphold the Park mission. **The AT model seems to be based on unlimited growth in use while BSP operates under a fixed capacity model.** For instance, 2012 was the first season more than 700 NoBo hikers finished the trail; in 2014 Katahdin Stream registered 901 NoBo thru hikers (May-October 2014). It seems likely the numbers of AT hikers is poised to increase in upcoming seasons due to increasing popularity with college age hikers and greater exposure in mainstream and social media.

2014 has posted records numbers of AT hikers entering the Park during our busiest summer period. We have serious concerns about the impacts of a significant increase in AT hikers. The culture and attitude of many AT hikers seems to be changing. Some of the trends we have observed in recent years include:

- **AT hikers are open and deliberate in their desire for freedom from all rules and regulations** during their thru hike but fulfilling our Park mission at times involves the use of some regulations. The regulations/policies most often questioned or violated by AT hikers:  
 \$10/night camping fee at the Birches  
 Camping permitted only in designated sites in Baxter  
 No pets allowed within BSP  
 No public drinking of alcohol (summit of Katahdin)  
 12 person camping limit at the Birches
- Modern AT hikers exhibit a **desire to travel together in large numbers**, congregating on the trail in large groups even as the Park has recently joined all other land management agencies in the Northeast in limiting hiking group size beginning in 2013 (in BSP: 12 people or less/group). Despite extensive I & E tools and staff efforts to explain the origin and purpose of the Park to this visitor group, distance hikers increasingly view the AT corridor in the Park as a means

to an end and the summit of Katahdin as a backdrop to their human achievement.

- Complaints from Park hikers and concern from BSP staff about loud parties and disrespectful **drinking of alcohol and use of recreational drugs in full view at the summit**. This behavior detracts from the summit experience for other hikers on Katahdin, including families with children. The inconsiderate behavior does not represent use the Park supports or encourages anywhere in the Park, let alone at Maine's most popular peak with the highest visitation.
- A surprisingly **large increase in hikers arriving with service dogs**. A quick search on the internet turns up at least 6 companies on the web offering fake service dog credentials and accessories available for a fee. Following their hike in the park, hikers have been seen hiking able-bodied, without dogs, boasting and laughing loudly in local establishments about how they "pulled one over on Baxter" by showing fake credentials, etc. Two hikers (one AT hiker "Skippy") claiming to have service animals were issued a summons by BSP Rangers for having a pet in the Park. These individuals were falsely representing their dogs as service animals. Both individuals were convicted and assessed a \$260 fine.
- An **increase in SoBo's** many of whom say they are avoiding the crowd scene and overdone "trail magic" on the south end of the trail in the spring. Increasing numbers of SoBo's who choose not to avail themselves of excellent information provided by ATC, guide books, websites, etc. but simply show up spontaneously to begin their hike, requiring significant staff time and guidance to successfully summit Katahdin and reach the 100 Mile Wilderness. Unlike the southern terminus of the AT, SoBo's that manage to complete a Katahdin climb exit the Park directly into the 100-mile wilderness with minimal support or options for dispensing of surplus gear. ( *See enclosed statistics on SoBo's over the years*)
- In 2014 we had 20 (or more) NoBo hikers enter the Park at once, via the kiosk on 10 different days. **Groups of 20-45 hikers** would arrive together, insisting they want to summit together despite our group day hike regulation and requests they not monopolize the summit. Hikers increasingly mention an intention to "break records" for the number of AT hikers at the summit.
- A large **increase in number of thru hikers wishing to hike "up and over"**. This phrase refers to AT hikers who, after reaching Baxter Peak and the terminus of the AT, leave the white blaze and continue to hike east and complete their day at Roaring Brook Campground. Coupled with this hike is an expectation that Park staff will undertake numerous radio calls to arrange for taxi or shuttle service on the other side of the mountain at day's end. Some thru hikers have indicated they will petition to have the white blaze formally extended to include Knife Edge and trails on the Chimney side of the mountain.

- **Increase in number of hikers arriving late in the afternoon** when the AT Steward may be done for the day, saying they plan on hiking 10 miles before nightfall but some actually plan to camp illegally on the West Branch Lands, rather than camping at the provided Maine DOC site at the edge of the Park (honor system payment).
- **A continued problem of friends/families of finishing thru hikers expecting to reserve public rental sites on weekends.** Weekends are when demand for Park sites is highest. The Birches was established incoming thru hikers, not families/friends of hikers. We always do our best but in the success of online reservations means increasingly fewer sites will be available on short notice.
- **Increased confusion regarding available overnight space** for thru hikers plus family because, despite clear instructions posted, the “no reservation-signup” option we offer at The Birches is interpreted to indicate unlimited tolerance and space for however many hikers show up on any night.
- Between arranging for shuttles, rides, meetings, and administering lodging at the Birches, more **radio traffic/time** on the Park’s two-way radio system is devoted to serving the needs of this group than any other user group in Baxter State Park.
- In recent years the “**tagging**” of Park facilities and natural features by AT hikers has emerged, requiring maintenance effort from Park staff.

### Conclusions

The text above is not meant as to serve as a litany of complaints, but it is meant to serve to document the significant effort put forth by Baxter State Park to serve a user group not defined in our trust mission, but with a clear historical connection to wild lands and the rejuvenating power of hiking on the landscape. It is also important to document the concerns we have regarding emerging trends and behaviors in this group may conflict with Park users and require yet more staff effort in the years ahead.

**Of principal concern to us is the conflict between the management models of Baxter State Park and the ATC.** The Trust communications of the Park clearly direct that the provision of recreational opportunities is of secondary importance in respect to the protection of the natural resources of the Park resources. We have limited daily access to Katahdin trailheads for 25 years. We apply these limits in the spirit of protecting the fragile alpine habitat on Katahdin from overuse and to provide a sustainable level of human impact and social experience in one of the most popular and iconic mountains in the northeast.

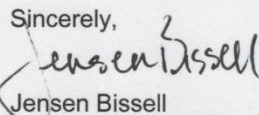
The efforts of the ATC seem to be oriented toward a continuing increase in the number of hikers on the long, narrow natural resource of the AT. Films and documentaries in planning for 2015 seem likely to spur even more use of the

Appalachian Trail. A review of the AT planning and management documents<sup>1</sup> does not indicate a consideration of sustainable use.

From the perspective of Baxter Park, we are concerned that the use of the AT within Baxter Park is nearing, or may have surpassed, an acceptable limit for the facilities and effort available from the Park to accommodate AT hikers. In addition, we are concerned about the impact on the wilderness experience for Park visitors on Katahdin if current trends continue. We do not plan on expanding lodging availability or staffing effort for AT hikers in Baxter Park. We are concerned that any significant increase will strain the current system beyond its capacity.

Options to address these concerns would require a commitment to sustainable use of the AT and preserving the wild experience along the trail. Permit systems are in place on other popular long-distance trails in the U.S. Relocating key trail portions or the trail terminus would another option.

I understand that the management of the complex natural and social resource that is the AT is complex and demanding. I want to thank you for your attention to our concerns regarding the complex management of this important natural resource. We sincerely hope you can find time to meet with us this winter to discuss our concerns and consider options for the future.

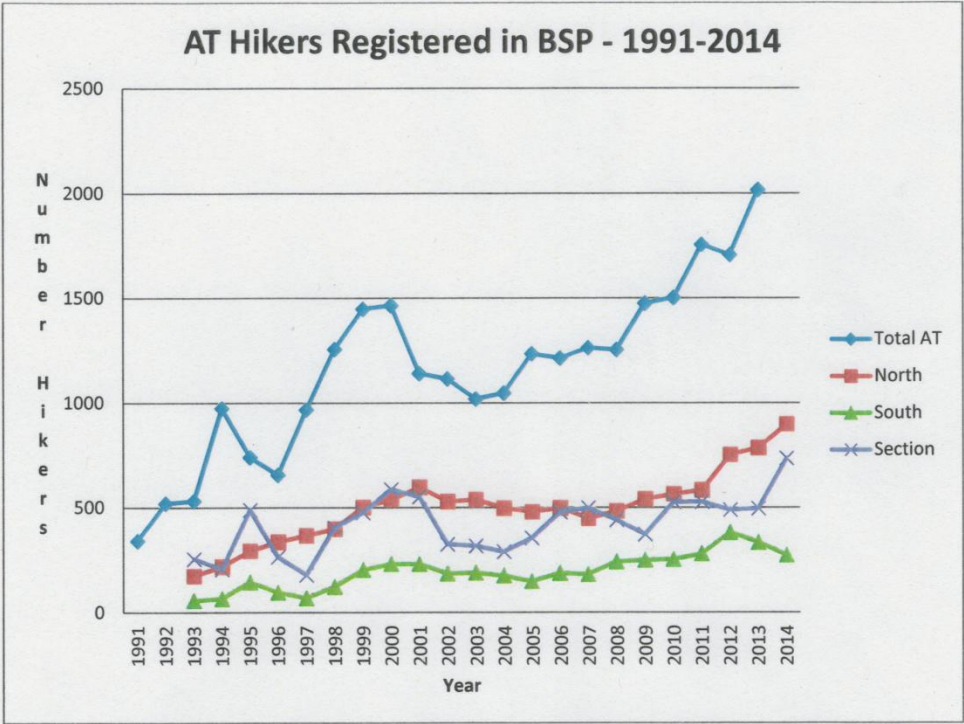
Sincerely,  
  
Jensen Bissell  
Director, Baxter State Park

Enclosures

Pc: Hawk Metheny, Baxter State Park Authority Members

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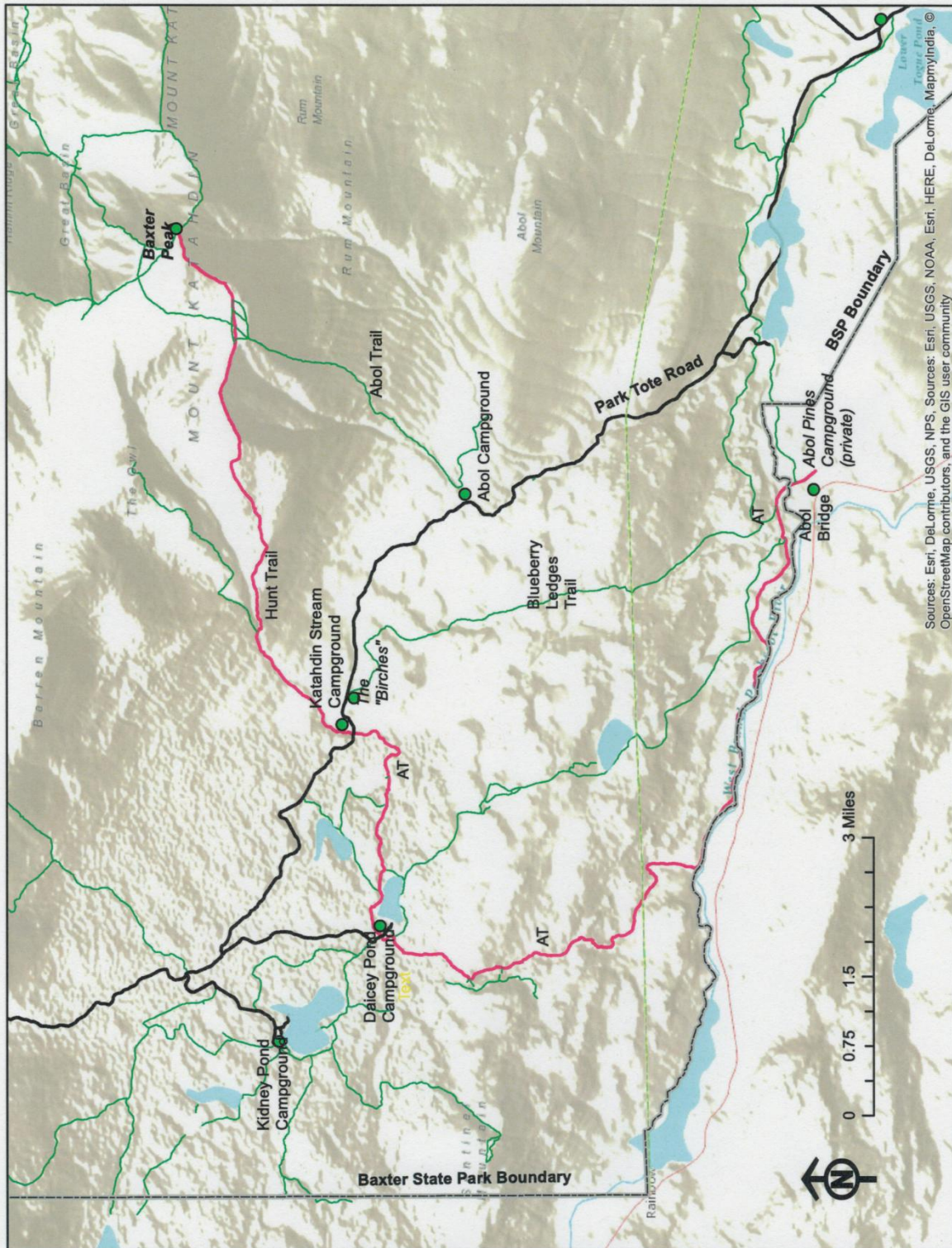
<sup>1</sup> Appalachian National Scenic Trail Resource Management Plan, September 2008; ATC Local Management Planning Guide, April 2009; Comprehensive Plan for the Protection, Management, Development and Use of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, September 1981



**LONG DISTANCE HIKERS REGISTERED AT BAXTER STATE PARK**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>South</b>	<b>Section</b>	<b>Flip-Flop</b>	<b>IAT</b>
1991	359					
1992	344					
1993	522	177	60	258	27	
1994	534	222	69	209	34	
1995	977	297	148	492	40	
1996	743	340	99	268	36	
1997	658	370	72	182	34	
1998	970	401	125	406	38	
1999	1258	504	206	478	70	
2000	1449	540	234	589	86	
2001	1466	599	234	554	79	
2002	1142	532	188	328	89	5
2003	1117	541	193	320	60	3
2004	1021	500	178	292	46	5
2005	1049	482	151	357	58	1
2006	1236	500	189	480	65	2
2007	1215	451	184	501	74	5
2008	1265	486	244	443	88	4
2009	1256	543	252	375	84	2
2010	1476	567	256	528	122	3
2011	1503	585	282	529	103	4
2012	1756	754	383	491	114	14
2013	1707	787	336	497	87	0
2014	2017	901	276	737	103	0





Sources: Esri, DeLorme, USGS, NPS, Sources: Esri, USGS, NOAA, Esri, HERE, DeLorme, MapmyIndia, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS user community