

Draft Article

## **Managing the AT Camping Experience: A Critique and Suggestions**

by Jeff Marion

I think we have a problem. The best way to solve a problem is to describe it, engage in extensive dialogue, formulate effective solutions, implement them, and monitor their success. This article is intended to initiate that process with respect to the problem of A.T. shelter “structure creep.”

*Problem definition.* Structure creep: An inexorable increase in the sizes of A.T. camping shelters and inclusion of decidedly non-primitive materials and amenities. These changes increasingly promote a more social A.T. trail experience and insulate hikers from intimate contact with nature.

My perspective on this problem is that of a long-time A.T. section hiker and a scientist who studies the management of recreation use in protected areas. My annual section hike last month provided me with ample time to consider why I find myself drawn to and concerned by this problem. As my thoughts ranged far and wide I found them to inevitably return to one question: *What is the core meaning or philosophical significance of the A.T. to me and why is structure creep at odds with this?* My personal response follows, which in turn is followed by a more descriptive elaboration of the problem, relevant published A.T. guidance, dialogue, and suggestions.

Personal A.T. core meanings: My life is imbedded in a technological world full of developed and mechanized structures that sustain and transport me in comfort, shielding me from nature, natural processes, and the weather. Intimate contact with nature, particularly during my extended A.T. hikes, allows me to reconnect with the natural world – with minimal distractions from the developed world and people. My time on the trail teaches humility and self-reliance, and provides opportunities away from the distractions of modern living to gain perspective on life and contemplate my relationship to the natural world. Large A.T. shelters with non-primitive materials and amenities, combined with the people they attract, have a powerful capacity to separate and distract me from intimate and meaningful contact with nature.

My A.T. section hiking started with 60-70 mile hikes in Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee in the early 70's. Thirty years ago most hikers camped at shelters that accommodated 6-8 people, and I recall very few instances when we shared a shelter with others. Today I see an increasing number of new shelters with capacities of 15-25 and more. After spending a couple of nights at these I now avoid them due to negative experiences with both crowding and conflicts. I missed the solitude of camping with my group or by myself. At large shelters you *have* to be social – you listen in and are often drawn into everyone's conversations whether you want to or not! The sights, sounds, and smells of people replace the sights, sounds, and smells of nature. I'm a light sleeper so I get a terrible night's sleep at large shelters. There are always folks awakening me with their talking, snoring, various escapades involving packs and boots thrown at diminutive four-footed night-time visitors, and of course the seemingly endless parade

of barely awake zombies making late night excursions down ladders and across bodies to relieve bladders.

Whatever happened to the primitive log cabin, timber frame construction, or rough plank-walled shelters on natural rock footers that harmonized with the backcountry setting of the Appalachian Mountains and Trail? Today I increasingly see shelters with modern architectural designs, T-111 “house” siding, clerestory windows, and obtrusive concrete footers. One might question the difference between the application of these modern materials and those carried by backpackers (Gore-Tex laminate and ripstop silnylon). I offer three arguments: 1) modern fabrics and items carried by backpackers enhance their safety and enable extended trips freed from reliance on large developed structures, 2) their use can replace high-impact alternatives (e.g., foam pads instead of pine boughs, stoves instead of campfires), and 3) their use is at the discretion of the visitor, whereas shelter designs and materials are selected by club members and acceptable rustic alternatives exist.

Then there are the shelter amenities, way beyond your average picnic table. I’ve seen various configurations of bunk beds and sleeping lofts and of large cooking tables with benches on “covered” porches, shelters with house-like decks, and even a separate “picnic pavilion.” Some of the cooking areas have roll-down canvas barriers to intercept wind and rain. The Partnership shelter at Virginia’s Mt. Rogers puts all others to shame by offering hot showers and pizza delivery due to its location 100 feet from the parking lot of a Forest Service visitor center. Until last year’s hike I thought this shelter topped the list until I hiked past the Quarry Gap “Hilton” shelter in Pennsylvania’s Michaux State Forest. This shelter had a swinging porch bench, hanging baskets of pansies and solar lights to illuminate your way to the spring and privy!

As a scientist who studies recreation on public lands I routinely consult with agency and organization guidance when evaluating problems and formulating recommendations. I did some searching and here’s a synopsis of A.T. information relevant to the problems I’ve described:

- *1981 Comprehensive Plan for the Appalachian Trail:* Shelters are a tradition on the A.T., but use of the Trail should not depend upon them. No attempt is made to provide such amenities for every potential user, so each person must be prepared to do without them. Shelter density and design should be consistent with the sense of the natural.
- *1997 ATC Local Management Planning Guide, Chap. 2(F), Overnight-Use Areas:* Since 1925, ATC policy has supported "a connected series of primitive lean-tos and camps" as an integral part of the Trail experience.
- *Chapter 2 (I), Managing the Trail for a Primitive Experience:* The ATC should take into account the effects of Trail management programs and policies on the primitive and natural qualities of the A.T. and the primitive recreation experience the Trail is intended to provide...Even in sections of the Trail that do not pass through remote or primitive landscapes, care should be taken not to inadvertently overdevelop or improve the Trail tread or facilities in these environments... Design and construction of these facilities should reflect an awareness of, and harmony with, the Trail’s primitive qualities. Materials and design features should emphasize simplicity and not detract from the predominant sense of a natural, primitive environment.

- *ATC Guidelines for sanitation, water supplies, and overnight facilities along the Appalachian Trail on National Forest lands:* To meet traditional goals for the A.T. experience, new shelters built along the A.T. should be of rustic design and constructed of native or rough sawn materials. Planed lumber (except for sleeping platforms) and modern stick-frame construction should be avoided.

This guidance, which is quite specific on shelter materials and amenities, reinforces my personal view that we have a problem. Regarding shelter size, I suspect that the ATC Board of Managers vision statement defining the desired Trail Experience is reasonably clear. It speaks of opportunities for “direct and intimate” contact with nature unimpeded by “competing sights and sounds” and the “opportunity to experience solitude.” Why is there a disconnect between this guidance and some of the shelters being built today? I am aware that the clubs propose and design new shelters which the ATC must approve. I suspect the heart of the problem lies with the A.T. community’s tradition of decentralized decision making. So here’s my question? Is the A.T. community simply serving popular tastes or is it basing decisions on a shared vision of an intended trail experience, as codified in approved plans and documents?

It appears in some cases that these shelters are designed to serve popular tastes, so let’s explore that option further. Whose tastes should we serve: thru-hikers, section hikers, one-week hikers, weekenders, or club members? Folks who like to socialize or folks who desire solitude and natural quiet? Hikers who encourage, expect and applaud the latest large amenity-laden shelters or those, like myself, who now avoid such “Hiltons?” If it is a vote by current hikers and club members how do we obtain a representative sample? Would that mean we are willing and able to alter facility sizes and amenities to match changing desires over time? Even if most visitors welcome the new larger shelters and amenities and don’t worry about the use of modern materials should we do their bidding? I suspect that many visitors would also welcome showers, pizza delivery, and swinging chairs. Heck, why not add running water and solar powered shelter lights and *what about that missing fourth side?* A real Hilton Hotel is waiting for us at the end of this path...

If A.T. hikers want a Hilton Hotel do we provide one? If not, then what criteria *do* we apply to decide what’s appropriate and what’s not and won’t some visitors demand that all shelters be updated to the latest and greatest model? *And most importantly – how do large, modern, amenity-laden shelters alter the nature of the A.T. experience?* It is my strong personal belief that the new larger shelters are profoundly altering the nature of the A.T. experience, and therefore appealing to and attracting a different type of hiker. The intended A.T. experience, emphasizing solitude and natural quiet (reflected in the documents cited earlier), is being transformed incrementally and without conscious foresight to one that emphasizes socializing with others within developed facilities that further insulate us from intimate contact with nature.

There are some important distinctions to consider, however. Some facility improvements, like simple/rustic picnic tables and cooking stations, serve a useful resource protection objective by attracting and concentrating cooking activity in a single place. Other facility improvements, like swinging chairs and roll-down wind/rain barriers, are visitor amenities rather than resource protection features. They cater to hiker comfort and convenience – in direct contradiction to maintenance of a “primitive experience.”

## Some Suggestions

So what should be done about this problem? I've always been a firm believer in dialogue – lots of it. I encourage a broader debate about these issues throughout the A.T. community.

Protected land managers generally base facility development decisions on guidance provided through legislation, agency policies, and management plans. This is easiest when there are specific prescriptive statements defining the desired visitor experience, resource conditions and appropriate types of facilities and management actions. These generally vary by trail segment or zone (e.g., frontcountry, backcountry, and wilderness) – perhaps larger more developed shelters would be appropriate in a more accessible frontcountry zone. The intent of prescriptive statements is to formally characterize the kinds of recreation opportunities and the timeless resource, social, and managerial conditions that managers seek to create and sustain. The natural setting relates to the naturalness of resource features and processes. The social setting relates to the quality of social conditions relative to the potential for individual experiences and interactions with other visitors. The managerial setting refers to the perceived presence or obtrusiveness of management actions, including the size, materials, and amenities of shelters. Such statements describe a “shared vision” to guide local decision making and promote consistent responses to decisions affecting the A.T. experience.

Here are some specific recommendations for the A.T. community:

- Develop comprehensive yet specific prescriptive statements for desired resource, social and managerial conditions by trail zone. Develop shelter design guidelines consistent with these statements without stifling creativity and diversity.
- Adopt the prescriptive statements and design guidelines as part of a revised A.T. management plan or as ATC/agency/club guidance documents.
- Ensure consistency across the A.T. community in shelter design by strengthening the existing shelter review process by the ATC and land management agencies.

In the absence or disregard of such guidance, separate decisions by different trail maintaining clubs will vary across time and location, perpetuating existing trends toward larger shelters built with modern materials, and offering expanded amenities. A conscious trail-wide effort by the maintaining clubs, the ATC and the land management agencies is needed to prevent this “structure creep” and attain more consistent decision making. A consideration that makes this problem particularly critical is that actions involving facility development are nearly always “one-way” – the area is increasingly “developed” over time, transforming forever the characteristics of the site and the recreation experience. You've heard of “ecological succession,” this is known as “recreation succession.” As facilities are gradually “improved” over time campers who desire a more primitive experience are replaced by campers who desire and welcome the familiarity of larger developed structures and amenities. The best way to halt recreation succession and its associated visitor “displacement” is to implement the recommendations offered above and to largely ignore, rather than serve, “popular tastes.”

In closing I want to express my sincere and strongly felt gratitude to the A.T. trail maintaining club community. I am fully aware of the endless hours and days that club members devote to the construction and maintenance of the trail and its shelters (I've maintained my neighborhood's 3.5

mile trail system since 1989). Your work is noticed and appreciated by myself and others I meet on the trail. I cherish the A.T. and care deeply about its protection and management. I have and will continue to devote my energies to the management of camping along the A.T. (see <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/protect/steward/overnight.html>) and to the national *Leave No Trace* educational program which the A.T. community has adopted. I offer these critiques and suggestions only in the spirit of constructive dialogue.

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