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# Building a Better Campsite Along the Appalachian Trail

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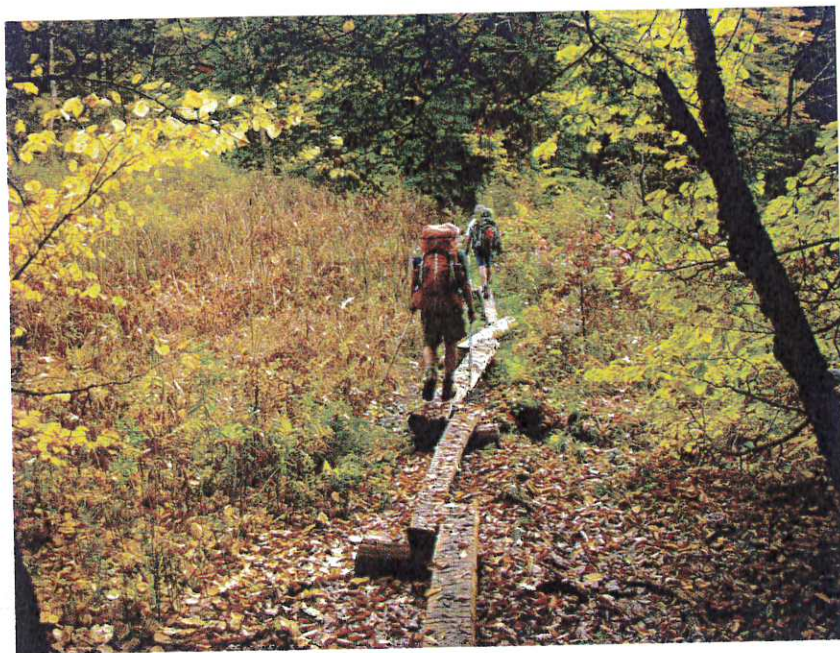
Years of uncontrolled use at a camping area along the Appalachian Trail resulted in widespread damage to soil, trees, and other vegetation; a decimated firewood supply; and visible signs of human waste (**Impacts to campsites; Impacts to soil; Impacts to vegetation**). The camping area was also crowded and sometimes rowdy, making it unattractive to many long-distance hikers (**Crowding; Conflict; Depreciative behavior**). To deal with these issues, new "side-hill" campsites were constructed (**Harden resource; Facility development/Site design/Maintenance**) and campers were informed of group size limits (**Limit use; Rationing/Allocation**) and bans on alcohol and campfires (**Reduce the impact of use; Rules/Regulations**) through signs and an on-site caretaker (**Information/Education**).

### Introduction

There's a tradition among experienced backpackers to limit their impact on the natural environment. Care is taken to stay on designated paths, camp on durable surfaces, not disturb wildlife, leave what is found, remove waste, and respect other visitors. However, not all campers ascribe to these principles. **Left unchecked, insensitive camping practices can scar the landscape.** In once-vibrant ecological systems, vegetation is trampled or missing, soils hardened or eroded, human garbage left behind. The impacts of unregulated camping were particularly apparent at one camping area along the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. Through a multi-faceted management approach, the campground was transformed from a place to be avoided to a celebrated back-country destination.

### Appalachian National Scenic Trail

Envisioned by regional planner Benton MacKaye in the mid 1920s and completed in 1937, the **Appalachian Trail stretches 2175 miles from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine** (Fig. 7.1). In 1968, the Appalachian Trail became one of the first national scenic trails in the United States and part of the national park system. Designated through Acts of Congress, national scenic trails protect continuous long-distance hiking corridors for the public in nationally significant scenic areas. Crossing through 14 states, the Appalachian Trail is maintained through partnerships between public agencies and private organizations. Volunteer efforts of local clubs are coordinated by The Appalachian Trail Conservancy, a non-profit organization that also raises funds to support ongoing



**Fig. 7.1.** The Appalachian Trail runs nearly 2200 miles between Springer Mountain, Georgia, and Mt Katahdin, Maine, offering hikers an epic journey. (Photo by Jeff Marion.)

management. Among the resources maintained by these groups are shelters and other camping areas which provide respite for long-distance hikers, weekend backpackers, and other visitors.

### Managing Camping along the Appalachian Trail

Annapolis Rocks is located in western Maryland, less than  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile from the Appalachian Trail and about 2 miles from a parking area on US Route 40. With a scenic sunset view, climbing rocks, natural spring, and large level area, the site—previously a parcel of private land—became a popular camping destination for climbers and casual visitors. On busy weekends, 100 or more people gathered at the flat camping area. Crowded conditions were accompanied by lively social interactions, large bonfires, and alcohol consumption. Years of heavy, unregulated use led to significant degradation of the camping area. The site experienced widespread vegetation loss and soil compaction. Where vegetation remained, informal trails cut through

the landscape. Logs covered with charcoal residue, patches of sterile land, and a decimated firewood supply resulted from numerous campfires. Likewise, live trees were damaged as some campers sought new sources of campfire fuel. In the absence of sanitation facilities and low-impact practices, toilet paper scraps and partially burned cans, bottles, and other trash could be seen throughout the site. **These conditions made Annapolis Rocks—once called “the worst campground along the Appalachian Trail”—unattractive to long-distance hikers (Fig. 7.2).**

Following land purchases at Annapolis Rocks by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the National Park Service, an ambitious suite of management actions was implemented to redevelop the site for low-impact camping. Using plans drafted by the Maryland Appalachian Trail Management Committee, the original camping area, which included 19 visitor-created campsites, was closed. In its place, 14 smaller campsites were constructed on nearby sloping land. **This type of design, known as “side-hill” campsite construction, can prevent the spread of soil**





**Fig. 7.2.** Campsites at the Annapolis Rocks area along the Appalachian Trail were badly degraded, but a new campsite location and design have substantially improved conditions. (Photo by Jeff Marion.)

**and vegetation disturbance.** The new campsites were distributed among healthy vegetation and spaced 100 feet apart—a distance at which normal conversations are not easily heard—to allow for more private camping experiences. Further, the new location moved campers away from rock cliffs at the site, improving visitor safety. In conjunction with the new sites, group sizes were limited to ten people, the total number of campers per night was capped at 75, and alcohol and campfires were prohibited. In addition, two self-composting toilets were installed on either side of the camping area.

Several steps were taken to inform campers about the new facilities and rules. The old camping area, closed for rehabilitation, was fenced. Signs reminded visitors of the closure and directed them to camp at the side-hill sites. New rules and regulations were posted by a map of the camping area at two kiosks. The first was located at the trailhead parking lot and the second near the camping area. In addition, two trail ridgerunners were hired to supervise the campsite and surrounding area during the peak visitation season. One of the

ridgerunners served as a caretaker, living at the campsite from April to October. The caretaker directed visitors to the new campsites, informed them of group size limits, bans on fire and alcohol, and Leave No Trace practices (see the case study, *Treading Lightly on Acadia*, p. 63).

Monitoring of campsite conditions at Annapolis Rocks demonstrated the success of the management program. **With the closure of the old campsites, the area of vegetation and soil disturbance was reduced from around 40,000 square feet to just over 3000 square feet.** Native vegetation returned to the original camping area and the amount of exposed soil was reduced. In surveys conducted before and after the management changes, visitors to the new campsites said that they were more satisfied with campsite privacy, noise levels at campsites, and spacing between groups. Likewise, side-hill campers were more satisfied with the condition of trees, the amount of vegetation, and the naturalness of the site than visitors to the original unmanaged campsites.

While the management actions taken were largely successful in meeting trail objectives, there were some other consequences

to the changes at Annapolis Rocks. Most apparent is the likelihood that some visitors were displaced due to restrictions on campfires, alcohol, and large groups. Among campers who were not displaced, a few concerns have emerged about the new campsite design. Visitors to side-hill campsites expressed somewhat lower satisfaction with being able to select a preferred campsite than visitors to the pre-management site, and said that they would prefer smoother tent pads, more campsites, and larger campsites. Fitting with the latter finding, monitoring of side-hill campsites revealed a slight expansion in their size (8%) during the first year. However, project managers concluded that the campsites may

have been too small in the first place, and subsequent measures have not revealed any additional expansion at the new sites.

Though located just a few steps from the Appalachian Trail, the camping area at Annapolis Rocks faced both ecological degradation and a party atmosphere that made it unattractive to many long-distance hikers. A multi-faceted approach involving site design, restoration, education, and monitoring succeeded in rehabilitating the site into an area suitable for primitive, backcountry camping. Formal recognition of this success came in 2004 when the Annapolis Rock Hiker Campground and Trail was designated as a national recreation trail.

### Further Reading

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