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## Wild Katahdin?: Will Growing Numbers of Thru-Hikers and Disruptive Behavior Remove "Maine's Greatest Mountain" From the AT?

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# Wild Katahdin?

*Will growing numbers of thru-hikers and disruptive behavior remove “Maine’s greatest mountain” from the AT?*

**Lucille Stott**



ON JULY 15, 2015, TRAIL RUNNER SCOTT JUREK BECAME THE FASTEST human to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. For 46 days, he had sped northward to Maine along the roughly 2,190-mile route, summiting Katahdin triumphantly, amid a swirl of social media and champagne bubbles. Jurek was by no means the first AT hiker who flouted Baxter State Park's backcountry rules—including a twelve-person group limit and no alcohol in public—but he became the poster boy for unacceptable behavior. Print and online media outlets showed Jurek popping a bottle of champagne by the summit sign with his boisterous support crew and promoters eager to toast his achievement and trumpet his success to the world below.

A park ranger cited Jurek on three counts: traveling in a group larger than twelve, littering, and public consumption of alcohol, while Jurek responded angrily that he was being used as a scapegoat. Ultimately, the first two citations were dismissed, and Jurek paid a \$500 fine for the public drinking charge. The day after Jurek's summit celebration, Jensen Bissell, the park's superintendent, posted a stern note on the park's Facebook page acknowledging Jurek's "remarkable physical accomplishment" while criticizing the barrage of hired media folk—including videographers and their equipment—who had converged on Baxter Peak amid the park's wilderness landscape.

The tallest mountain in Maine, at 5,269 feet, Katahdin (meaning "the greatest mountain") was named by the Penobscots, who still consider it a sacred place. The Penobscots believed that Pamola, the god of thunder, protected the holy mountain. When Henry David Thoreau wrote of his 1846 visit to the mountain, he expressed awe at the forbidding nature of its remote reaches and noted that Pamola "is always angry with those who climb to the summit of Ktaadn." Although Pamola appears to have mellowed over time, his nerves likely jangled as Jurek popped the cork, another of the small but visible number of Katahdin summiters who turn a hard-won wilderness experience into an excuse to party.

"Thousands of people, including Mainers and others from all over the world, visit Baxter Park and hike in the Park's wilderness . . .," wrote Bissell in his Facebook post. "People celebrate their accomplishment, often with their families and often many times over, quietly and with appreciation for this precious gift left to us in perpetuity by Percival Baxter. These 'corporate events' have no place in the Park and are incongruous with the Park's mission

*Trail runner Scott Jurek, celebrating his Appalachian Trail speed record, opens a bottle of champagne at the AT terminus, on the summit of Katahdin, on July 12, 2015. Park rangers were nearby. Jurek later paid a \$500 fine for this moment.* BOB NAJAR/IRUNFAR.COM

of resource protection, the appreciation of nature and the respect of the experience of others in the Park.”

Bissell also makes clear in his post that federal designation of the AT does not extend to the approximately fifteen miles that fall inside the park’s borders. As he put it, “The AT within the park is hosted at the consideration of the Baxter State Park Authority.”

The part of Bissell’s message that captured the most attention was his hint that the three-member Maine state authority that governs the park is considering removing Katahdin as the AT’s northern terminus: “The Authority is currently considering the increasing pressures, impacts, and conflicts that the Appalachian Trail brings to the Park and if a continued relationship is in the best interests of Baxter State Park.”

Readers’ responses to the controversy were swift, plentiful, and passionate. Jurek’s many supporters, some ultrarunners themselves, blasted the park for its limits on freedom of access and curbs on behavior and railed against the idea that the iconic Katahdin—which many view as the Holy Grail of a thru-hiker’s quest—might be withdrawn from the trail. Equally loyal Baxter supporters chided Jurek for exploiting the moment for personal gain and overtly disregarding well-established rules meant to protect the park’s wild and fragile terrain and respect the experience of other hikers.

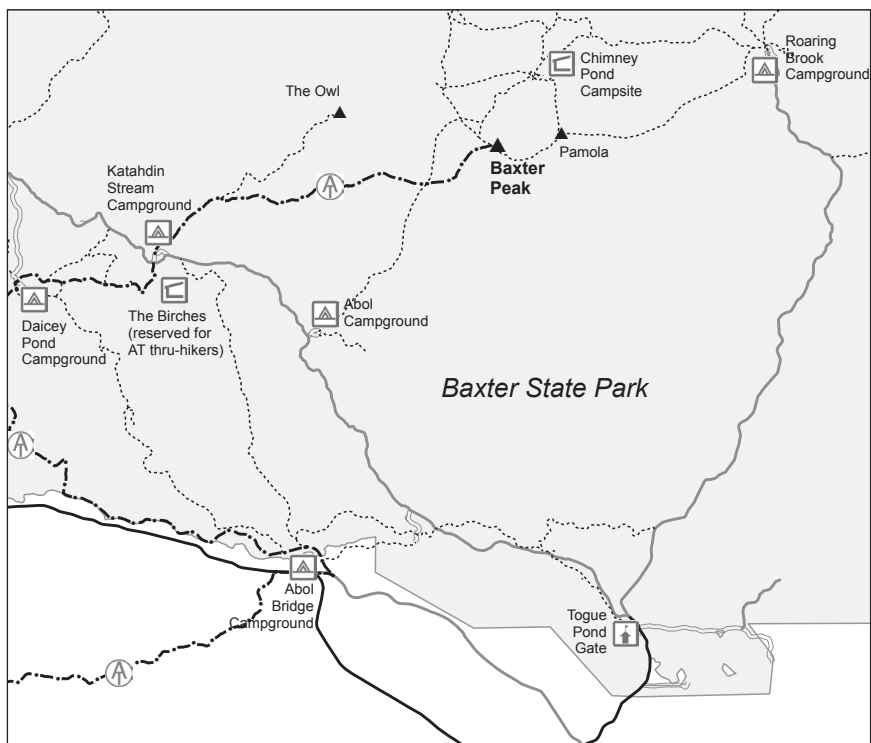
Exactly where all this will lead in the long run is yet to be determined. But even as interim measures are being put in place to mitigate the problems, the possibility that the AT could eventually lose Katahdin as its northern terminus remains very real.

Though the recent controversy became headline news, the tension between the demands of the ever-increasing AT thru-hikers and the park’s unique mission did not begin with the Jurek party’s run-in with a ranger. This tension has, in fact, been simmering for several years.

Eight months before the Jurek controversy, on November 19, 2014, Bissell sent a six-page, single-spaced letter to officials of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. He wrote that the park’s model of backcountry management conflicted with the AT’s approach and listed disturbing instances of entitlement and disruptive behavior among a small percentage of the expanding numbers of thru-hikers.

## **Two Different Approaches to Backcountry Access**

At the heart of it all are two widely divergent approaches to backcountry use. The Appalachian Trail, begun in 1921 and completed in 1937, is overseen



*The Appalachian Trail meanders its final miles in Baxter State Park. The park built its shelters known as The Birches in 2002 to handle exploding numbers of northbound thru-hikers, who had once stayed at a lean-to at Daicey Pond.* LARRY GARLAND/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

by a disparate group of public and private organizations, including the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, a number of public agencies within the fourteen states that it traverses, and 31 local trail-maintaining clubs, including the Appalachian Mountain Club. Named the first National Scenic Trail in 1968, the AT became part of the National Park Service at that time and is partially supported by tax dollars. It remains the longest marked trail in the United States, stretching from Georgia to Maine. Although the trail's caretakers have always encouraged responsible behavior and respect for the AT's wilderness landscape, they have chosen to encourage and promote recreational use and permit unlimited access.

In 1981, a branch of the National Park Service published an "AT Comprehensive Plan," outlining guidelines for managing the trail. Following are some of the relevant passages highlighting its management policies:

- Managers will foster an unregimented atmosphere and otherwise encourage self-reliance and respect for trail values by users.
- Hiker regulations will be kept as unrestrictive as possible, and should be developed only to the extent they are proven necessary to protect the physical trail, its environment, and the interests of adjacent landowners.
- Incompatible activities will be controlled by educational efforts and, failing this, by enforcement of laws and trail regulations.
- Appropriate state, federal, and local agencies will see that the purposes of laws and regulations are not neglected within their jurisdictions. Where problems develop, noncoercive solutions—design, education, volunteer ridgerunners, or caretakers—are preferred. Enforcement of regulations should not detract, if possible, from the hiking experience and be exercised only in a way that complements and reinforces educational approaches. Where the footpath is within the Appalachian Trail corridor purchased by the National Park Service, or is outside the boundaries of existing public areas, the Trail clubs and their agency partners will work with local law enforcement officials to assure their understanding of law enforcement needs and of the primary emphasis on education.
- Management actions will discourage activities that would degrade the trail's natural and cultural resources or social values, such as use by groups or organizations involved in promotion, sponsorship, or participation in spectator events or competitive activities, or by groups which by their size or commercial interest generate use which is inconsistent with the concept of a simple footpath.

These guidelines clearly favor education as the primary approach to hiker behavior along the AT and place regulation and use of law enforcement as last resorts.

In 2005, the 80-year-old Appalachian Trail Conference changed its name to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy to place a stronger emphasis on the need to protect the trail's rich natural resources. The ATC itself has no law enforcement authority and so relies on its land management partners along the trail to set rules—on things like camping, fires, and group size—and enforce them within their jurisdiction. It has thus far stopped short of establishing



limits on access, preferring to rely on enhanced educational programming and personal responsibility. Ultimately, the sheer length of the AT and the fact that it traverses so many different states and jurisdictions make it difficult to control hiker behavior in any consistent way.

At the opposite end of the management spectrum is Baxter State Park, which is not really a state park as most people understand that term. Its original 200,000 acres were a gift from a former Maine governor, Percival P. Baxter, who donated 28 separate parcels to the people of Maine from 1931 to 1963, intending the land to be used primarily as a wilderness sanctuary. The park, which now extends to 209,644 acres and includes 46 mountains, 55 lakes and ponds, virgin forest, rare plants and animals, and fragile alpine terrain, remains privately funded from Baxter's original \$7 million endowment, a fact unknown to many hikers who resent its limits on public access and rules of conduct.

Financial independence has allowed Baxter State Park's governing board to honor the wishes of Baxter, who put the resources of the park first and people second. In specific instructions about how the public trust was to be managed in perpetuity, set out in the 28 deeds of trust, he privileged preservation over recreation and underscored his wish that the acres he was leaving behind be kept pristine and "forever wild." He welcomed hikers on the 200 miles of rugged hiking trails, hoping they would attract "those who love nature and are willing to walk and make an effort to get close to nature." Though he sanctioned roads, motorized vehicles, campgrounds, and timber harvesting in designated areas, he insisted that recreation should not "encroach upon the wilderness."

As a result, Baxter's rules for access and behavior distinguish the park from most other sectors of the AT. The park's two distinct entry points help control the impact of the roughly 70,000 annual visitors, half of whom head to the three trails leading up Katahdin. The park also limits the number of vehicles that can park at trailheads each day and requires advance reservations for overnight camping. Hikers may not bring pets, drink alcohol in public, or camp overnight after October 15. "We don't want to keep people out, and we don't want the park to become anathema," said Bissell. "But we want to ensure that all our visitors find the emotional, visceral connection they're seeking when they come here. Everything we do is meant to foster that connection and help people experience the raw power of nature. This is the opportunity our mission gives us, and we continually try to manage it the best way we can."

The two management models are so different that it is something of a miracle the AT's various entities have managed to partner companionably with Baxter since the early 1930s, when legendary AT developer and native Mainer Myron Avery got his wish to end the trail at his beloved Katahdin rather than at Mount Washington, as originally planned.

### **Numbers Becoming “Unsustainable”**

The major cause of strain at Baxter State Park is the steep increase in the number of hikers who have sought to complete the entire Appalachian Trail, a trend that reflects the enormous growth in backcountry recreation around the world during the past half-century. According to figures published by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, only 59 trail completions were reported from 1936 to 1969. Then in 1970 the numbers began to rise, a trend attributed to the countercultural, back-to-the-land ethic of the time and the surprising popularity of the book *Appalachian Hiker: Adventure of a Lifetime* (Appalachian Books, 1971), by Ed Garvey, one of ten recorded thru-hikers that year. By the end of 1970s, the term *2,000-miler* had taken hold, a sign that completing the trail had become more than a passing fad. Each decade since has seen the numbers grow significantly, with a second notable bump following the 1998 publication of Bill Bryson's bestseller, *A Walk in the Woods* (Broadway Books).

AT thru-hikers are divided into three groups: northbounders, who leave from Springer Mountain, Georgia, and hike more-or-less continuously to the northern end point (only an estimated one in four makes it all the way); southbounders, who begin at Katahdin and hike down to Springer (about one in ten thru-hikers moves in this direction); and alternative thru-hikers—dubbed “flip-floppers”—who start somewhere along the trail and hike one way, then begin again and hike the rest of the trail the other way, all within a 12-month period. A fourth group, section hikers, takes more than a year to complete the trail in noncontiguous pieces.

Northbound thru-hikers have by far the greatest impact on Baxter because of their numbers and the fact that those who manage to get to the park—a recorded 995 in 2015—are physically tapped out. Some are traveling so lightly by then that they are not equipped for the unforgiving weather that can often visit the region even in summer, park officials said. The problems can develop into extra work for busy rangers. On some early mornings, as many as 300 day- and long-distance hikers start up Katahdin at the same time.



## **The Few Spoil Things for the Many**

Bad behavior among some hikers is another big concern. Unfortunately, it is plaguing trails worldwide, not just the Appalachian Trail. At the biannual Alpine Stewardship Conference sponsored by the Waterman Fund and hosted in November 2015 by Baxter State Park, several representatives from backcountry organizations in the Northeast reported irresponsible, disrespectful behavior on their trails. Far from leaving no trace, they said, some hikers are off-loading garbage, tramping and camping in fragile areas, engaging in loud, alcohol-fueled parties, and even defecating on the trails.

Holly Sheehan of the Maine Appalachian Trail Club bemoaned the “trail magic” fad—the leaving of food behind for others—a practice that attracts wildlife and most often becomes trash. She also warned of the dangers of illegal fires along the trail and cited one college orientation group that threw a keg party at Gulf Hagas.

Sally Manikian, the backcountry resource conservation manager for the Appalachian Mountain Club (and *News and Notes* editor for this journal), says she takes a long view of such bad behavior from her perch in the White Mountains, the most populated and used recreation area in the Northeast. “None of this is really new,” she said. “The Leave No Trace movement in the 1970s was a direct response to hikers’ misuse of trails in the 1960s, when they were said to be ‘loving the mountains to death.’ The University of New Hampshire has an archive of photos from that time. There’s one taken in 1962 showing an overflowing trash bin at Liberty Spring shelter. It was pretty disgusting.”

Today, AMC maintains 300 miles of AT trails—some of the most rugged of the entire trail—and Manikian said she and other stewards find themselves regularly gathering up piles of discarded orange peels, packing out human waste, and rehabilitating trails and campsites. “We are on an upward trend of use,” she said. “Over the 40 years of our program, we’ve documented peaks and valleys, periods of steady rise and decline. We are currently on a rise and are seeing some record-breaking use figures lately.”

In addition to the nine campsites staffed with caretakers charging a fee in the summer months, Manikian said AMC encourages use of five non-fee campsites along the part of the AT it maintains (there are an additional four campsites on the Grafton Loop Trail, which includes about five miles of the AT) because it guarantees composting of human waste, protection of water quality, and reduction of heavy-impact camping. “We’ve always been on the

forefront of management techniques, because we have so many visitors we have no choice but to respond,” she said.

Only a small percentage of White Mountain visitors are AT thru-hikers, but the AMC recognizes that this group has special needs and has prepared a handout to educate distance hikers about the unique landscape they will encounter in that area of the AT, particularly in the remote 100-Mile Wilderness they must traverse before entering Baxter, and the difficulty of the 22 trails along the route.

### **A Call for Help**

In his 2014 letter, Jensen Bissell describes much the same behavior problems in Baxter State Park that other backcountry stewards are reporting in their areas, including drug and alcohol use in public, hiking together in large numbers, loud parties that disrupt other hikers, sneaking into the park late to camp illegally, refusal to pay the reduced \$10 camping fee, and an entitled attitude that puts special demands on rangers and facilities. Bissell even notes that a few hikers have brought false service dogs into the park to flout the no-pets rule. “The culture and attitude of many AT hikers seems to be changing,” he writes. “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.”

His words highlight the unique bind that places Baxter State Park stewards in a different position from other backcountry managers: they will not be able to fulfill the park’s clear mission—considered sacrosanct—if something isn’t done to keep thru-hiker numbers in the park manageable.

In a conversation a year after sending this letter, Bissell continued his urgent call for change on the part of the AT’s other management entities. “We are what we are,” he said of the park, “and we’ll always be what we are. Our mission will not change. We’ll just keep trying to do it better.” Though he readily acknowledges that the behavior issues in the park are caused by no more than 5 percent of thru-hikers, most of these in groups, these problems are so visible and disruptive and overall hiker numbers so high that it is getting more and more difficult to protect the park’s lands and animals and ensure the enjoyment of all hikers. Ideally, he would like to see a cap on the number of hikers permitted to use the AT in a given season, but he knows that is unlikely to happen.

Park naturalist Jean Hoekwater, who has been working on hiker education in the park, among many other responsibilities, since 1988, expressed great

## AT 2,000-Milers by Decade

1930s	5
1940s	3
1950s	14
1960s	37
1970s	775
1980s	1,427
1990s	3,332
2000s	5,912
2010–2015	5,171

Source: *Appalachian Trail Conservancy*,  
[www.appalachiantrail.org/2000-milers](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/2000-milers)

admiration for the efforts of thru-hikers. “They have good reason to be proud,” she said. “But some don’t understand that this resource is very special—even sacred to a lot of people. It doesn’t exist for a particular group. The understanding of what we are and how they fit into it must be deepened. We’re not just here as the northern terminus of the AT.”

Hoekwater said that she has approached hiker education in Baxter in the spirit of being as unobtrusive as possible, relying on “the authority of the resource, not the badge. We want to believe people are here from a shared love of the place and that they feel some attachment to the resource. We expect they will work with us to make the Baxter experience good for all.”

Over the years, Hoekwater said, the park has instituted a number of accommodations for AT thru-hikers, the only group to receive special treatment. These include a designated camping site; reduced overnight fees; educational materials, a website, and radio communications designed specifically for long-distance hikers; a seasonal AT steward hired to greet thru-hikers as they enter the park; and a year-round field ranger and administrative staff member who serve as AT liaisons.

Calling the AT “a recreational miracle,” Hoekwater said all those involved must nurture the idea that the quality of everyone’s outdoor experience is based on personal responsibility and goodwill. “We have to get hikers enlisted in being part of the solution,” she said. “We have to raise the prospect of what each one of us can do for the landscape we’re enjoying. We have to counteract the modern tendency of people to think, ‘It’s all there for me and someone else is taking care of it.’”

Echoing Bissell’s belief that only a small percentage of hikers are currently part of the problem, Hoekwater is still worried that the growing numbers



*Most thru-hikers pay homage to the Katahdin sign without libations at hand: Cay Lodine, Phil Lodine, Christine Woodside, and Nat Eddy on the summit of Katahdin at the end of their four-and-a-half-month journey in 1987. COWBOY PAUL LYBARGER*

and disruptive behavior could continue in the wrong direction and get out of control if the issues aren't addressed now. "There are oodles of people conforming with our regulations with no issues," she said. "But the problems that do exist have reached a critical point that can't be ignored. We've done about all we can do on our end. Now we need to work together."

### **Cooperative Efforts Offer Hope for Resolution**

Media accounts following Scott Jurek's infractions and fines created the impression that Baxter State Park and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy were on opposite sides of a heated battle involving intractable differences of opinion. In fact, representatives from the ATC support almost everything Jensen Bissell and Jean Hoekwater are saying and agree that some things must change.

Claire Polfus, the Maine conservation resources manager for the ATC, was disturbed, she said, by what she sees as wrong impressions left by the Jurek stories. "People started believing in an us vs. them mentality," she said. "I heard from thru-hikers who said, 'Maybe they don't want us at Baxter.' But

hikers have always told me how nice and professional the Baxter staff has been to them. I think the system for AT hikers in Baxter works well.”

In the end, Polfus said the heated response to the Jurek story turned out to be a good thing. “It gave us renewed purpose to solve the problem and even helped reduce the behavior problems in Baxter after it happened,” she said. “But we’re way beyond that now, and we’re working together to solve the problem. We’re talking more and we’ve become stronger partners in the past year.”

Among the solutions already in place, she said, are beefed-up educational program for hikers; an increase in trail ridgerunners and caretakers along the AT to interact with hikers; a policy for managing numbers by dispersing hikers along the trail; and an AT–Baxter task force specifically charged with working in all the AT communities to raise awareness of the problems. The ATC has also instituted a voluntary registration system that allows hikers to pick their start dates and vary them to alleviate crowds at the southern terminus.

“The AT is never going to be a park that has gate-keepers,” said Polfus. “But we can do more to relieve the pressure on Baxter and help keep the numbers entering there manageable. The use of public lands is rising across the board. Everyone is facing behavioral issues. It seems to be a cultural thing. My biggest hope is that people stop focusing on animosity and move toward becoming part of the solution.”

Laurie Potteiger, information services manager for the ATC, meets many of the thru-hikers who come through the ATC’s headquarters in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. She said she understands the problems cited by Bissell and the Baxter staff. “We know they’ve come to a critical point,” she said. “Baxter has unique goals and fragile alpine regions, so we understand what they’re facing. We know the flow of hikers into the park has to be controlled in some way.”

A solution she feels will make a big difference is one the ATC has been promoting actively for a couple of years: encouraging flip-flopers. “The biggest new trend among thru-hikers that’s helping disperse use is alternative itineraries that start mid-trail,” she said. “Until a couple of years ago, people who did something other than move straight through the trail did this in an unplanned way. We’ve recently been encouraging people to be more intentional about it, to ‘hike your own hike,’ because you can really start anywhere. That allows you to avoid the crowds and extend your hiking season. These patterns also enable flip-flop thru-hikers to arrive at Baxter well ahead of most of the northbound thru-hikers.”

Hikers can get on the AT from hundreds of access points. Some of the most popular starting points for flip-floppers include Harpers Ferry; the Delaware Water Gap on the Pennsylvania–New Jersey border; Shenandoah National Park in Virginia; and Pawling, New York, where there is an Appalachian Trail station on the Metro-North railway just 70 miles from New York City. Before the 2015 season began, the ATC hosted a “Flip Flop Kick Off” to encourage and support alternative routes, and its website ([appalachiantrail.org](http://appalachiantrail.org)) places this option right beside northbound and southbound alternatives.

Potteiger said the ATC also is expanding its Leave No Trace education by training master educators on its staff, offering courses to the public, and developing a long-distance AT hiking workshop curriculum. Early in 2015, the chair of the ATC Stewardship Council’s Trail and Camping Committee led an effort to create a series of short, entertaining, AT-specific Leave No Trace practice videos that can be viewed on the ATC website.

In early March, just before the 2016 thru-hiking season got underway, Baxter State Park and the ATC, after months of discussions, announced that they would allow all AT hikers into the park but that all northbounders must carry and show permits. They can acquire the free permits at two places in Millinocket—the Appalachian Trail Lodge or Baxter State Park headquarters—or two places accessible from the trail—from the park steward at Abol Bridge or the Katahdin Stream Campground. Hikers must give their real names and trail names, and they must show these permits at the Togue Pond or Matagamon gates (if they happen to go into town and re-enter the park at those gates). They also must show the permits to rangers at The Birches campsite and have the permits stamped at Katahdin Stream Campground when they finish climbing Katahdin.

The park announced that it will post daily, on its Facebook page and at [baxterstateparkauthority.com](http://baxterstateparkauthority.com), the number of permit cards issued. “The Park will maintain a list of the AT long distance hikers who were issued a completion date on their card,” the announcement said. “This list will be published on the Park website at the close of the summer hiking season each year.”

Soon after the park’s announcement came the news that the ATC would staff its visitor center in Monson, Maine (at the southern end of the 100-Mile Wilderness), seven days a week. ATC officials said that this would prepare northbound hikers for their approach to Baxter State Park. The ATC also planned to hire an additional full-time staffer to roam the southern portions of the trail, which are also seeing the impact of increased use.



## **Will All This Be Enough?**

As Baxter State Park's staff and officials continue to work with the Appalachian Trail's management groups, it's clear everyone understands the problem and wants to help alleviate it. It's also clear that both groups feel a strong need to honor their respective missions and traditions. "We've always been as unregulated as possible and we hope to remain that," said Laurie Potteiger. "Things have to be different, but we want hikers to be responsible and make voluntary decisions that will reduce crowding and impact."

In keeping with that philosophy, the ATC has refused to issue Baxter State Park permits at the Monson Visitor Center, preferring to let hikers wait until they enter the park to secure their cards and to focus their efforts on increased education in Leave No Trace behavior.

Will initiatives based on voluntary participation help the situation enough to preserve Katahdin as the AT's northern terminus? Those who believe in open access to all public lands certainly hope so. Jensen Bissell said the Baxter State Park Authority is willing to wait to see if the new strategies will bring about positive change. "But they haven't withdrawn the possibility of removing Katahdin from the AT," he said. "We'll have to see what the coming years bring in terms of increased numbers."

As more people continue to turn out—many unprepared for what they find—wilderness degradation might indeed be a matter of sheer numbers complicated by inexperience. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Shenandoah National Park had already required permits for overnight stays in the backcountry, with separate permitting for AT thru-hikers. So it is not surprising to see Baxter move in this direction. At some point, the authority might feel the need to limit the number of thru-hiker permits it issues, but for now, it hopes the act of securing a permit card will be enough to remind these hikers that they are entering a unique part of the AT and should respect its distinctive character.

Ultimately, all the AT and Baxter stewards agree that the Jurek controversy added a sense of impetus to their discussions that was not there before. "Anything that brings more urgency to the efforts is a positive thing," said the Appalachian Mountain Club's Sally Manikian, who believes Jensen Bissell and Jean Hoekwater are being quite fair in their request for help. A member of the ATC Regional Partnership Committee, Manikian said Bissell came to the group "with open hands, asking for help from the whole community. He's definitely not making a big deal out of nothing. We have to talk at the

national level about recreation and landscape in light of the overuse risk. We at the AMC have been trying to do what we can and so has the ATC.”

But though the stewards have worked hard to find workable solutions that will mitigate the problems while preserving their separate identities, the hiking community remains divided. Jennifer Pharr Davis, who held the AT speed record before Scott Jurek, spoke publicly just as Jurek was about to reach Katahdin and break her record. “I am starting to realize that a true legacy is not so much about performing when the whole world is watching, as it is a dedication to your cause when no one is watching,” she said, advising him to “hold the record lightly.” That sentiment was echoed by an experienced thru-hiker on Baxter State Park’s staff who said he felt it appropriate that thru-hikers “resume their humility at Baxter after being lionized along the rest of the AT.”

Of course, some hikers believe that the park overreacted to Jurek’s behavior. They oppose all restrictions on public lands and feel that Baxter State Park has no right to set limits on access to its trails. In the Winter 2014–2015 issue of *The Appalachian Long Distance Hiker*, 2,000-miler Warren Doyle, a frequent Katahdin summiter who once was jailed for trying to climb after the park had closed, is quoted as saying, “It is a shame that a magnificent massif like Katahdin finds itself imprisoned in a state park like Baxter.”

That’s one way of looking at it. Another way, perhaps the wiser way considering our well-proven inability to control our human impact, is to look at the majestic Katahdin—famously characterized by Henry David Thoreau as “primeval, untamed, and forever untamable”—as a priceless and vulnerable treasure in protective custody. Because of its unique mission, Baxter State Park is in an unusual position to ensure the mountain’s welfare. Rather than turning this crisis moment into a two-sided battle, those of us who cherish our time in the woods need to realize there is only one side: the side that is doing its best to ensure that Maine’s greatest mountain remains healthy, well treated, and “forever wild.”

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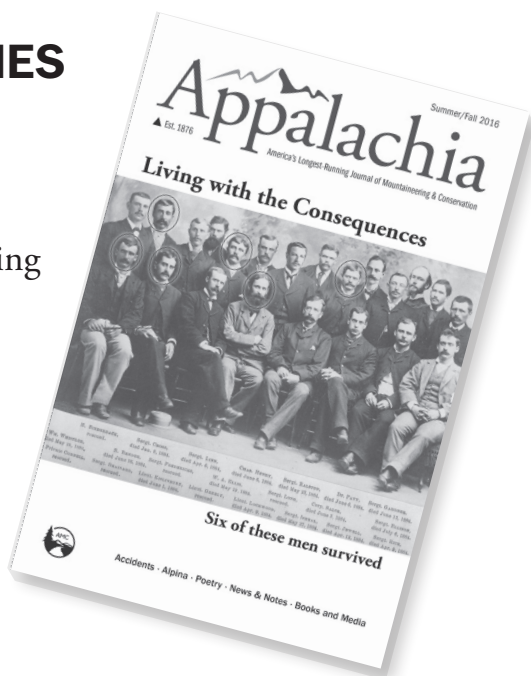
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