

# Structure Creep: Managing the A.T. Camping Experience

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. In this article I hope to advance 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 natural areas. My annual section hikes provide me with ample time to consider why I find myself drawn to and concerned by this problem. As my thoughts range far and wide I find 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, along with a description of the problem, some relevant A.T. guidance, and a request for your involvement.

Personal core meanings of the A.T.: 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.

Thirty years ago most hikers camped at shelters that accommodated 6-8 people; I recall few instances when my hiking groups shared a shelter with others. Today there are an increasing number of shelters with capacities of 15-25, with more campers in adjacent campsites. At these locations you *have to be social* – you listen to and are often drawn into other group’s conversations whether you want to or not! The sights, sounds, and smells of people *replace* the sights, sounds, and smells of nature. As a light sleeper I get a terrible night’s sleep at large shelters. Folks awaken me with their talking, snoring, various escapades involving packs and boots thrown at diminutive four-footed night-time visitors, and a parade of the “barely awake” making early morning excursions down ladders and across bodies to relieve bladders. Other common problems include having to wait in lines at the privy and water sources and threatened visitor safety due to increased numbers of food-attracted wildlife.

More importantly, what’s become of the primitive log, stone, or rough plank-walled shelters on natural rock footers that harmonized with the backcountry setting of the Appalachian Mountains and Trail? The decentralized nature of A.T. management has resulted in a wide range of shelter designs and construction materials. Many are being replaced by shelters with modern architectural designs featuring smooth dimensional lumber (e.g., 2x4’s, T-111 siding), sitting atop concrete

blocks or round concrete pillars of cement. Some have an enclosed second story with Plexiglas windows, bunk beds, large suburbia-style covered decks, and built-in cooking areas with roll-down canvas barriers to intercept wind and rain. Many of the new shelters are inconsistent with existing ATC guidance prescribing the use of “rustic designs” and “native or rough sawn materials.”

The new shelters also increasingly include visitor amenities (showers, swinging porch benches, solar lights, and large modern decks) that cater to hiker comfort and convenience. While they may be welcomed or requested by some hikers they serve no resource protection function. More importantly, the intended A.T. experience (see side-panel) is being incrementally but profoundly transformed without conscious forethought to one that encourages “camping” in modern structures that separate visitors from nature and promote less self-reliant experiences. The increasing crowds and socializing at such structures appeals to a different kind of hiker and displaces or degrades the experiences of hikers who prefer solitude. These changes tend to be permanent, as facilities are incrementally “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. These trends and concerns have persuaded some in the A.T. community of the need for clarifying and emphasizing adherence to uniform shelter construction guidance.

Side-panel text box: The ATC’s former Board of Managers crafted the best available vision statement defining the desired A.T. “*Trail Experience*”: “The sum of opportunities that are available for hikers on the Appalachian Trail to interact with the wild, scenic, pastoral, cultural, and natural elements of the environment of the Appalachian Trail, unfettered and unimpeded by competing sights or sounds, and in as direct and intimate a manner as possible. Integral to this Trail Experience are opportunities for observation, contemplation, enjoyment, and exploration of the natural world; a sense of remoteness and detachment from civilization, opportunity to experience solitude, freedom, personal accomplishment, self-reliance, and self discovery; a sense of being on the height of the land; a feeling of being part of, and subordinate to, the natural environment; and opportunity for travel on foot, including opportunities for long-distance hiking.”

Shelters are a traditional feature of the A.T. and they will remain so. These structures and associated campsites help avoid or minimize impacts to natural resources and can separate campers from each other to limit crowding and conflicts. However, it appears in some cases that shelters are being redesigned to serve popular tastes, so let’s explore that option further. Whose tastes should we serve: thru-hikers, section hikers, weekenders, or club members? Hikers who like to socialize, or hikers who desire solitude and natural quiet? Hikers who expect and want more of the latest large amenity-laden shelters, or those who prefer primitive natural settings? Who gets to vote, and should we alter facility sizes and amenities to match changing desires over time? If requested, should we 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...

The ATC’s Stewardship Council has begun considering new guidance to address “structure creep” and is seeking your input. Dialogue within the A.T. community is needed to clarify our collective position on this important topic. Please give it some thought and generate some constructive dialogue with hiking partners, club members, and land managers. Regardless of our ultimate decision, let’s give it due consideration and make a *conscious choice* about the desired overnight experiences we are seeking to create and maintain along the A.T. The economists have a phrase for the “trail” we’ve been wandering down – they call it the “tyranny of small decisions.” The A.T. “*Trail Experience*” is too precious a commodity to leave unmanaged.

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