



A classic summer evening on the bald at Big Yellow Mountain in the Roan Highlands. The Greater Roan Highlands Landscape is a roughly 65,000-acre project area that encompasses a mosaic of private and public lands and includes one of the richest collections of biodiversity on the planet.

# A PLAYGROUND AND A LIVING GROUND

IN NOVEMBER 1974, ANN SATTERTHWAITE DELIVERED A paper that presented a bold vision for the Appalachian Trail to celebrate the Appalachian Trail Conference's 50th anniversary. In direct relationship to Benton MacKaye's original notion, she imagined a broad landscape surrounding the Trail that transcended traditional boundaries and land designations. Satterthwaite called it an Appalachian Trail Greenway and described a vast "greenbelt" that would not just protect the Trail corridor, but connect the footpath to the countryside and showcase the rich cultural, economic, and historic diversity of communities from Maine to Georgia.

PHOTO BY TRAVIS BORDLEY

*By Jack Igelman*

At the time, her study brought needed attention to the Trail and helped secure millions of dollars in funding for the A.T. during the Carter administration, according to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's (ATC) director of conservation, Laura Belleville. But the momentum generated by Satterthwaite's lofty proposal faded as the ATC's push focused on completing protection of the last 200 miles of the Trail.

Still, the ATC's director of landscape conservation Dennis Shaffer says her work wasn't in vain, and is definitely an inspiration. "Ann's work was an important bridge to MacKaye's original vision that A.T. leaders saw and appreciated, but the timing of her conservation approach wasn't ripe yet," said Shaffer.

Now, more than four decades after her ambitious proposition, both Shaffer and Belleville believe that it's time to widen the scale of Trail protection.

In December of last year, Satterthwaite was among several dozen planners, Trail advocates, and land managers to discuss the launch of the A.T. Landscape Conservation Initiative — co-hosted by the ATC and the National Park Service — a collaborative effort of both private and public partners and agencies to conserve ecological, cultural, historic, and economic values across a wide-ranging area surrounding the A.T. The initiative coincides with the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service whose "scaling up" strategy promotes large land conservation projects through public and private partnerships.

"When you think about the original, bold vision to create a trail through the Appalachian Mountains, protecting the footpath has been the primary effort," said Shaffer. "I feel like this is the next phase of protecting the Trail experience." And while it may be a new stage of protection, he said, it's rooted in the Trail's earliest beginnings: Benton MacKaye's vision to not just create a 2,000-mile-long trail, but a ribbon of green space connecting the communities around it.

While Shaffer has logged three decades of experience in land conservation, he's been captivated by the A.T.

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experience since he first met a pair of Canadian thru-hikers at a store near his family's cottage in Pennsylvania when he was five years old. "I remember talking with them and being fascinated by how many pairs of shoes they'd gone through," he recalls. "The reason so many people have powerful experiences on the A.T. is driven by so much more than just walking on the footpath. The memories can happen on your way to the Trail or in the community you stopped in for food or to spend the night." Or perhaps explaining to an eager lad why you're on your fifth pair of boots.

And while the core of a hiker's journey may happen on the Trail where the tread meets the dirt, the Landscape Initiative is taking an expansive approach to protection that takes a bird's-eye view of the Trail and considers more than just the footpath. At the meeting, participants poured over maps of the Trail from Mount Katahdin to Springer Mountain marking and labeling current large-scale conservation initiatives and targeting high-priority or threatened sections of the Trail corridor. The goal, said Shaffer, was to look at the A.T. landscape as an entire system, rather than a corridor segmented by boundaries.

That's a perspective Satterthwaite, who was trained as a planner, proposed in the 1970s. Her view was inspired by English national parks that include living communities and land uses that are inextricably linked to the landscape. "When we think about parks in the U.S. we fence them off. I don't set boundaries myself — I see conservation in much broader terms," explains Satterthwaite. "The A.T. as a spine of the landscape is a wonderful given, but it doesn't express the extent of what can be done. The Trail has been protected, but how are we connecting the Trail to cities and showcasing the very diverse communities from Maine to Georgia? That should also be part of the experience."

Laura Belleville also participated in the gathering and said that a 30,000-foot view of the A.T. may help the ATC grasp less obvious opportunities for the Trail — as well as threats — that may surface in the future. "I think a large-scale landscape initiative helps you understand the big questions," she said. "We like to give areas names and draw lines around places and put them in a political framework, but when you're dealing with land conservation that's not necessarily how it plays out." Belleville admits that she's inclined to approach conservation from a biological standpoint — for instance, understanding how species migrate from one place to another — which means that how you draw boundaries can be dynamic.

Shaffer said that while some of the values that enhance the A.T. experience are tangible and can be defined on a map, such as a viewshed, some of the values that contribute to a hiker's experience are nebulous. And that's just it: a conservation landscape includes not just what you see, but what you sense and feel too. While completing protection for the Trail in



the years that followed the release of Satterthwaite's study was a tremendous achievement (the Trail itself is now 99 percent protected) protecting the Trail experience is perhaps as pressing as ever as iconic vistas, healthy ecosystems, and irreplaceable cultural, historic, and natural resources are threatened by development.

Among the discussions of the December meeting was crafting a vision to discuss best practices to tackle such an ambitious initiative. One of the conclusions was that a large landscape-scale approach dictates that the ATC and their partners reach out to potential stakeholders who aren't typically at the table. Shaffer said that the "tent has been populated by the usual cast of characters" who are typically recreation, conservation, and natural resource centric.

"Landscape level conservation is a huge opportunity to bring together a lot of different values. There are so many more opportunities that come to bear that really depend on building a broad and diverse coalition," said Shaffer. "We have an opportunity to broaden the tent." That future discussion may include local officials, planners, and businesses that may have a stake in the geography around the Trail.

While Belleville and Shaffer said the ATC has a proven track record of working collaboratively, perhaps no one at the December meeting has a better understanding of a broad approach to large scale landscape conservation

Lost Cove Creek — just a few miles from the A.T. in Avery County — is one of the great secrets in Pisgah National Forest and is as enticing as its sounds.

"Our job is to open a realm. This is something more than a geographical location — it is an environment."

Benton MacKaye



From top: The South Mountain region demonstrates the conservation challenge encountered in much of the Northeast — that of urban and suburban growth into farmland and forestland; In addition to protecting the scenic qualities of the region, the South Mountain partnership is also invested in protecting its cultural and historic context — here a group is led on a history hike of the area along the A.T. near Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania.



efforts than North Carolina author and Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy trustee Jay Leutze.

Leutze lives in a cabin built by his family on the flanks of Big Yellow Mountain, a 5,480-foot bald mountain that's within an easy stroll of the A.T. in Avery County, North Carolina. The views from the bald are breathtaking, but are also a window to a much larger area and inspired an ambitious effort to engage in one of the most substantial conservation collaborations in the southern Appalachians in recent decades. The Greater Roan Highlands Landscape is a roughly 65,000-acre project area that encompasses a mosaic of private and public land holdings that includes one of the richest collections of biodiversity on the planet. While roughly 20,000 acres is public land, the majority of the land within the landscape is not defined by traditional conservation boundaries. But because of the high recreational, ecological, and scenic value of the Roan Highlands the region has been on the radar of conservationists, including Leutze, for decades.

"Initially they [private landowners in the Roan] saw conservation organizations as outsiders," admits Leutze. "They saw us as a branch of government, which they saw as limiting vehicular access to the beloved mountain tops. But people were also becoming concerned about losing the way they've related to the landscape for generations. Local folks learned that real estate developers were a far more serious threat to what they treasured than was the U.S. Forest Service or the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy."

Shaffer emphasizes that the ATC is sensitive to including local landowners and doesn't want people to see this initiative as a land grab. "We want to work with willing partners," he said. "This is a coalition of network building people who want to work with us."

While projects such as the Greater Roan Highlands Landscape may be a model for future collaborations throughout the Trail corridor, Luetze said the project still has a long way to go. "People in Avery County [North

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Carolina] and Carter County [Tennessee] still feel pretty remote from the Trail experience," he said. "I'd say the Roan is a place needing future engagement with the local communities. The [A.T. Landscape] Initiative will succeed where there can be a link to the population base."

One large-scale landscape project that's made significant headway is the South Mountain Partnership, a public-private collaborative effort that encompasses the A.T. in south-central Pennsylvania over a four-county region that includes a half-million acres. It's a large scale project that has blurred the lines between natural resource conservation and cultural preservation. In addition to protecting the scenic qualities of the region, the partnership is also invested in protecting the cultural and historic context of the region including the area's rich civil war history, it's bucolic farmland, and Native American history to name a few.

Katie Hess, the ATC's director of the South Mountain Partnership, said the project has thrived because of a grassroots approach to conservation instead of being driven from the top-down. In the decade since the project began, Hess said they've formed critical relationships with municipalities and county governments, a task not so easy in a state where people take great pride in local control and aren't always willing to work across administrative boundaries.

Each year, the project presents the Spirit of South Mountain Award to recognize individuals, projects, or organizations that make significant contributions to advancing a positive and sustainable future for the South Mountain landscape. In 2015, the prize was given to the Franklin County Commissioners and Greene Township Supervisors for their cooperation in conserving more than 1,100 acres of land. "Residents and local decision makers have to be on board," urges Hess. "If it's top-down there's less ownership. Large landscape projects must be driven by locals — that's the number one takeaway."

The ATC is also in the initial stages of forming partnerships in three watersheds in the Delaware River Basin in eastern Pennsylvania with a recent \$82,000 grant from the William Penn Foundation. The funds will be used to develop educational and interpretive materials to help establish a constituency of supporters in the region.

Hess acknowledges that developing meaningful relationships with potential partners takes time. "It's a long-range approach to conservation. You have to commit for the long haul," said Hess. That's something Satterthwaite and others within the A.T. community understand all too well. Nearly a century after, MacKaye's vision to create a giant wedge of wilderness connected to the cities of the East Coast is still a work in progress. "To have a wilderness experience that is so accessible to so many people is remarkable. This," said Satterthwaite, "is just the next chapter." ▲

ABOVE LEFT: PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTH MOUNTAIN PARTNERSHIP / BELOW: PHOTO BY KELLY MCGINLEY