

# **Norwich Hikers Face Appalachian Trail Corridor Conundrum**

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Norwich — A potential crackdown on unauthorized side trails along the Appalachian Trail corridor in Norwich is forcing longtime users to contend with federally imposed regulations.

As a designated National Scenic Trail, the AT is governed by the National Park Service and, in Vermont, is managed by the Green Mountain National Forest. According to a 2016 inventory of side trails in Norwich administered by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy — an organization that partners with NPS and the U.S. Forest Service to protect and maintain the AT — the approximately 6 miles of the AT that run along the southern boundary of Norwich contain some of highest density of unauthorized side trails within the 2,190-mile trail's entire corridor from Georgia to Maine.

Last fall, about 20 signs endorsed by the U.S. Forest Service and the AT Conservancy were posted to these side trails, alerting users that a review is underway and that any side trail not designated for authorization during an upcoming "proposal process" would be closed this summer.

The signs surprised many side trail users, prompting a December meeting at Montshire Museum between conservancy personnel and other interested parties such as Norwich Trails Committee members.

About 45 people attended as AT Conservancy outreach coordinator Katie Mann, whose office is in White River Junction, and others explained management guidelines for the AT corridor, which includes 500 feet on either side of the sanctioned trail.

One designated side path already exists along the AT in Norwich — the Tucker Trail near Happy Hill — and there are numerous public rights of way on ancient town roads such as Podunk Road and Cossingham Road.

Much of the AT regulations' language is centered on precluding non-foot travel, including a section written in Green Mountain National Forest's 2006 land and resource management plan that reads, "The use of horses, pack animals, dog teams and bicycles shall be prohibited on the AT footpath and within 500 feet of the trail except where it crosses or is located on National Forest System roads, state highways, or town roads."

But a burgeoning network of mountain bike trails has been built during the explosion in the sport's popularity over the last 20 years, including several miles of them in the vicinity of the Tucker Trail.

Many of the additional trails connecting and intersecting with the AT in Norwich pre-date those mountain bike trails — some even pre-date the AT itself, users say — and are used primarily for foot travel. These trails also could be subject to closing, if not designated as side trails, based in part on a 1981 NPS plan document that states, "The (AT) will lie lightly on the land remaining a simple footpath ... retaining a sense of the wild and primeval."

Trail user and longtime Norwich Trails Committee supporter Doug Hardy has argued that many of these side foot trails are primitive and have little or no impact on the wilderness aesthetics of the AT.

“These are informal, small trails that have a long history of use and have not caused damage to the (Appalachian Trail),” Hardy said in a phone interview. “A lot of them were built by private landowners who have conservation easements on their properties, and a big reason why those easements are in place is because they’re interested in protecting the land surrounding the AT.”

John Wiggin, who said his family has maintained 100 acres near Sugar Top Road since the Civil War era, called the crackdown on side trails “a solution looking for a problem.”

“To see these signs posted right before the holiday season was a slap in the face, a punch in the gut,” Wiggin said. “It’s unfriendly and needless.”

Hawk Metheny, regional director for the AT Conservancy, said keeping a close eye on side trails along the AT corridor is important for a number of reasons.

“If a trail is well-established, an AT through-hiker could say, ‘Where does this go?’ and end up getting lost,” Metheny said. “Some of the trails go into sensitive vegetation areas and riparian buffer zones and cause erosion, and once they become established, they can be inviting for (non-foot-travel) uses like mountain biking and motorized use, and then those users might access the AT.”

One takeaway from the meeting at Montshire was a suggestion that AT Conservancy personnel offer the public more guidance regarding trail use. Matthew Stevens, a Lyme resident and the AT group’s

conservation resource manager in Vermont and New Hampshire, has begun working with the Norwich Trails Committee to identify which side trails should become protected as designated side trails.

“It wouldn’t be practical to have a sweeping closure of every historic trail through the area, and we understand it’s very important to have ongoing community dialogue,” said Stevens. “At the same time, it’s our responsibility to minimize the impact on a national scenic hiking trail that is managed to stay as wild as possible.”

Metheny, the AT Conservancy regional manager, believes the proposal submitted to the Green Mountain National Forest should ultimately request for “one or two” of the unauthorized trails to become designated NPS side trails, based on their importance to the community.

Meanwhile, Hardy is advocating for the status quo for foot travel use — neither closing the trails nor building them into officially designated trails with signage and maintenance schedules.

“If you’re trying to maintain as much of a sense of wilderness as possible, it’s a paradox if you start marking and maintaining these small side trails,” he said. “Accepting or ‘sanctioning’ any given trail does not mean it has to be built out to any particular standard.”

Brian Riordan, president of the Upper Valley Mountain Bike Association, said closing the trails built near the AT corridor could undermine his organization’s vision to connect more neighborhoods through trail networks. However, he’s confident the interested parties will find common ground.

“Ultimately, I think you’re going to see collaboration to where it works out for everyone,” said Riordan, a Norwich resident. “Everyone involved is involved

because they love the wilderness experience."

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