THE GREATER MARGINS

CONSERVATION AROUND THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL AND ELSEWHERE IS LOOKING AT THE FULL PICTURE.

BY DANIEL HOWE, ASLA

Jay Leutze stands on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail at the top of Hump Mountain, in the Roan Highlands of northwestern North Carolina, surrounded by a cinematic 360-degree view of the crown jewels of the Southern Appalachian mountains—Grandfather Mountain, Linville Gorge, Mount Mitchell, and the Great Smoky Mountains in the far distance. Leutze is a lawyer by training, by vocation a writer and conservationist working with the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, and a partner in the Appalachian Trail Landscape Conservation Initiative. He looks toward Belview Mountain, the closest ridge that is directly visible from the footpath, less than a mile away. Leutze has written a book, Stand Up That Mountain ( Scribner, 2021), that chronicles how a partnership of state, federal, and local agencies; legal advocates; and local residents in the nearby Dog Town community came together to conserve the Appalachian Trail experience on this mountaintop by derailing a proposal to build an open-pit gravel mine on Belview Mountain.

This is a work of large-scale landscape conservation—an effort to address the broader experience of the Appalachian Trail, not just the protection of its footpath across the Roan Highlands. “We tend to think of this as a one-way relationship—the experience of the trail users, and the value of the trail user having appreciation of local culture,” Leutze says, “but we will fail unless we connect the local community to this landscape and what it can mean for them. We need to be down in the community looking up as much as we are up on the trail looking down.”

The 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail is a unit of the National Park Service, the first of 11 scenic trails established under the National Trails Systems Act in 1968. Along the way the trail passes through 14 states and is a short drive from the cities of Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Charlotte, North Carolina; and Atlanta. In all, about a third of the population of the country can live before lunch and be in a tent on the trail by nightfall. More than three million people visited the Appalachian Trail last year, and 800 to 1,000 of them might complete a hike along its entire length in an average year.

This unusual national park is managed by a partnership between the National Park Service and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a nonprofit advocacy organization with headquarters in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. The conservancy engages in land conservation, fundraising,
outreach, and support for users of the trail, and works directly with the park service to coordinate the activities of 35 volunteer trail clubs that maintain and improve the trail along its length.

Although the trail passes through large, traditionally protected landscapes, including six national parks and eight national forests, most of the protected lands along the trail form a narrow corridor within a much larger, privately owned Appalachian landscape, one that is generally rural but sometimes quite close to urbanized areas. The Appalachian Trail Landscape Conservation Initiative, led jointly by the park service and the trail conservancy, is a large-landscape conservation program meant to embrace the complex web of culture, land use, economics, and ecology that exists beyond the boundaries of the trail corridor. Through a set of partners with local and national expertise and technology, the project is working to identify threats and take action to protect the singular experience represented by the trail and its environs.

“This is the future of the National Park Service,” says Wendy Janssen, the park service’s superintendent for the Appalachian Trail. Janssen is speaking of the public–private relationship between the park service and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy as well as about the concept of large-landscape conservation as an emerging tool in the national park toolbox. Beginning in 2010 with then Interior Secretary Ken Salazar’s Treasured Landscapes program, the park service has embraced the idea of conservation efforts beyond the boundaries of the national parks, calling it Scaling Up—a major goal in the agency’s strategic plan for its centennial, which is this year. There are more than 30 such efforts underway across the country from Cape Cod in Massachusetts to the Channel Islands off the California coast.

These are really big ideas. James Levitt is a director of the Program on Conservation Innovation at the Harvard Forest (at Harvard University).
and a fellow in the department of planning and urban form at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Landscape conservation takes regional thinking and a lot of patience," Levitt says. "The AT is a perfect example of that. We are approaching the centennial anniversary of Benton MacKaye's vision for the trail. MacKaye first publicly proposed the idea for the trail in an article in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects in 1914, and it is appropriate that we are thinking beyond the footpath, because MacKaye was, like Teddy Roosevelt, Clifford Pinchot, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Charles Eliot, not thinking about a single place or path but systems of protected land." Levitt also points to ambitious large-landscape conservation efforts in other parts of the country such as Crown of the Continent, involving millions of acres surrounding Glacier National Park in Montana and Waterton Lakes National Park in Canada.

Dennis Shaffer is the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's director of landscape conservation. Shaffer believes this is the right moment for the conservancy to take on this effort with the park service. "We've been fortunate over the past 30 years to have successfully protected 99 percent of the actual footpath along the trail. That chapter is coming to a close. It is a national icon now—a national treasure. So, what's next?" he says. "Now we turn our attention to a sustainable landscape experience, a holistic resource that is more than the footpath and involves communities and land far beyond the trail itself. When we start talking about connections with communities, working on climate change, connecting to cultural and historic resources, opening the trail up to a wider, more diverse audience—people get really jazzed."

In south central Pennsylvania, one project shows how it all might work. The South Mountain Partnership embraces a four-county region that surrounds the Appalachian Trail near the state capital of Harrisburg. An 80-mile stretch of the Appalachian Trail is surrounded by a landscape of elaborate barns, apple production, historic sites (including the Gettysburg National Military Park), and one of the largest contiguous intact forests between Harrisburg and Washington, D.C. Kim Williams was the trail conservancy's director of the South Mountain Partnership.
LARGE-SCALE CONSERVATION TAKES THE CULTURAL AND PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE INTO CONSIDERATION.

from 2009 until 2012. She came to the task with a degree in landscape architecture from Utah State, and a particular pedigree for this job—she was a recent long-distance hiker on the Appalachian Trail, having taken leave from her job at Design Workshop in Asheville, North Carolina, to hike the trail from North Carolina to Maine in 2009.

Williams notes that a partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has been essential to the continued success of the program. The department helped respond to a threat to South Mountain by facilitating a critical 50-acre land acquisition early on, but it also, under then-Assistant Secretary Cindy Adams Dunn (now Secretary) established a mini-grant program administered by the trail conservancy that has been remarkably successful by helping build a farm-to-market economy, provide new points of access to the Appalachian Trail, and establish a historical museum among other projects that have engaged the local community in the project. The department is supporting six other large-landscape conservation initiatives across the state in addition to South Mountain.

“It’s not a linear process,” says Williams, who now works as an environmental planner at Equinox, a landscape architecture firm in Asheville. “Leading a conservation initiative involves a series of creative thinking challenges to get every one of the stakeholders engaged, to craft how it’s going to work for everyone. It’s important to understand cultural landscapes as well as physical landscapes and the basic tools of land use planning—GIS, zoning, and greenway and trail planning.”

Williams calls this large-landscape conservation project “a big-tent experience.” A partial list of South Mountain partners includes local historical societies, the Conservation Fund, sporting and wildlife advocates, tourism bureaus, local county and municipal governments, the National Park Service, area land trusts, and national nonprofits such as the Trust for Public Land, which uses cutting-edge analytics, in addition to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

In a project related to the Appalachian Trail in southern Maine near the Mahoosuc Range and the Androscoggin River, the Trust for Public Land engaged the community through a series of weekend gatherings at local recycling centers, calling them “Dump and Donut” events, and then used GIS to map the critical concerns people had, such as fishing, hunting, and views. These maps identified physiographic landscape forms, and the planners enhanced the detail using high-resolution land cover information, wildlife habitat, and water-quality and forestry data.
by overlapping multiple layers of information in the tradition of Ian McHarg's environmental planning efforts in the 1970s, planners realized that people's intuitive sense of what was important (measured at Dump and Donuts) matched up remarkably well with the scientific data. This resulted in a targeted preservation effort that netted more than 40,000 acres of protected land over a decade, with another 20,000 acres that are nearing closing.

"The numbers we are seeing about visitation on the Appalachian Trail are reflective of the national park as a whole," says Jasson of the National Park Service. "There will be more and more people on the trail, particularly near the metropolitan areas. This project is an amazing opportunity to engage so many people in so many different types of communities. The cultural resources alone along the trail tell the story of American history up and down the East Coast. It's not just a footpath."

The Appalachian Trail Landscape Conservation Initiative has an ambitious scope that will require many partnerships like South Mountain's "to scale up" this national park from a protected footpath to something resembling MacKay's original vision of an integrated rural landscape experience connected by the trail. But already there is excitement among people around the Blue Ridge and the Barren Chairbacks and elsewhere.

"We are proud to be part of this community of organizations and partners," says Leuzinger of the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy. "While we are working hard in the highlands of Roan, our partners are working hard in the highlands of New Hampshire."

The American tradition of park making that led to our current system of national parks began from a desire to capture scenery and preserve it intact for future generations. The second 100 years of the National Park Service is likely to be characterized by a more expansive notion of what a park is—moving beyond its boundaries to preserve a landscape experience, what James Levis calls a "network of networks" of green infrastructure. The Appalachian Trail is on the forefront of this partnership-based idea, and its unique location along the densely populated East Coast makes it an ideal testing ground. The application of new technology to more carefully target conservation efforts, coupled with a broader notion of what we are planning for—not just wilderness, but community and natural systems that fit together—echoes Benton MacKay's 1921 notion of a series of recreational communities connected by a walking trail a very 21st-century idea, indeed.