

## GEOCACHING AND THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

**Issue:** Growth in Geocaching along the A.T.

**Background:** That Tupperware container filled with goodies you just stumbled across may be a “geocache.” Geocaching, described as “equal parts sport, culture, and treasure hunt,” involves participants hiding a cache (a stash of goods) in a remote location and recording its exact position using a hand-held global positioning system (GPS) unit. The coordinates, along with a few helpful hints, are then posted on the World Wide Web (<[www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com)> is a popular site) for other GPS-wielding geocachers to look up. Then, armed with a GPS unit, enthusiasts seek a route to the site to search for the hidden cache.

It’s actually a modern variation on an old idea called “letterboxing” which traces its roots all the way back to 1854 to a remote part of Dartmoor, England. The difference between the two activities is that geocaching relies on using GPS to locate the cache, whereas letterboxing requires the participant to decipher a riddle or set of clues to find the location of the letterbox, and the use of documentary ink stamps by the latter’s devotees.

Geocaches are usually housed in a waterproof plastic or metal containers (film tin, Tupperware dish, or ammo case) and may contain any number of items, from the mundane to the extraordinary. The unofficial rules dictate that you may take an item from the stash if you leave something of your own in its place, so that the items in the cache are in a continual flux—you never know what you’ll find. There is also a logbook, similar to a shelter register, to record your thoughts and achievement of the find. The cache is then rehidden in the same spot for the future treasure seekers.

Geocaching emerged after the government brought an end to “selective availability,” a process by which the U.S. military regularly degraded location signals from its satellites that GPS needed to work. Before, only military units would work accurately, and GPS users could expect their units to be accurate only to about 100 meters. Now, recreational GPS units can guide you to within meters of your destination. This newfound accuracy spawned geocaching, a modern hide-and-seek game for those pursuing a new use for their techno-gadgets.

**Current Situation:** As of December, 2006, 340,000 geocaches are active worldwide, with the number of sites and participants growing weekly. Because route finding is part of the attraction of the game, with the excitement multiplied through the power of the World Wide Web, impacts such as social trails and damage to specific cultural and natural resources— Revolutionary or Civil War encampment walls and stone piles as well as rare and endangered species—is growing.

Geocaching has raised a debate among land managers across the country who question both the appropriateness and legality of placing caches on federal, state or local park and forest lands. Overzealous geocachers, in their mission to hide or find secret stashes, may disrupt sensitive resources, such as natural- or cultural-heritage sites. Some states, such as

Maryland, have adopted interim rules allowing this activity with prior permits; others are still evaluating their options or ignoring the issue. Because federal regulations prohibit abandonment of property, disturbance of damage of natural features, and, in some national parks, off-trail hiking, most NPS sites do not permit geocaching. The Chief, Office of NPS Policy, is now providing guidance to parks for their consideration of permitting for such activities.

NPS-ATPO Ranger Todd Remaley and ATC Boundary Program Manager Sally Naser have documented more than 100 sites between Harpers Ferry and Delaware Water Gap, have found and removed dozens of caches, and have spoken to and asked sponsors to warn their users against trespass (For an example, see [www.atgeocoin.com](http://www.atgeocoin.com)). Furthermore, Remaley worries that—given the narrowness of the A.T. corridor—there’s potential for geocachers to trespass on adjacent private land, or to be confused if their activities are permitted by an adjacent state park, state gamelands unit or state or county authorities, or to misunderstand and violate A.T. rules, such as using bicycles, ATVs, 4 wheel-drive vehicles and other transportation on park lands, all of which has happened.

Many geocachers consider their activities to have such a low impact that they do not warrant informing land managers, or interference from the government. Other park and ATC managers have reported that geocaching has educational and recreational benefits that stimulate people to get back outdoors and enjoy their parks and forests in a new and exciting way. Indeed, land navigation or orienteering is a longstanding sport in itself. Permitting the use on NPS-ATPO lands or on the seven national park units crossed by the Trail would require substantial investment and administration not currently envisioned; however, “virtual” geocaching, certification by Leave No Trace, or other “low-impact” venues and mitigation measures could be researched, including highlighting existing jurisdictions or ATC lands where existing resource conditions indicate that they could be willing to permit these activities.

**Action:** Discussion of alternative strategies and sharing refined direction with ATC regions, Trail-maintaining clubs and agency partners.

(Portions of this report are from “21<sup>st</sup> Century Treasure Hunting?” by David Reus, *Appalachian Trailway News*, July/August 2001, field reports from Sally Naser and Todd Remaley, and recent direction from the NPS Chief, Office of Policy, “Policies and Regulations Related to Geocaching Activities in Park Areas.”)