

**Reconsidering the Politics of Nature and Community
on the Appalachian Trail**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the potential for communities to become involved in efforts to develop ecologically sustainable societies. As the concept of community is often ill defined, this thesis explores traditional and interest-based ideas of community, and develops a conceptualization of a work-based community. The history and development of the Appalachian Trail is reviewed as an example of how private citizens can reshape unbuilt environments through physical work and dedication to a common goal. Through the work of maintaining a 2,100-mile hiking trail, trail managers come to share common experiences and goals, as well as developing relationships with people and places that make it possible to recognize these maintainers as a work-based community. The A.T. management community exemplifies the potential for communities to have substantive in efforts to develop more ecologically sustainable and socially equitable ways for humans to live, work, and play in built and unbuilt environments.

Preface

My experiences on the Appalachian Trail began at the age of twelve while hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains in central Virginia. At an intersection of two trails, we stopped following blue marks on trees, and began hiking on a trail distinguished by neat six inch white blazes every few hundred yards. As we hiked, I learned that we were walking a few miles of the Appalachian Trail. Like many others, I became captivated by the idea of being able to start walking a trail in Georgia and continue walking for some 2,100 miles north to Maine. I continued to hike on the Appalachian Trail, but never gave much thought to where the Trail came from, or how it was maintained.

At the time I knew very little about building trails. I suppose I knew that the Appalachian Trail was not a naturally occurring two-foot wide strip of dirt running most of the length of the eastern United States. It was not until I began studying at Virginia Tech in southwestern Virginia that I learned the A.T. was built and maintained almost entirely by volunteers. After years of hiking, it seemed appropriate to give a few days to maintaining, even if it was maintaining trails I had never hiked on. Rather

than a question of making up for the effects of my hiking on trails, I saw it as a gesture of respect to those who had maintained the trails I'd used, and an acceptance of my responsibility to ensure the possibility of such experiences for others.

Through joining a trail maintaining club, and participating in trail maintaining trips I slowly became involved in management activities. Though I began going on maintaining trips out of a sense of obligation, I quickly came to enjoy the physical efforts undertaken with other people who also liked being outside, and shared my feelings and understandings of the trail. Additionally, the physical work offered an enjoyable contrast to the daily work of lectures, readings, and courses. After two years in a maintaining club, I was elected to an officer position. Through meetings with other clubs and maintainers, I began to get a sense of the variety and number of people involved in maintaining the Appalachian Trail. Through my efforts with a small group of people in southwest Virginia, I began to understand, and then to feel a part of what is often referred to as the Appalachian Trail management community. As I began exploring community involvement in environmental issues as a topic for my Master's thesis, it seemed only fitting to examine the

Appalachian Trail and the management community that led me to first reconsider the meaning of community at the end of the twentieth century.

In completing this project, I have received assistance from a number of sources. I am grateful to the Department of Political Science at Virginia Tech for providing me opportunities to explore my interest in environmental politics. Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Timothy Luke for his guidance and assistance in finding some commonality between my intellectual, academic, and personal lives. His support, patience, and comments on the ideas, proposals, and drafts that led to this thesis have been invaluable. Dr. Richard Rich also offered guidance assistance in helping me develop and complete this project. I am also grateful to Dr. Mark Barrow, in the Department of History at Virginia Tech, for his encouragement, confidence, and interest in this topic.

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the mistakes and shortcomings that remain are wholly my own.

Finally, I am grateful to the many thousands of people who have worked and continue to work to manage and protect the Appalachian Trail. Without their continued efforts neither this thesis, nor the trail it discusses, would be possible.

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