

LANDSCAPES

of the Appalachian Trail

BY DENNIS SHAFFER

THE A.T. AND ITS

surrounding protected corridor are embedded within some of the Appalachian Mountain's richest and most diverse features. Opportunities abound to protect, enhance, and promote the ecological, scenic, cultural and recreational values of the A.T. countryside. One of the most important challenges of the A.T. Landscape Conservation Initiative — launched in 2015 by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and the National Park Service — is prioritizing how and where to focus conservation efforts along the magnificent ridges and valleys that make up the A.T. experience that so many visitors and residents alike have come to know and cherish. Identifying the priority landscapes of the A.T. was high on the agenda of the second Annual A.T. Landscape Conservation Initiative Conference held this past fall at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Land conservation leaders from federal and state agencies and nonprofit conservation



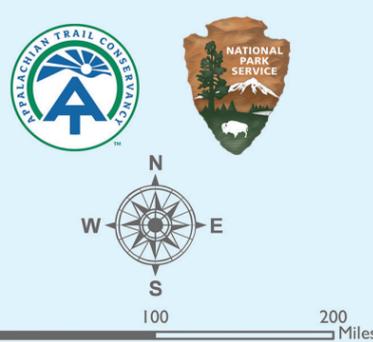
The Roan Highlands in North Carolina and Tennessee are one of 10 areas officially designated as an A.T. Priority Landscape
Photo by Jerry Greer



PRIORITY LANDSCAPES of the APPALACHIAN NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

LEGEND

- Appalachian Trail
- Priority Landscape
- A.T. Large Landscape
- Urban Area



Map produced December 2016 for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy www.appalachiantrail.org by Mitchell Geography. www.mitchellgeography.net

Data Sources: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, USGS Small Scale Map Data, Natural Earth, Mitchell Geography.

organizations met for two days to build on the enthusiasm and achievements resulting from the first year of the initiative. In addition to the work targeting priority landscapes, the coalition of conservation partners attending the conference focused on refining a vision and mission for the initiative, developing and implementing a communication strategy, creating opportunities to work with the new presidential administration, and building strategies to attract new financial resources to enhance on-the-ground conservation work throughout the A. T. landscape.

Work to develop a list of priority landscapes began with discussions about an initial set of high-level landscape conservation criteria. Reaching an ambitious vision for the A.T. landscape requires a long-term conservation agenda. The criteria set out what the initiative's coalition of partners aspire to achieve over the long term — protecting and enhancing our relationship with the A.T. and all that it encompasses. The criteria are organized around eight broad categories that encompass landscape-level land conservation: viewsheds, forestlands, farms, natural resources, recreation and public access, historic and cultural sites, and human health. Other criteria influence conservation decision making such as: vulnerability and threats, opportunities to build connectivity with existing conservation lands, landowner interest, partnership potential, and financial support.

Utilizing large-scale maps, workgroups, and guided discussions, meeting participants identified a list of 10 Priority Landscapes of the A.T. This initial prioritization work will continue to be refined as more partners engage in the A.T. Landscape Conservation Initiative. Evaluation of existing and improving access to data about ecological and cultural resources and climate-change science will also improve efforts to prioritize landscapes along the A.T.

The 10 Priority Landscape Areas are:

- 100-Mile Wilderness of Maine
- Maine's High Peaks
- Lyme/Hanover Area of New Hampshire
- New-York-Connecticut Line to Bear Mountain-Harriman State Park, New York
- Landscapes along the New York/New Jersey State Lines
- Kittatinny Ridge, Pennsylvania
- South Mountain, Pennsylvania
- Harpers Ferry, West Virginia to Snickers Gap, Virginia
- Catawba Valley/Triple Crown, Virginia
- Roan Highlands, North Carolina and Tennessee

The Appalachian Trail and communities along the Trail have benefitted from a long and successful history of land conservation efforts. In addition to the 30-plus year campaign to secure a permanently protected corridor for the A.T. footpath, many local and regional conservation projects have resulted in critical viewshed protection and prevented incompatible land development and fragmenta-

tion in areas along the Trail. The A.T. experience continues to be enriched by these conservation achievements. While the 10 Priority Landscapes of the A.T. have been identified and mapped, ATC and its coalition of conservation partners will continue to support, promote and celebrate all land conservation efforts within the A.T. landscape.

A great example of a priority landscape and an area with a long history of land conservation success stories is the Roan Highlands of North Carolina and Tennessee. Jay Leutze, chair of the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, participated in the second Annual A.T. Landscape Conservation Initiative Conference. Jay spoke about his organization's work in the Roan Highlands and described one of the projects his organization recently secured. "The Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy has worked for decades to protect critical lands on Hump Mountain immediately adjacent to the A.T.," said Leutze. "This property has been our top priority to preserve the natural setting and views of one of the most magnificent southern balds." In the early 2000s, Jay successfully stopped the destruction of Belview Mountain, an iconic Appalachian mountain, from a local mining company that was violating North Carolina's mining law. This incredible story is now being told through the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's myATstory campaign (myATstory.org — available January 17).

Advancing conservation within the 10 Priority Landscapes of the A.T. will require long-term commitment and coordination among a broad and diverse coalition of conservation partners. Conference participants expressed strong support for continuing the annual gathering of conservation leaders from up and down the A.T. A number of next steps for coalition development and further refining the 10 Priority Landscapes of the A.T. were outlined by the attendees. These next steps will build on laying the foundation for effective communications among the coalition partners, increasing organizational capacity, and accelerating work within the priority landscapes. The A.T. and the landscapes through which it passes are benefiting from the outstanding conservation work of many organizations and individuals. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy and National Park Service continue to be excited and grateful for the tremendous enthusiasm and momentum that our partners are bringing to the A.T. Landscape Conservation Initiative and our work to protect the gems of this national treasure. 📍

Dennis Shaffer is the ATC's director of landscape conservation. For more information visit: appalachiantrail.org/landscapeprotection

Watch Jay Leutze's myATstory, "Standing Tall" at: myATstory.org