

## “TRAIL MAGIC” ALONG THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

Revised 10/30/06

**Issue:** The evolution of “Trail Magic” from small spontaneous acts of kindness to larger and increasingly common planned social events, such as multi-day hiker “feeds,” and the appropriateness of leaving unattended food and drink along the A.T.

**Background:** Spontaneous acts of generosity and hospitality provided by “Trail Angels” are one of the A.T.’s hallmarks. "Trail magic" can be a wonderful thing when done in ways that are not harmful to trail resources, wildlife, or the experience of hikers. However, there is a growing concern in the A.T. community that Trail Magic is evolving in ways that are inconsistent with the intended “Trail Experience” as defined by the ATC’s Board of Managers:

*“The sum of opportunities that are available for those walking 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.”*

Other elements of this guiding vision statement include:

- *A feeling of being part of the natural environment.*
  - *A sense of remoteness and detachment from civilization.*
  - *Opportunities to experience solitude, freedom, personal accomplishment, self-reliance, and self-discovery.*
- (Appalachian Trailway News, July/August 1997)*

Trail Magic is a popular tradition within the hiking community and we all recognize that it is often offered for altruistic reasons in keeping with the spirit of the A.T. However, while there are some positive aspects of this tradition there are also some potential problems, both of which are highlighted below to facilitate dialogue and provide a basis for developing recommendations:

### **Positive Aspects**

- a) Trail Magic can create a lasting and positive experience for many hikers. The simple expression of goodwill by strangers is often more meaningful than the food or other act of kindness.
- b) Strangers bestowing acts of kindness on A.T. hikers is a tradition documented in the earliest thru-hiker accounts.
- c) Offering Trail Magic creates a way for those who might not otherwise connect to the A.T. to become involved.

### **Potential Problems**

- a) Alteration of the intended “Trail Experience” that emphasizes primitive values, unspoiled nature, solitude, and self-reliance. The expanding size and number of organized feeds (over 40 in 2006) also conflicts with guidance in the A.T. Comprehensive Plan, which states that hikers should traverse the Trail “*by their own unaided efforts.*” Continued proliferation of these large scale events could also lead to the expectation among thru-hikers that “organized Trail Magic” is an entitlement.
- b) Threats to wildlife from ingesting food wrappers or associating food with human scents, trails, and shelters. Wildlife will eventually find unattended food and eat both food and wrappers, and strew trash along the trail. Food-attracted bears threaten visitor safety and must be killed.
- c) Threats to hiker safety from eating unrefrigerated foods left along the trail or at multi-day feeds. Leaving re-used jugs of water for hikers in long dry stretches allows the possibility for

unintended or intended contamination. Hikers who depend on such services are in jeopardy when they are not provided.

- d) Excessive crowding and trampling-related impacts to vegetation and soil at and in areas near event locations when hikers bunch up to attend large events. This affects all hikers and creates problems at work-for-stay sites and in areas that receive high visitation but have fixed numbers of overnight sites. Resource impacts occur quickly but recovery requires more than a year.
- e) Damage to volunteer morale. Trail maintainers who are already overworked may additionally have to clean up trash left on their sections or work to rehabilitate impacted event sites. These volunteers may receive less awareness, appreciation, or recognition from hikers, the media and the public due to an increased focus on Trail Angels.
- f) Siphons prospective trail volunteers away from more essential trail maintenance activities.
- g) Violations of regulations or policies addressing length-of-stay, signage (advertising), group uses, and health agency food preparation/storage practices. Charging money or asking for donations is also problematic.

### **Draft Recommendations**

The Appalachian Trail was created to provide a primitive, natural outdoor setting where people could hike, camp, and escape the pressures of modern, urban life. Today it is a place where people go to find rejuvenation for both the body and soul. The beautiful wild, wooded, and pastoral setting of the A.T. itself provides inspiration, but acts of generosity are also a hallmark of the A.T. experience. Long-distance hikers frequently say they find their faith in humanity is restored on the Trail—an extraordinary statement in today’s world. ATC’s role, in partnership with more than 5000 volunteers and dozens of land-managing agencies, is to protect both the Trail and the Trail Experience, while recognizing that a certain amount of “trail magic” is a part of its charm and character.

There can be such a thing as too much trail magic – how many large feeds and social events along the trail do we want? Some hikers and trail maintainers feel that the spirit of trail magic is lost when events are planned and organized, or that there are too many large-scale events. After a while, hikers may expect special treatment, become less appreciative, or view Trail Magic as an entitlement. These recommendations are offered to help Trail Angels have a positive influence on Trail, the plants and animals who call it home, and the people who enjoy it.

**Small, spontaneous acts of Trail Magic  
that follow *Leave No Trace* principles  
are most in keeping with  
Appalachian Trail values and traditions**

**Do not leave unattended food or drink.** Leaving such items in shelters, streams, or along the A.T. can harm wildlife and is considered litter (in violation of regulations). Especially in remote areas, signs of civilization can detract from the wilderness character of the Trail. Dispense food and drink in person so you can carry out any trash or leftovers.

**Locate events in developed areas with hardened surfaces.** Local parks and Trail towns often

present good options. Keep events small. Consider whether your event may be contributing to an overabundance of trail feeds both locally and trailwide. Remember some hikers come to the Trail to get away from crowds and are seeking an opportunity for solitude and contemplation.

**Restore the site and pack out trash and food.** Leave the site as you found it – don't be a burden to volunteers whose time is better spent in other activities.

**Forego advertising.** Publicizing a “feed” in advance can lead to clumping of thru-hikers, causing overcrowded conditions at shelters and campsites. Where sites are limited, crowding can lead to competition for space. Advertising – even non-commercial – is prohibited on the A.T.

**Learn the regulations that apply to storing and preparing food.** If you will be cooking or preparing food, check with the land manager to find an appropriate area and what food-safety or other regulations apply. Charging a fee or asking for donations may be prohibited or require a special permit.

**Avoid serving alcoholic beverages.** In addition to possible legal issues, there is the potential problem of serving minors, or over-serving hikers, which can create problems or put people at risk.

**Be hospitable to all.** While long-distance hikers with ravenous appetites are most likely to welcome trail magic, be sure to make all trail users and volunteers feel welcome.

**Help build and maintain the Trail for future hikers.** You can enhance the A.T. experience for others in rewarding ways by volunteering to care for the Trail itself. Volunteers are always needed to maintain the Trail, its overnight sites and corridor lands, and to monitor rare plants, water quality, and air quality. Visit [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org) for more information.

*Special Note:* The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Primitive Ethics Committee is seeking input on Trail Magic from the A.T. community (hikers, trail angels, clubs, and land managers). Please send comments to [trailmagic@appalachiantrail.org](mailto:trailmagic@appalachiantrail.org). After receiving and assessing that input, this draft issue paper will be revised and posted on the ATC website.