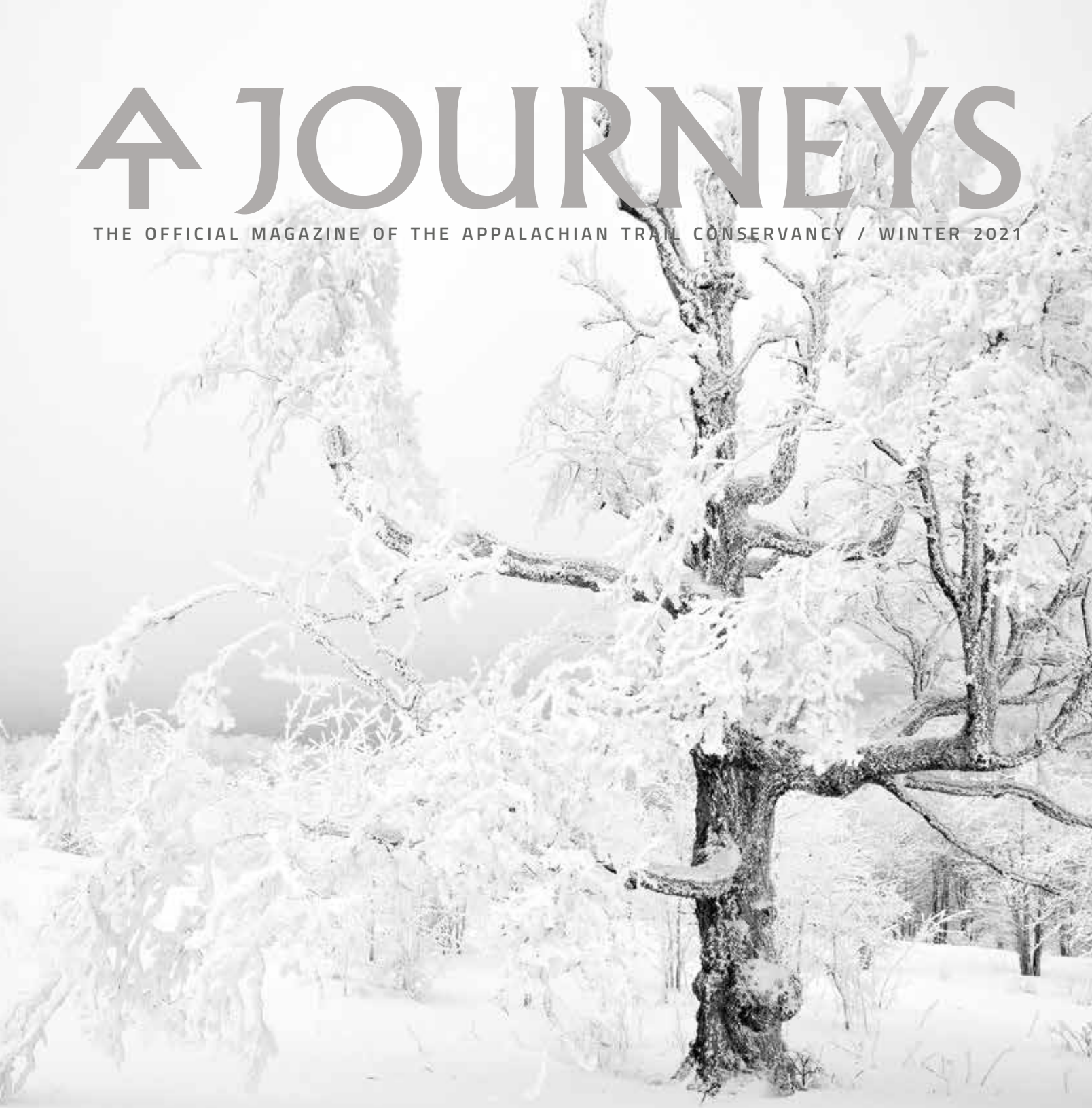
JOURNEYS

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY / WINTER 2021



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ON THE COVER
Appalachian Trail near Mount Rogers, Virginia — which intersects with the Native American territory lands of the Moneton Nation. The A.T. runs through 22 Native Nations' traditional territories and holds an abundant amount of Indigenous history. Photo by Jeffrey Stoner

Above: Rocky Fork Creek along the A.T. corridor in Lamar Alexander Rocky Fork State Park, Tennessee/North Carolina intersects with the Native American territory lands of the S'atsoyaha Nation. Photo by Jerry Greer

A.T. JOURNEYS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY / WINTER 2021

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Trey Adcock

Trey Adcock (ᏀᎳᏏᏍ ᎠᏓᏅ, enrolled Cherokee Nation), PhD, is an associate professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and the director of American Indian and Indigenous Studies at the University of North Carolina Asheville. In 2013, Trey participated in the Trail for Every Classroom program hosted by the ATC and has hiked multiple portions of the southern section of the Appalachian Trail with friends and family. In 2018, Trey was named one of seven national Public Engagement Fellows by the Whiting Foundation for his oral history work in the TutiYi "Snowbird" Cherokee Community. "I wanted to share my story and understanding of land acknowledgement outside of the general bland academic statements that have become the recent fad," he says. "The Trail means so much to so many people I thought it was important to provide a perspective that not everyone knows or even thinks about — the daily act of land acknowledgement for Indigenous peoples." (page 16)

Shilletha Curtis

Shilletha Curtis was born in Newark, New Jersey and spent much of her time growing up in Morristown and down by the shore. She received her Bachelor's in Social Work from Rutgers University in 2014. Before that, she spent a summer in China honing her Mandarin skills followed by an internship at an orphanage in Romania. Helping people has always been her passion but she found that she had a profound love for animals and eventually the outdoors. She trained and then worked as a veterinary technician in Austin, Texas and practiced for two years; but she realized that there was more to life than working a nine-to-five when she lost her job due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

Shilletha discovered the Trail last year while hiking with her girlfriend and caught the A.T. bug since then. With a new outlook on life, she has been preparing for an A.T. thru-hike this winter (page 26). "I want to make the A.T. more accessible to the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community and address inequalities and racism within the hiking community," she says. After the A.T., Shilletha will tackle the second leg of her plan to hike the "Triple Crown" on the Pacific Crest Trail and see where her hiking career takes her.

MIlls Kelly

Mills Kelly is a professor of history at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. He is currently writing a history of the Trail and has just completed a shorter book titled *Virginia's Lost Appalachian Trail*, about the original route the Trail took between Roanoke and Damascus, that he hopes will be published in 2021. "I first hiked on the A.T. in the early 1970s and it seems like the Trail has been part of my life ever since," he says. "While researching my book, I kept looking for sources that spoke directly to the role that race has played in the history of the Trail. The more I looked, the more frustrated I became about the almost total absence of such sources. I wrote an article about the A.T. and race (page 24) to try to shed some light on what is truly the most under-appreciated and under-discussed part of the Trail's history."

Fred Tutman

Fred Tutman is a grassroots community advocate for clean water in Maryland's longest and deepest intrastate waterway and holds the title of Patuxent Riverkeeper, which is also the name of a nonprofit organization that he founded in 2004. Some of the lessons learned on the Appalachian Trail — as both a hiker and Potomac Appalachian Trail Club member — have inspired his work on water trails as well.

Prior to riverkeeping, Fred spent over 25 years working as a media producer and consultant on telecommunications assignments on four continents, including a stint covering the Falkland War in Argentina for the BBC and managing a Ford Foundation funded project to help African traditional healers tell their stories to the world.

Currently, Fred splits his time between Maryland and North Carolina where he maintains busy blacksmith forges in both places. He is the recipient of numerous regional and state awards for his environmental work, is the longest serving waterkeeper in the Chesapeake Bay region, and the only African-American waterkeeper in the nation. He lives and works on an active farm located near the Patuxent River that has been his family's ancestral home for nearly a century. "My aim is to pursue justice for both people and the planet," he says. "And to also encourage others to experience Mother Nature and forge a personal compact to protect her." (page 54)

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LOOKING FORWARD BY LOOKING BACK

THIS YEAR MARKS THE FIRST OF TWO SIGNIFICANT milestones for the Appalachian Trail. In 2021, we will celebrate the 100-year anniversary of Benton MacKaye's essay, "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning," in which the A.T. was first envisioned. And, in 2025, we will celebrate the 100th birthday of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. These anniversaries help us explore and contemplate our history. They also act as catalysts to challenge us to look back with clarity and to understand that, in order to move forward, we must look honestly at everything that has gone into building our present.

It is this ability to recognize that we exist on a continuum that defines our human consciousness.

> "The concept of our mind's ability to move through time was hypothesized by Dr. Endel Tulving, who called it chronesthesia, an ability by humans, acquired through evolution, to be cognizant of the past as well as the future.
>
> According to Tulving, recalling and replaying events in the past has helped us to evolve by allowing us to update critical information while continuing to deal with rapid changes and chaos in the world around us."
>
> –*Understanding the Evolution of Human Thought*

There is also a tendency for us to edit what we choose to remember. We are more comfortable when we look to our past to see only that which makes us feel proud and empowered. As A.T. hikers and volunteers, we can all relate to this phenomenon. We talk about the beautiful vistas and the conquered peaks — not about the days in green tunnels with only rain and fog, or the nights spent wanting to be anywhere else but in a dank shelter with a bunch of snoring strangers. And we never want to talk about the mistakes, the bad gear, poor planning, and wrong directions. We want to talk about our accomplishments and remember what we did correctly — not our errors. Try as we might, though, humans are not one dimensional — we are not just our successes but also our mistakes and missteps. We are as much a product of our past ignorance as we are of our enlightenments.

I know that many people will find reading this issue, and our exploration of aspects of our past we do not often talk about, a difficult process. It may elicit anger and frustration or perhaps guilt. Some readers will invariably believe we have, once again, stepped beyond our purview. Others will recognize the importance of these discussions but still be left unsure how to use the information to inform a better future. Some may find this issue long overdue and embrace the process we are undertaking as an organization and as a larger community to acknowledge the whole past — not just our edited version.

The most important thing I hope all readers will take away from the following stories is that we are, absolutely, a product of all that has come before us. Therefore, when we talk about whether we should care about social justice issues as it impacts the Trail today, we need to do so in the context of understanding that in our past we sometimes purposefully and other times through indifference, made the lack of diversity in how we built and managed the A.T. an acceptable approach. We try and justify this truth by attributing the behaviors to societal norms at the time but throughout history people have made choices to reject or accept bigotry and prejudice. Today, we can continue down this same path or we can acknowledge our past mistakes and take steps to rectify the consequences.

Winston Churchill said, "A nation that forgets its past has no future." I believe this is also true for the Appalachian Trail and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. We cannot control or change our past, but we can absolutely control our current actions and we can influence our future through those actions. We understand this will be a long process and we will surely make mistakes. But we recognize that looking forward must start by looking back.

The Trail's future depends on us making this choice.

Sandra Marra / President & CEO

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YOUR WORK IS SO VALUABLE in protecting public lands. And the strong effort for inclusion of minorities in preserving nature's beloved heritage for all to enjoy is wonderful and will bless our country in countless ways beyond the Trail.

Stephen Noltie
Lancaster, Ohio

I FEEL FORTUNATE TO HAVE completed the Trail in 2001 with my husband Bill. We look forward to receiving the beautiful A.T. calendar each year and reminiscing about our experiences. We consider it a privilege to donate to such a worthy cause. Thanks to Sandi Marra for serving as president and CEO. We appreciate your time and talent.

Sylvia Beck and Bill Haney
Greensboro, North Carolina

THANKS FOR YOUR LEADERSHIP and commitment to the A.T. From my perspective you are doing an excellent job and we are fortunate to have you as our lead. My husband and I have thru-hiked the A.T. several times and plan to thru-hike again in 2022. We are lifetime Appalachian Trail Conservancy members, and you can count on our donation at the end of each calendar year.

Lelia "Princess" Vann & Greg "Rocketman" Reck
Norfolk, Virginia

A.T. Journeys welcomes your comments. The editors are committed to providing balanced and objective perspectives. Not all letters received may be published. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.

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Trail Talk

THANK YOU to @AT_Conservancy for supporting the protection of the 3,300-acre Redington #Wilderness Sanctuary through the Wild East Action Fund, which seeks to accelerate the pace of conservation within the Appalachian Trail landscape. —NE Wilderness Trust @4wildplaces

@Appgearco
Thank you @appalachiantrail for giving us a chance to give back to one of our favorite places! A HUGE thank you to you, your ridgerunners, and all those who work to protect this special trail...y'all are the best!

Walk a mile or from state to state or ALL THE WAY. Any part of it is worth the time and effort.
—Dorothy Callaway

The A.T. is my happy place
—Laura Heckel Snyder

@ kate.bender
Just donated to become a member today! Thank you for all you do to keep this trail beautiful! My parent's house where I grew up is only 1 mile from the Trail, so I love having it practically in my backyard.

@Prideandarchive
We are constantly amazed at the work people do to make the trails we love to enjoy! Thank you to all the volunteers and I hope to be one of them one day!

It is amazing that the vast majority of maintenance on the A.T. is fulfilled by volunteers who willingly give of their time and effort to keep this beauty open and accessible. —John Scott @AbuneMediation

@kaykt34
One of my favorite things about winter snow hiking is the stillness and silence, aside from its beauty. Everything seems so clean and pure in certain ways.

When we were young (mid 1950s), my parents would drive out to the Skyline Drive, park the car, and unload the camping gear. We'd hike in about a mile to a three-sided hut and spend a week. We rarely saw another person. We'd take hikes every day, and my father would teach us all about plants and animals, and tell scary and funny stories at night. My mom would teach us about how the mountain ridge came to be. GREAT memories.
—Christy Huddle

@dad_ninja_757
Nice Work! As an Eagle Scout, and now going through scouting with my teenagers, I can attest to the lifelong benefits of a love of nature. Our favorite backpacking trip is the Hog Camp Gap area on the A.T. and Mount Pleasant Trail near Lexington.

GET READY FOR THE A.T. VISTA INAUGURATION IN 2021 AND 2022

UPDATE FOR VIRTUAL AND IN-PERSON EXPERIENCE

With the great news of a vaccine for COVID-19, the planning team for the A.T. Vista has updated the program to provide for both a virtual and in-person experience in 2021 and 2022.

To honor the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Benton MacKaye's 1921 article, "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning," the 2021 A.T. Vista program will be conducted virtually providing an opportunity to visit all 14 states of the Appalachian Trail and participate in online workshops. In 2022, the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference will host the in-person program offering hiking, learning, and excursion opportunities to explore the areas nearby as we have traditionally done in the former Biennial programs.

We know it's been since 2017 that we've been together to spend time on the Trail, learn, and socialize, but the current timing of when things will be available for the safest experience is unknown. We want the inaugural A.T. Vista to be memorable and this alternative two-year program will allow us to maintain the momentum so that we can continue to share in the great camaraderie of the kindred spirits who cherish the Appalachian Trail.

During the 2021 program, you will be able to participate in local small-group hikes in your area and join us online for workshops and other special activities. Although the format of the program will slightly change, we still need you! We are seeking hiking leaders from every state along the Trail. Workshops for 2021 will be conducted online and in-person for 2022, so continue to submit your proposal with your topics to share.

The program will still be a multi-day event with virtual experiences available August 7-8, 2021 and the in-person event to be held at the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz, on August 5-8, 2022. Additional information will be available in March 2021, so stay tuned for the details.

If you are interested in making this a memorable and ongoing future event, email us at: atvistainfo@gmail.com to join the team!

Visit

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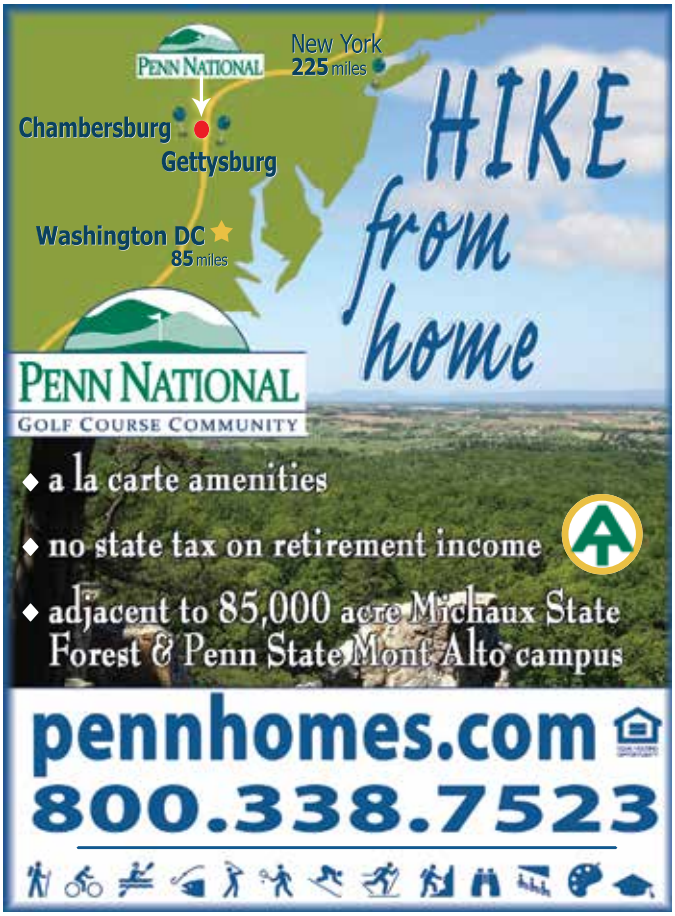
for more details as the program details unfold



BY SHALIN DESAI

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

IT ALL BEGAN WITH A QUESTION. WHAT ARE YOU?

WHEN I THRU-HIKED THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL in 2015, my first planned "zero day" was in Franklin, North Carolina. I was picked up at Winding Stair Gap by a friendly local and dropped off at a well-known motel. Exhausted and dripping from a short but heavy downpour, I walked into a room crowded by ten fellow thru-hikers. Last in line, I waited to check into a room. The desk clerk was warm to each of the hikers — asking for their identification, credit card, and how their journeys were so far. When I walked up, his eyes narrowed. He looked me up and down, a soggy hiker with his pack on his back, and asked, "What are you?"

At first, I was confused. Clearly, I was a hiker. But, when he asked again — this time, slower and with a greater emphasis on the word "are" — it was clear he meant my ethnicity. This was not the first time I heard this question. I could pass for a range of ethnicities with my black hair, permanent five o'clock shadow, and skin that ranges from olive-toned in winter to dusky brown in summer.

"I'm Indian American" I stated plainly. "Good," he said curtly. He seemed relieved by my response and subsequently grabbed my driver's license out of my hand and processed my room reservation without a word. The other hikers in the reception area shifted uncomfortably. Feeling interrogated and unwelcome, I asked him to cancel the reservation before he ran my credit card and I walked out of the motel, trudging to the nearest hostel. No one spoke to me or looked at me as I walked out.

Shalin during his thru-hike in the Presidential Range of the White Mountains in New Hampshire. –By Clayton "Ridge Rambler" Perry

What became clear to me, at that moment, was that my identity would significantly shape my journey in ways good and bad. To answer the clerk's question more fully: I am Indian American, born in Massachusetts, and the son of immigrants from the state of Gujarat in western India. I am in my thirties, having thru-hiked the A.T. in my late twenties. But I grew up on trails, hiking in the Berkshires, White Mountains, and Maine since childhood. I am queer and live with my boyfriend who is a recent immigrant from India. I am part of a family that can claim to have lived the American dream, immigrating to the United States during the height of the technology boom and slowly moving up the economic ranks to an upper middle-class status. I am educated, having been schooled at top-notch institutions, and I am also professionally successful, having worked in senior management for both for-profit and non-profit organizations.

All these markers shape my Trail experience. My race and sexuality have been markers that have resulted in negative experiences along the A.T. — from one hiker suggesting my Trail name be "Osama bin Hikin" or an A.T. Community resident asking me if I was comfortable living in such obvious sin, being attracted to my own sex. My education and economic status, meanwhile, have given me access, opportunity, and comfort beyond most. The experience I had thru-hiking not only the A.T., but also the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail, were marked by these personal facts and made my experiences hiking each of these trails distinctly my own.

That is both the pleasure and the problem of talking about the Trail experience. While we talk about the "A.T. experience" in monolithic ways, it is a catch-all term for the near infinite personal experiences each of us have while recreating on the Trail. These experiences are conditioned by who we are and how our identities are perceived. To ensure that each of us has a safe, welcoming, and inclusive Trail experience, we all must acknowledge that this near-infinite range of Trail experiences exist. That my Trail experience is not yours. And yours is not mine. That both are real and different.

We must also acknowledge that just because one person had a positive experience on the A.T. — free of discrimination, harassment, and discomfort — that the same may not be true for someone else with a different set of identities. The A.T. is not a separate reality from the rest of the world and is prone to racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ageism, and other forces that can make it a less welcoming, less safe, and less inclusive space. It is also a product of history and is structured by the same forces that the rest of society has been shaped by.

Shalin with his Mom, Raju Desai, at Delaware Water Gap, where his parents came to meet and resupply him during his thru-hike. –By Bhupen Desai

A COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE

Recognizing the Trail experience can vary significantly from person to person, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) has worked to ensure that its management and protection of the A.T. is underscored by a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In 2015, the ATC identified broader relevancy as one of its main strategic priorities with the stated purpose of engaging a younger and more inclusive audience with the A.T. The ATC added a suite of programs from youth summits to education workshops to expand and diversify its network of doers and dreamers. The Next Generation Advisory Council — comprised of fifteen 18 to 30-year-old leaders — was convened to advise and to support the ATC's broader relevancy efforts. Connections were made to partner organizations through Summit Seekers — an inter-generational outdoor leadership training program designed to foster inclusion and engagement of communities of color with outdoor recreation and environmental stewardship — and other programs meant to expand the relevancy of recreating on and stewarding the A.T.

Then the tragic murder of George Floyd happened. The systematic and targeted marginalization of Black people, and the violence inflicted upon them, was nothing new. But the murder of George Floyd thrust a range of topics that were previously on the margins of conversations to the forefront: racism, white privilege, white supremacy, and racist violence. While we understood

that we were dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic for only a few weeks at the time of the murder, the centuries-long pandemic of American racism moved to the front of our collective consciousness.

It was then that the ATC realized its need to commit to something larger and deeper: not just broader relevancy but justice. As managers of a public resource, our work is and should be informed by a commitment to environmental and social justice. If the resource we manage is not as safe, as welcoming, and as inclusive as it could be, then we have substantial work to do. Recognizing this, the ATC's "A Commitment to Justice" letter was shared with our constituents and, in a matter of hours, sparks flew.

"Rocks and trees don't see color." "Stick to the Trail." "Last time I checked, social justice and Trail maintenance are not the same thing!" "Black people can hike the A.T., just like me. If they don't come, it's not our fault."

These are just a few of the comments we received — among hundreds — the morning after the letter was posted. Among the comments decrying the letter, the most common themes were a denial that racism or discrimination exist on the Trail or in Trailside communities, that justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion were not part of the ATC's mission or vision, and that Black people were always welcome to the Trail but chose not to come. We knew we had a problem.

TO ENSURE THAT EACH OF US HAS A SAFE, WELCOMING, AND INCLUSIVE TRAIL EXPERIENCE, WE ALL MUST ACKNOWLEDGE THAT A NEAR-INFINITE RANGE OF TRAIL EXPERIENCES EXIST.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT, EDUCATION & ACTION

Problems must be named before they are solved. The comments we received helped us name the problem we are currently confronting. When it comes to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, we are developing plans based on an incomplete understanding of how we got to where we are and what the ATC can do to craft a more inclusive, safer, more welcoming, and more diverse A.T. As a conservancy and as a broader Trail community, we must learn before we do. The process we identified starts with acknowledgement, proceeds with education, and results in action.

Acknowledgement is the beginning. In the ATC's "A Commitment to Justice" letter, we acknowledged the issues at hand: "The A.T. is not racially or ethnically diverse. It is not accessible to people from low-income communities. It is not always a safe place for women. And, it is not relevant to many people we consider to be part of the next generation. We recognize this must change."

However, knowing how we got to this place requires us to engage in an understanding of our entire history, including the history that preceded the A.T. We must understand that public lands are stolen lands — lands acquired by the forced removal or genocide of the land's Indigenous communities. We must understand that the A.T., while a recreational opportunity to some, traverses the routes which slaves once used to escape the antebellum South. We must recognize that some Trail management practices, whether intentionally or unintentionally, led us to a demographic that is largely male, largely Caucasian, largely above 55 years old, and largely affluent.

By gaining an understanding of our entire history and acknowledging (and naming) the full range of problems we are confronted with, we can educate — and ultimately act — in a way that creates more robust and resilient solutions to today's problems.

We will invest in change, with our time and our money. But we also recognize that this issue of *A.T. Journeys* is part of a larger conversation about who we are and how we got here — and how we will change. It is important to recognize up front that we will make mistakes. That this must be a broad-based effort, with those who have remained silent in the past speaking up and engaging in the process. And, that we must approach each other with empathy, civility, and understanding. That some of the things we want to discuss will likely lead to discomfort but this is not an attempt to fuel guilt, but rather to acknowledge that there is a problem and, more importantly, there is a path forward.

This will not be easy, but it will result in a better and broader Trail community.We hope you will join us in this journey.

Shalin Desai is the Vice President of Advancement for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy

NATIVE LANDS

/ BY TREY ADCOCK /

IT IS LATE SEPTEMBER, AND WE ARE ON A 5.5-MILE SECTION OF THE Appalachian Trail in present day southwest North Carolina looking for wisi, a mushroom more popularly known as Hen of the Woods, *Grifola frondosa*. There are three of us, myself an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation (CN), an Elder, Gilliam Jackson, from the Tutiyi "Snowbird" community of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) and Devyn Smith, a twenty-something year old, fresh out of college who grew up in the Yellowhill community on the Qualla Boundary. To us, this land is Tsalagi Ayehli, Cherokee Nation territory. To most, however, this is known as Nantahala National Forest.

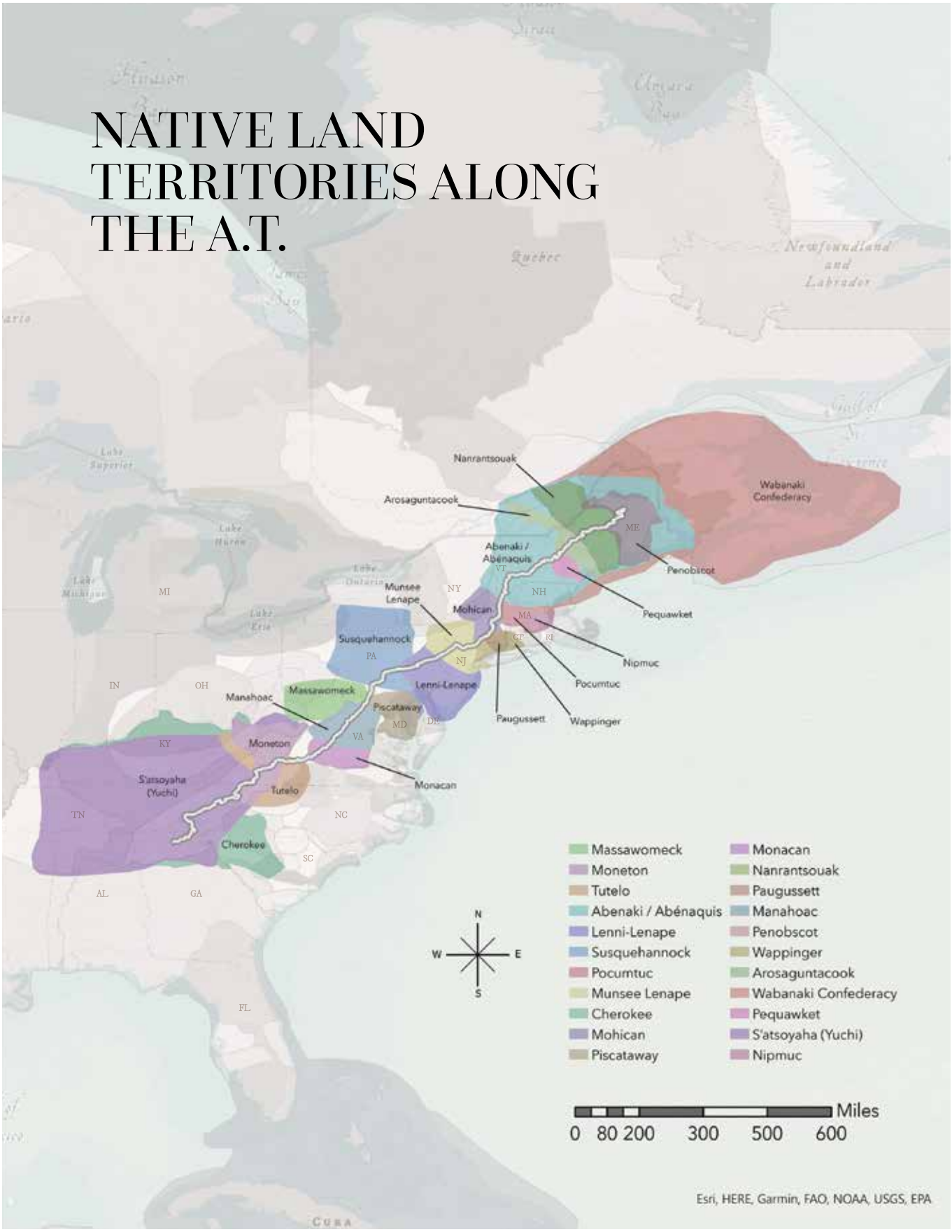
The morning is crisp and the clouds are thick but breaking as we traverse this section of the Trail. We make good pace as this portion is mostly level with only a couple of moderately steep climbs. As we walk, we spend time making fun of each other, catching up on community news and tribal politics while patiently looking for any signs of wisi. This delicacy continues to be one of the most coveted foods of Cherokee people and we are in an intense search for our first harvest of the year. As we log a couple of miles, Devyn and I are struggling to keep up. Gill is a prolific hiker, having completed the A.T. in 2016, and he seems to glide atop the Trail while using Cherokee words to name plants, trees, colors, and an animal or two. With only 200 or so fluent EBCI Cherokee speakers remaining, words are precious. Gill graciously teaches us names in the language and we recite, desperately trying to remember.

Like the language, the harvesting of plants and wild foods is a knowledge bounded to the land. One of the many results of the forced removal and genocide of thousands of Native Americans from the southeast U.S. was that of rupturing Indigenous peoples from their food systems. While many families have held onto that knowledge, others still are looking for a way to reclaim those cultural practices that center us in who we are. Thus, this search is not simply about looking for wisi but is also an act of resistance, resilience, and reclaiming. Finally, three miles into our journey, we catch a glimpse of the most beautiful wisi we have ever seen, right off the Trail at the base of a dead oak tree. We are exuberant as we all claim to have been the first to see it. We laugh, we give thanks, and we acknowledge the special relationship and responsibility we all have to the land that provides so much.

The A.T. in the North Carolina portion of the Nantahala National Forest runs along Cherokee Nation territory – By Jerry Greer

Land acknowledgement at a base level is a recognition that you are on the lands, for various purposes, of an Indigenous people.

NATIVE LAND TERRITORIES ALONG THE A.T.



About the A.T. Native Lands Territory Map

The Appalachian Trail runs through 22 Native Nations' traditional territories and holds an abundant amount of Indigenous American history. The A.T. Native Lands Territory map was created to provide A.T. hikers with a better understanding of the territories they are traversing through. These lands are also referred to as "territories of influence," meaning this is land that Indigenous American nations and tribes hunted, traded, foraged, and defended. Beyond educating hikers, we must pay respect to our nation's ancestors.

Our primary source of spatial data in creating the A.T. Native Lands Territory map originated from Native Land Digital (native-lands.ca), whose friendly and accommodating team pointed us in the direction of their publicly available application programming interface, which allowed access to their raw GIS (geographic information system) data. Simple analysis allowed the map to highlight relevant Native Nation's traditional territories along the Trail, while preserving careful attention to detail. The tool used in this process was ESRI's ArcGIS Pro.

During the creation of this map, collaboration with the team at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) was paramount. Guidance from ATC's GIS specialist, Josh Foster and director of outreach and education Julie Judkins allowed the creation of the map to be a seamless and enjoyable experience. Most importantly, Victor Temprano, founder of Native Land Digital, was the point person who led me to their open spatial data. GIS and cartography cannot carry out what they do without the cooperation of those who maintain data.

– Mark Hylas, A.T. Native Lands Territory Map creator

Mark Hylas is a GIS student at Central New Mexico Community College, who originally grew up in rural New York where he was a frequent hiker of the Appalachian Trail.

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FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, RECOGNIZING, SHOWING RESPECT, AND WALKING GRACIOUSLY ON ANOTHER PEOPLE'S TERRITORY HAS BEEN CUSTOMARY FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS.

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For Indigenous peoples, recognizing, showing respect, and walking graciously on another people's territory has been customary for thousands of years. In the United States, with over 577 federally recognized tribal nations, this can take many forms. For some Native Nations there are very specific protocols that need to be abided by and heeded before one can be welcomed onto a land. This could include specific ways of asking permission, presenting gifts, or providing offerings to the land itself. For other Indigenous communities, there might be more of an informal disposition that is expected of guests as they enter into a relationship with both the people and the land they are guests upon. These types of acknowledgements do not serve any bureaucratic process but instead recognize the deep responsibility of reciprocity that is embedded throughout that landscape. It is an act of recognizing the various ways in which land provides, heals, and teaches. Lands that Indigenous people are often excluded from and whose histories have been predominantly erased from these spaces.

For the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), which oversees the management and protection of the A.T. that runs through 22 Native Nations' traditional territories, including a portion of the EBCI's current boundary lines near Stecoah Gap in southwestern North Carolina, acknowledging the original peoples is appropriate.

A formal land acknowledgement can be one possible way to confront the legacy of displacement and genocide that led up to the creation of the A.T. As a bureaucratic, institutional practice, land acknowledgements have been practiced in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand for decades before more recently migrating into U.S. institutions such as universities, nonprofits and into art communities to name a few. In Australia, these performative acts are also known as "Welcome to Land" ceremonies, believed to be adapted from the Māori pōwhiri, a ceremony to welcome visitors that includes speeches, singing, a gift to the host and the pressing of noses (hongi). In the United States, practices of acknowledgement are often recited by a non-Indigenous person at the beginning of events, embedded within institutional documents and in some cases have multiple modes of visualizing the acknowledgement formally via posters, plaques, signage, well-crafted web pages, and other types of promotional materials.

There is no one-size-fits-all land acknowledgement as the template and language inevitably varies. However, establishing practices of land acknowledgement can be a powerful way of showing respect, countering colonial practices and narratives like the doctrine of discovery, and initiating ongoing action through reciprocal relationships. For some activists and academics, acknowledgement is the first step in decolonizing institutional practices that furthers a settler-colonial agenda. Others argue still that unless there are serious conversations around land rematriation then an acknowledgement is simply a move to innocence rather than a call to action.

Acknowledgement statements can also be complicated if there are multiple Indigenous communities that claim ancestral ties to a territory. In addition, many communities historically moved from place to place, so a forced, structured territorial boundary is a colonial concept. The danger too for those looking to implement

A portion of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian territory boundary lines fall along the A.T. near Stecoah Gap in southwestern, North Carolina. –By Mike Waller

a land acknowledgement is that they become rote, sanitized, perfunctory statements that can lead to tokenizing the Indigenous peoples they are meant to show respect to. Central to a land acknowledgement statement must be a commitment to develop a deeper relationship with the various people and land the institution is attempting to recognize. Land acknowledgement truly becomes meaningful when coupled with authentic relationships and informed action. Statements should be considered living documents that evolve as relationships between communities, and also evolve with the land itself.

Fortunately, there are some tremendous online resources for those wanting to develop a land acknowledgment statement for their institution or community. Native Land Digital is a Canadian nonprofit organization that is Indigenous-led, with an Indigenous executive director and a majority Indigenous Board of Directors. They have created an interactive digital mapping project of Indigenous lands that also includes a territorial acknowledgement guide. The Native Governance Center is a Native American-led nonprofit organization located in St. Paul, Minnesota, which has created online tips for creating an Indigenous land acknowledgement. They also offer other factors to consider including thinking about who should be delivering the statement and understanding issues of displacement. The art and maps they have created around their own statement are particularly inspirational. The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture created, in partnership with Native allies and organizations, a downloadable #HonorNativeLand guide to provide step-by-step instructions on how to produce a statement and provides tips for moving beyond acknowledgment into action. In terms of how to deliver one, Laurier Students' Public Interest Research Group provides some guidelines to follow, including providing a formal thank you to the host nation whenever making a presentation or holding a meeting, whether or not Indigenous individuals are part of the meeting or gathering.

Moving from acknowledgement to action is no easy task but a necessary first step is to begin developing meaningful relationships with the Indigenous communities that were impacted. This involves being willing to listen to the concerns and voices of the community members. What should the ATC's responsibilities be, and to whom, as current stewards of the land? What current issues are impacting specific Indigenous communities with historic connections to Appalachian Trail land and how can the ATC be a viable partner? These might lead to uneasy and uncomfortable conversations…and that can be a good, necessary point of reflection for future generations.

For more information about land acknowledgement visit: **native-land.ca**

WHY LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT MATTERS

/ BY JOE WHITTLE /

WHAT DOES A LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT mean, and why is it important? These are questions I was asked to answer for this issue of *A.T. Journeys*. As a member of two Native American communities — the Lenape (a.k.a. Delaware Nation) and the Caddo Nation — this is a significant question for me to ponder, and answer. It's also an important question for me to consider as a seasonal field ranger for the U.S. Forest Service, a lifelong outdoor adventurer and backpacker, a longtime backcountry guide, and a journalist. People who help educate and facilitate human relationships with America's natural spaces should learn from and respect the cultures who've had the longest relationships with those lands and their communities of life.

Where I live in the Wallowa Mountains and Hells Canyon area of northeast Oregon, which is one of the wildest places left in the lower 48 states, the Nez Perce (Nimiipuu) and other Plateau Tribes have called the region home since human footsteps first tread there. One of the oldest known village sites in the U.S. is in the Nimiipuu homeland, which was recently dated at about 16,000 years old. (The glaciers melted off there about 17,000 years ago.) The Plateau Peoples have had an intimate relationship with that land for millennia. Every member of its ecological family is documented in tales told to their children on long winter nights. Their oral traditions are a priceless archive of its diverse ecologies and natural processes. By remembering to heed the lessons of those who came before us, perhaps we can better understand how to preserve our experiences with the natural world for those who come after.

As a Lenape and Caddo man whose people were forcibly removed from our homelands, and for countless other Indigenous people, land acknowledgement also references unhealed wounds. For people who have lived in timeless communion with one region of land, the land and all of its communities of life, including the human ones, are one and the same. Chief Joseph, the famous leader of the Nez Perce during the tragic Nez Perce War of 1877, once said: "The earth and myself are of one mind. The measure of the land and the measure of our bodies are the same." Contemporary Nez Perce leader, Allen Pinkham, says that when a species like the salmon go extinct in their homeland, it feels like severing a limb from their bodies. The ecology of an Indigenous homeland is an integral part of the identities of its people. That's one reason it is inherent for us to protect it. Epigenetics shows that the experiences derived from generations of living within that ecology impact the expression of our genes, and literally make us who we are. As does the trauma of being removed from it, (the separation perhaps even more so than the violence that caused it).

I've recently begun repairing some of that trauma in my own family by returning to our Lenape homelands (in southeast New York, New Jersey, and eastern Pennsylvania) to backpack there for the first time in my life. I've decided to hike the length of our homeland, "Lenapehoking," on the Appalachian Trail. It has been an

"THE EARTH AND MYSELF ARE OF ONE MIND. THE MEASURE OF THE LAND AND THE MEASURE OF OUR BODIES ARE THE SAME."

Greeting the morning light and connecting with "hìtkuk (tree) relatives" in Lënapehòking, Lenape homeland territory at Stokes State Forest on the New Jersey side of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. –By Joe Whittle

overwhelming and profound experience meeting the ecological systems that helped form my identity for the first time. My father was born on our reservation in Oklahoma, and I was born in Chief Joseph's homeland and named after him as a sort of land acknowledgement for our presence as guests in the Plateau Homelands. I have been privileged to come to know that land well. But at 44 years of age, I had yet to meet my own homeland as an Indigenous person. I've now recently returned from my first leg on the A.T., where I soaked up the incredible wonder of autumn in the eastern woodlands — an experience that made me who I am long before I physically realized it — and my perspective of land acknowledgement has reached a new (but old) level of context and meaning.

For Indigenous people who've been separated from our homelands, no small part of the concept of land acknowledgement is our need for physical reconnection to the land. A common belief among Indigenous people is that we cannot actually "own" the land, but rather that we are its familial caretakers. Our homelands are an extension of our families. So how can non-Indigenous Americans do more than acknowledge the land they are on? Obviously that would start with doing anything one can to help Indigenous people protect and return to our homelands and maintain connection to our families. And as countless millennia demonstrate, we are the most suited to care for those lands sustainably, which can then further serve all people who care about those lands along with us. There are many other things you can do to help to give back beyond land acknowledgement — such as helping to educate and encourage others to care about Indigenous issues. For myself, I try to be a helpful friend to the people whose homelands I'm a guest in. That's one reason the first thing I did when I returned to Oregon was to help my dear friend Kanim Moses-Conner, (Chief Joseph's GGG grandnephew), with a subsistence treaty rights hunt to feed his family and Elders. Packing heavy but sacred sustenance out of snow-covered mountains to help sustain a community that has sustained itself and the ecology that way since time immemorial, is rewarding but strenuous work. So, if I can offer my hosts some "rent" in the form of manual labor, (and getting to tag along for a wonderful adventure in one of America's wildest places), then I am happy to do it. That's what land acknowledgement means to me.

#RecreateResponsibly to Protect Yourself, Others, and the Outdoors

During this public health crisis, spending time in outdoor spaces has become even more important for many Americans. Yet these unusual circumstances mean that all of us, from seasoned outdoor enthusiasts to families heading out to their local park for the first time, could use a little guidance about how to stay safe.

The Recreate Responsibly guidelines offer a starting point for getting outside to keep yourself healthy and to maintain access to our parks, trails, and beaches.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Check the status of the place you want to visit. If it is closed, don't go. If it's crowded, have a Plan B.

PLAN AHEAD

Prepare for facilities to be closed, pack lunch and bring essentials like hand sanitizer and a face covering.

PRACTICE PHYSICAL DISTANCING

6 ft.

Keep your group size small. Be prepared to cover your nose and mouth and give others space. If you are sick, stay home.

PLAY IT SAFE

HARD EASY

Slow down and choose lower-risk activities to reduce your risk of injury. Search and rescue operations and health care resources are both strained.

EXPLORE LOCALLY

Limit long-distance travel and make use of local parks, trails and public spaces. Be mindful of your impact on the communities your visit.

LEAVE NO TRACE

Respect public lands and waters, as well as Native and local communities. Take all your garbage with you.

BUILD AN INCLUSIVE OUTDOORS

Be an active part of making the outdoors safe and welcoming for all identities and abilities.

recreateresponsibly.org

DO YOUR PART TO PROTECT THE A.T.

PREVENT CROWDED CAMPSITES

Crowding severely damages A.T. campsites and natural resources along the Trail.

YOU can be part of the solution. Use ATCamp.org to prepare for your next overnight A.T. hike.

ATCamp shows campsite capacity and campsite use per night, so you can avoid staying at campsites that are full and help protect the A.T. You can also plan and register the start of your thru-hike by selecting an uncrowded day and starting location. Whether you are an A.T. section hiker, camping group, or thru-hiker, that everyone can help maintain the A.T. by using ATCamp!

ATcamp.org

The ATC continues to advise long-distance hikers to postpone their journeys until and when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has deemed the pandemic under control and/or a COVID-19 vaccine or effective treatment is widely available and distributed.

THE A.T. AND RACE

BY MILLS KELLY

FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS I HAVE BEEN RESEARCHING the history of the Appalachian Trail in archives from Georgia to Maine. Among the questions I've tried to answer are how major events in American history — World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War — had an impact on the experiences of hikers and Trail club members. World War II and the Vietnam War were easy to locate in the archives, but no matter where I looked, it was as if the Civil Rights Movement never happened.

I have read my way through the archives of almost every Trail club and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and despite all my searching, I found exactly one letter among the thousands of pre-2000 documents I have examined that spoke to the issues of race and civil rights. That one letter lives in the archive of the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club in Knoxville, Tennessee.

From its founding in the 1920s, membership in the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club was open to, "any reputable White person," according to the early club handbooks. In 1960, a member wrote to the club's president, "I think the time is ripe to amend our constitution to eliminate the racial discrimination clause. It is too embarrassing to admit to a foreigner that you belong to a club, which he could not join, though we may invite him to a hike — just on account of the color of his skin." The club's president responded that he was sympathetic to this concern and would be happy to see the club integrated. Although I found no further discussion of the issue in the archives, the 1963 club handbook had dropped its racially exclusionary language, so perhaps that lone member's protest had an impact.

Everywhere else I looked, I kept expecting to find at least some discussion of the impact of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the various archives of the southern clubs. Instead, it was as though the Trail clubs — and the ATC — existed in an alternate reality where racism was not a fact in American life.

While it might be tempting to point fingers at the southern clubs, they were not alone in limiting their membership to people who they felt comfortable with. Until the 1970s and 1980s, many, if not most of the Trail clubs had restrictive membership requirements — e.g., nomination by at least two members, participation in a certain number of club activities — that made it quite simple to discriminate quietly against people of color, Jews, or really, anyone of any race, religion, or creed. The impact of these requirements is readily apparent in the photos of annual meetings, club hikes, and Trail work that one finds in the archives. Until the late 1980s, almost every face you see is White.

The ATC was no better than the Trail clubs. Several of its annual and later biannual meetings were held in segregated resorts in the South thereby excluding anyone of color who might want to attend. In 1940, ATC chairman Myron Avery wrote an essay about the old version of the A.T. that passed south of Roanoke toward the Pinnacles of Dan. This section, he said, had a "definite charm" and some "outstanding features," one of which was that the area's "racial stock was reputed to be perhaps the purest Anglo-Saxon in the eastern Atlantic states." Who knew that getting to meet "pure" White people was a good reason to hike a section of the A.T.?

When I bring up the topic of race and the A.T. with friends, especially White hiker friends, they often ask some version of the same question, "Why do you think so few people of color hike?" Or, unbidden, they offer their own theories as to why one sees so few people of color on the A.T., such as, "Their families just don't have a tradition of hiking," or "It's probably a socioeconomic issue." What this way of looking at the issue misses is the many ways hikers of color have been made to feel unwelcome on the A.T. over the decades. It is precisely these misconceptions that should compel us to revisit the Trail's history to understand completely the ways the Trail has not been open, welcoming, or safe to non-White communities.

For example, imagine for a minute, that it's 1981 and you're a Black hiker

who decides to hike the Georgia section of the A.T. Despite your misgivings about being a lone Black person in the mountains of north Georgia, you catch a bus to Springer Mountain and start your grand adventure. The hike goes well for the first few nights, but when you arrive at the Montray Shelter (now Tray Mountain Shelter) everything changes. There in the shelter log you find an entry, in all capital letters just so you can't miss it, a message with the n-word, which plainly threatens the life of any person of color who intends to stop there. After the shock of reading that threat fades, it dawns on you that lots of people have written in the shelter log since that racist threat and no one bothered to comment on it, to scratch it out, or to tear it out. They just left it there for you to find.

Robert Taylor, the first Black man to thru-hike the Trail in the 1990s, reported similarly racist behavior along the A.T. — hikers who looked at him like he might try to steal their gear, and people in supposedly friendly Trail towns who shouted racist threats as he tried to resupply or just pass through.

Those threats are not some relic of our racist past. In 2018, I hiked from Pen Mar to Duncannon in Pennsylvania, where I had arranged for a shuttle driver to pick me up in front of the legendary Doyle Hotel. When I called my driver to tell him I'd arrived, he asked if I would walk down to the mini mart a few blocks from the Doyle so he could pick me up there. Once I got in his car, I asked why he wanted me to walk to the edge of town. He said that because he was Black, people in town often yelled racist epithets at him and he was just tired of it.

Most White hikers also do not understand or even think about the fact that their relationships to the forests can be very different from those of Black hikers, whose ancestors were chased through those same woods by lynch mobs. Krystal Williams, a Black attorney who thru-hiked in 2011, told me, "When I hiked north out of Damascus, I was reminded that I'm walking for pleasure where my ancestors' blood was spilled. I had a very visceral reaction at that moment. This reality is not understood or appreciated by many White hikers."

IF HIKERS, TRAIL CLUBS, AND THE ATC TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE TRAIL'S PAST, RATHER THAN A PARTIAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE A.T.'S PAST, THEN THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE BECOMES REAL.

For the past 25 years or so, the ATC and some of the Trail clubs have begun to take seriously the notion that encouraging diversity, equity, and inclusion along the A.T. is a good idea. In a 2020 interview, Dave Startzell, the ATC's executive director from 1986-2011, explained that by the mid-1990s, the ATC and some of the clubs had begun discussing strategies for change, but the success of those efforts has been uneven. So, while the Trail has been known as a place for inspiration and solace for millions, communities of color continue to report negative experiences and incidents that have made the experience less welcoming and inclusive than for their White counterparts.

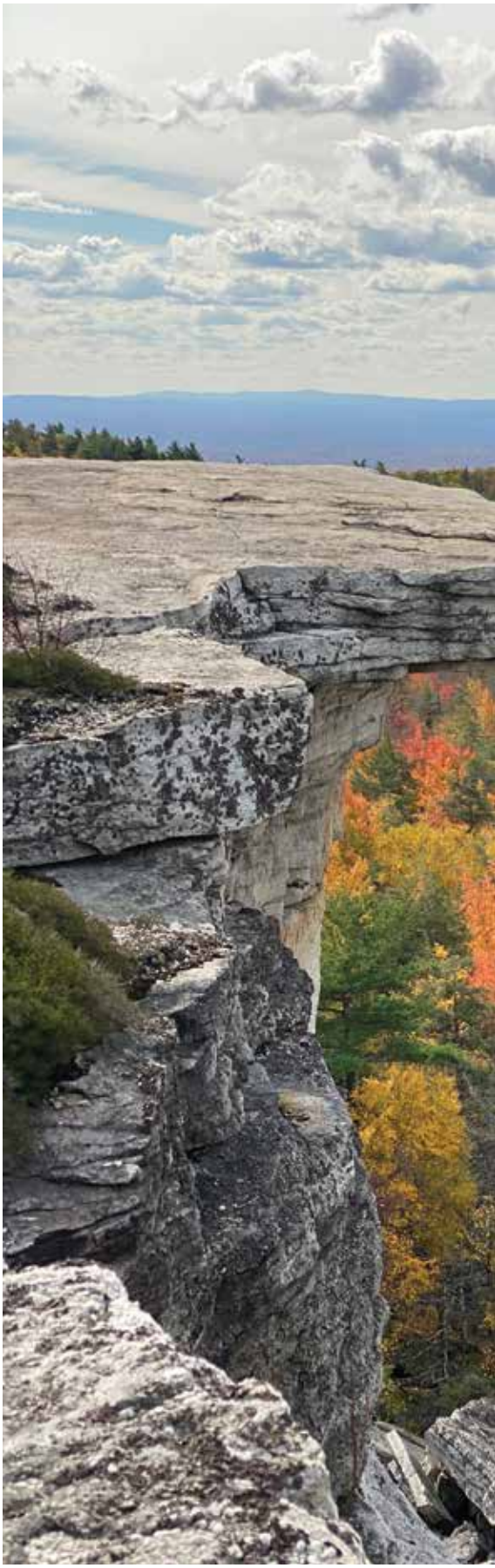
Exclusionary membership policies, threats in shelter logs, racist taunts in Trail towns, historic photos of Trail club and ATC meetings that show nothing but White faces, the Confederate flag flying at a hiker hostel, and Swastikas painted on trees at trailheads in 2020 all send the same message — the Appalachian Trail is, and always has been, a place for White people. If hikers, Trail clubs, and the ATC take ownership of the entire history of the Trail's past, rather than a partial understanding of the A.T.'s past, then the possibility of change becomes real. A clear-eyed understanding of the past opens the door for a just and equitable future for the Appalachian Trail.

MARCH 2020 CREEPED IN LIKE A FRAIL FAWN and roared out like a boisterous lion. COVID-19 snatched up my job as it did many others and left me tattered and torn. My worth dipped to an all-time low, leaving me with crippling anxiety and living on edge. But then nature called out to me in a calm and welcoming voice and she invited me into her marvelous wonders. Here is where my journey began.

In the silence of the unknown, my memory recalled the time that my girlfriend and I had found a trail alongside the road at Harriman State Park in New York last April. We eagerly jumped out of my old silver Nissan Sentra and headed into the shelter of the trees. As we trekked along, we were approached by an older man who greeted us promptly and proceeded to tell us, "You know right behind me is the Appalachian Trail. It runs all the way from Georgia to Maine and if you continue up the hill you can get to it. Have you ever been out here before?"

"No, we haven't," I responded with wide puppy eyes and a giddy smile. "But that's cool about the Appalachian Trail, I'll make certain to check it out!" "Well, I hope y'all have a good hike! You two seem like sweet girls and you will both find nice husbands," he said. Bewildered, we turned to each other and snickered. "Yeah, good husbands — we're lesbians," we said to each other. We found it hilarious when men, especially older men, assumed we were straight women. We were far from it, but we never tried to correct them out of concern for our own safety.

A year later, his words about the A.T. rang loud in my ears and I am glad they did. Something hit me like a bolt of lightning from an overcast sky. I had to hike the entire Appalachian Trail; it was that simple. Or was it? Adrenaline and excitement raced from the top of my head down to the soles of my feet and I immediately checked Facebook to see if I could find others embarking on this journey. Indeed I did, and I joined a few of the Appalachian Trail groups that had anywhere from 20,000 to 60,000 followers. I welcomed myself and immediately became engaged until I couldn't anymore. On February 23, 2020 Ahmaud Arbery — a Black man, was shot while jogging by two racist White men in his south Georgia neighborhood. I felt sick to my stomach and started to wonder about my own safety hiking on the A.T. in the South especially. Frightened, I checked the online Appalachian Trail groups and frantically asked about my safety as a Black woman hiking the A.T. in the South. Almost immediately, I was met with hostility and racism. The comments just would not stop flowing. Comments like: "We don't see color on the Trail," "There's no racism on the A.T.; I haven't experienced any," "The root cause of poverty is crime and if you had fathers you wouldn't be this way, and yeah some cops are bad," and "You're not special, you're not the first Black person to hike the A.T." And I certainly won't be the last.



BY SHILLETHA CURTIS

PREPARING FOR THE TRAIL

Shilletha during a prep hike near Lake Minnewaska at Gertude's Nose in New York –By Hanna Wilson

Shilletha hiking with her dog Meraxes at High Mountain Park Preserve in New Jersey

All these comments came from White hikers who denied racism and refused to listen to my concerns. Instead, I was ridiculed, humiliated, and eventually banned for standing up against the admins and moderators in the group. Distraught, I put all my frustration, pain, and sadness into writing a piece titled "Not Just Another Hiker" and I swore on my life that I would send it to the *Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, even Oprah if I had to. But then the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) heard about my struggle before I had contacted them. I sent them the piece and spoke with them about it; and everything in my life changed. My article was published as a blog post by the ATC and by The Trek, and it went viral. Love, support, and blessings started pouring in from around the world and I never saw it coming. As a Black woman, I never thought that my voice would matter. But here I am. As I write this it is November, and I have come a long way from the caterpillar that I was. I have formed a chrysalis and have emerged as a beautiful monarch butterfly — spreading inspiration, love, and truth to all those who will listen.

Looking at this journey is surreal at best and the past few months have been hard to absorb. I am in a state of shock as I continue to acquire my gear, write more articles, and do shakedown hikes. In May, I purchased my first piece of gear, which was my Big Agnes Copper Spur UV UL2 tent and now I have my "big four." Every piece of gear I receive sends a gentle reminder that I am about to embark on a life-changing journey.

Diving into the hiking world has been a little scary as this is something that is very new to me. I had never known about

THE BEST WAY THAT I PREPARE FOR THE A.T. IS EXPOSURE TO MY FEARS, CHALLENGING MYSELF ON VERSATILE AND FOOT-ACHING TERRAIN, AND STRENGTHENING MY MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH THERAPY AND MEDITATION.

base weight, base layers, sleeping bags, and tents. With so many brands and companies to choose from, I found myself stuck in a whirlwind of decisions that could very well make or break my hike. Obtaining gear came as both a sticker and mental shock to me. Fortunately, help was on the way. I received a Diversity Grant from Backpacking Light to help out with gear, became a writer for *Garage Grown Gear*, have obtained a few product donations from small companies, and I have become a brand ambassador for a few smaller companies. My gear journey is an ongoing process as I look to obtain the last few items for my wintry thru-hike. Speaking of a wintry hike, I am going against the status quo and trekking in the heart of winter as I am looking for a less crowded and more solitary hike. Many have tried to convince me otherwise, but I have been getting out and putting my trail-runners to work.

Learning the ropes is still a constant struggle but I am quickly catching on. Living in New Jersey has given me opportunities to test out all my gear in four seasons and I have been out on the A.T. for section hikes since March. Camping has come with a learning curve but I feel like I am finally getting into a routine at camp, learning to become more independent and to trust my skills. Over the summer, I conquered my fear of bears and now welcome spotting them with an open heart. I have seen my fair share of copperheads and have been at war with black flies and sweltering humidity. The best way that I prepare for the A.T. is exposure to my fears, challenging myself on versatile and foot-aching terrain, and strengthening my mental health through therapy and meditation. Shakedowns are vital to success and most of my shakedowns have happened in the heart of the Catskills, and the A.T. in New York, and New Jersey. And when I am really looking for a mental challenge, I take on the infamous A.T. in Pennsylvania (also known as "Rocksylvania").

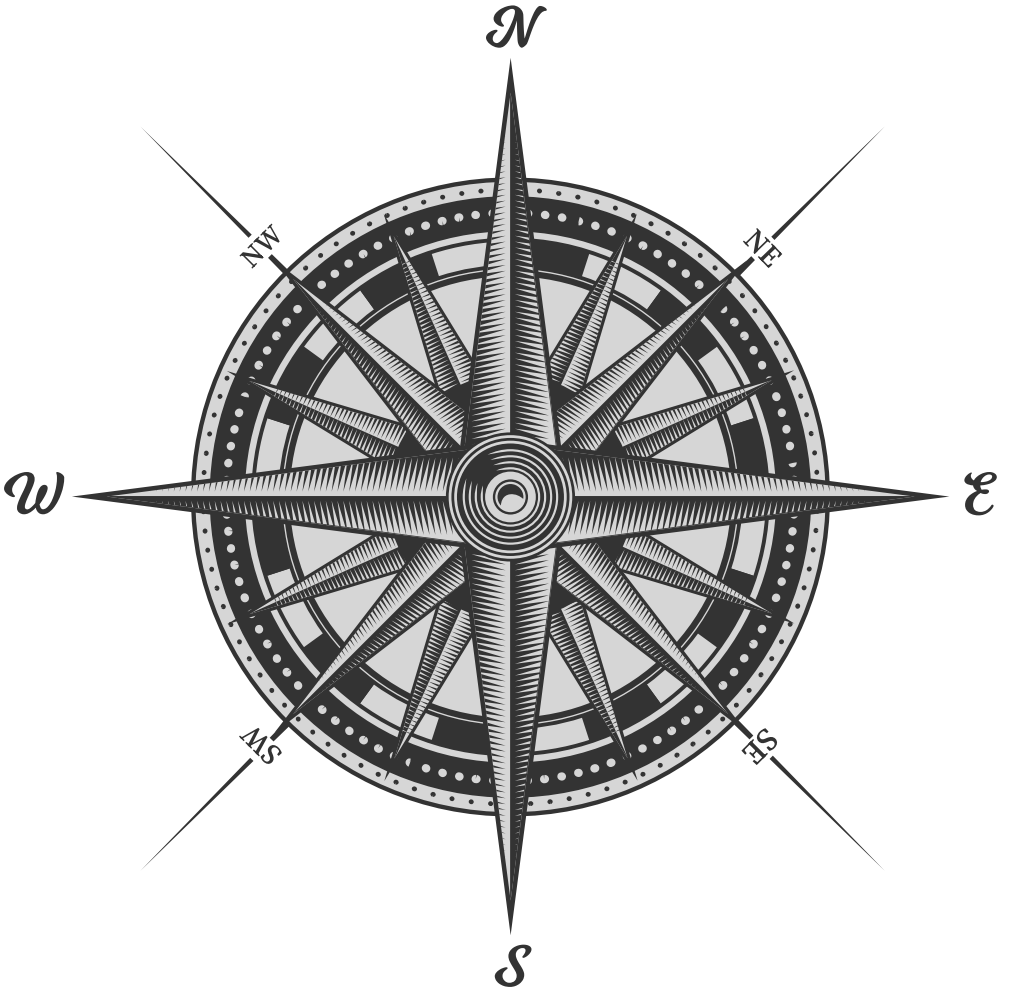
Hiking has opened a door, and being out on the trails three to four times a week has inspired me to tackle the "Triple Crown." In this pursuit, I will strive to be the second Black woman who obtains the "Triple Crown." Every day I am getting stronger as I use my blue aluminum trekking poles to traverse the hard soil of the earth, summiting mountains. I have hiked at Arches and Yellowstone national parks, across deserts, balds, rocks, and ridges that would make anyone awestruck. And I know that I am ready.

Nature herself heals and gives me clarity to answers I have spent my life searching for. The Appalachian Trail has a seductive nature and sucks you into its grasp like a black hole. Magic and lessons can happen when you least expect them; and as true as the sky is blue, the Trail always provides. As I prepare to book my plane ticket to Georgia, the words of a friend that I met through the A.T. ring loudly in my ears: "You only have three options: cry, quit, or continue. You will certainly cry; I did, and I am in the military. It's okay to cry but you have to continue. Quitting is not an option."

I have never quit any dreams that I set my mind to. I may even sob. I will have days that I want to gather every rock in Pennsylvania and throw it over the cliffs. Blisters, ticks, and exhaustion come what may. But understand this: My name is Shilletha Curtis, my Trail name is "Dragonsky," and I am stronger than anyone could imagine. I move mountains, they do not move me. Katahdin, I am coming for you.

Stay tuned for the next chapter of Shilletha's Trail adventure.

While the ATC continues to urge long distance hikers to cancel or postpone their journeys until the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention determines the COVID-19 pandemic to be "under control," we felt Shilletha's story was important to share. Her experience reveals another, centuries-long pandemic faced by Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), and LGBTQ+ hikers: racism and other forms of hate or discrimination. While some may have seamless journeys to and on the Trail, many hikers continue to feel unwelcome and unsafe. We hope this piece spurs a dialogue and, ultimately, compels action to address this.



BY JULIE JUDKINS

HEADING TOWARD TRUE NORTH

WE LEARN, UNLEARN, AND LEARN AGAIN

MANY OF US HEAD TO THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL after experiencing life changing events or when seeking a new direction in life. The Trail has served me best as a mirror for self-reflection. The A.T. allows us the introspection to see wounds we might not see in our busy lives and find a path toward healing. The lands and people the Trail encompasses have deep wounds themselves, and acknowledging the trauma of the past, like the first steps along an approach trail, is just the beginning of a long journey.

When I joined the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) staff in 2004, I did not foresee the changes that would occur in the organization's structure and vision. Yet a plan was already in place that would orient us toward transformational change, even going so far as to change our organization's very name from the Appalachian Trail Conference to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. A change in name marked a change in identity, with the ATC looking "beyond the footpath" to land conservation, stewardship, and education. As the organization evolved, so did my role within it. I went from supporting education planning and volunteer workshops to leading national partnerships and building networks of educators, communities, and young people. Now, I am part of a larger team tasked with creating a culture oriented toward justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). This work requires me to learn from my mistakes but also engage in an ongoing process focused on growth. In taking steps forward, I need to slow down, take a new bearing, and readjust frequently.

Having engaged in a few years of intentional JEDI work, the ATC has taken important strides while realizing that much more is still needed. Individually and organizationally, we are each looking inward and taking a bearing toward "true north," the internal compass and direction that guides us to our greatest potential. We might not have the power to change our complex past, nor the acts of colonization and injustices embedded in our history. We can, however, acknowledge our past and vow to address harmful systems and practices to build a better future.

Reciprocity, building relationships, and changing systems takes time; as motivational author and speaker Stephen Covey put it: "Change moves at the speed of trust." In the ATC's case, the journey toward true north is itself the work. Every individual is starting at a different place on this learning spectrum and has a different itinerary. The ATC's compass in this journey has the bearings of foundational, internal, and external learning and change, which can help point us ultimately toward justice.

ATC'S JOURNEY TOWARD JUSTICE

Foundational

Starting with the core of who we are and what we do, the ATC has adjusted our mission and vision statements, created new value and identity statements, and launched a new strategic plan. We have taken time to discuss, vet and internalize why this work is important to us individually, organizationally, and as a broader Trail community. We do this work because we recognize that the Trail's benefits — lowering stress, improving health, and building stronger communities, among many others — are vital tools for our collective wellbeing. Access to the Trail and its benefits should be recognized and respected as a basic human right.

We have recognized breakdowns in communication. Now we strive to start all meetings and events with collective agreements on how we communicate and ensure our work is reciprocal and not transactional. We recognize the importance of building community first before bringing our own agenda to the table.

Internal

The ATC hired new staff to work on advancing JEDI within the organization. We have added to staff benefits, improved flexibility, and audited hiring practices, job descriptions, and classifications. We developed teams to focus on keeping the ATC on track with its JEDI learning and practices. We provided training on best practices for inclusion, such as understanding implicit bias. And our Next Generation Advisory Council continues to provide advice and support for programs, practices, and communications.

We have learned, at the ATC, that inclusion is about behavior. Listening, empathy, and curiosity are important practices to remember. We are an action-oriented organization, so we must remind ourselves that jumping in to "solve the problem" isn't always the best approach. At times, we must listen, pull back and remember that discomfort is part of the process. The desire to see accomplishment or progress should not come second to listening to someone from the perspective of their lived experience.

External

The ATC cannot reach its true north alone. Bringing the people and organizations from the broader Trail community will help us learn with and from each other. The list below highlights the ways we are leading, sharing, and connecting to maximize our potential. We work with partners through a framework for equity that strives to eliminate barriers to participation by groups traditionally underrepresented, cultivating a diverse, dynamic new generation of Trail enthusiasts and conservation leaders.

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WE DO THIS WORK BECAUSE WE RECOGNIZE THAT THE TRAIL'S BENEFITS — LOWERING STRESS, IMPROVING HEALTH, AND BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES, AMONG MANY OTHERS — ARE VITAL TOOLS FOR OUR COLLECTIVE WELLBEING. ACCESS TO THE TRAIL AND ITS BENEFITS SHOULD BE RECOGNIZED AND RESPECTED AS A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT.

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The Ed-Venture Series provides an interactive virtual presentation led by local experts covering Trail-related topics like wildlife, botany, history, and folklore for learners of all ages.

Youth Summits have built on several years of educational summits for young people; and last year 19 NextGen Forest Ambassadors completed a series of virtual group sessions. Two alumni and seven mentors supported the group and sessions covered a variety of topics, from the Cherokee language and stories to birding and tree identification.

Wild East Women and Latinx Partnership is a group of inspiring woman who engage with public lands and trails as adventurers, stewards, and leaders, and have supported multiple virtual events. Partnering with She-Explores and Ravel Media, the ATC developed the podcast series "Where We Walk." Launched in September 2020, it has been downloaded more than 60,000 times so far and examines topics like the next generation of Trail caretakers and how the history of the A.T. has included and excluded women. The ATC's Latinx partnership coordinator, similarly, amplified Latinx individuals and groups all over the country to explore and give-back to trail organizations through virtual campfire talks and events.

The ATC's Community Impact Fund supported $150,000 worth of projects promoting social, economic, and land justice in southeastern West Virginia and southwestern Virginia. Seven community organizations, schools, and municipal/county agencies will activate a variety of projects and people. Examples include creating Indigenous gardens at schools and community libraries, and developing a curriculum to better incorporate science, Indigenous knowledge, social studies, storytelling, and language arts.

The Volunteer Leadership Academy has provided dialogue and conversation on engaging new people and new partners. JEDI sessions have provided resources on accountability, language, models for working with affinity groups and young people, and much more.

Learn, unlearn, and learn again. Intentions, while coming from a place of kindness, can still unknowingly cause harm or replicate patterns of oppression. The existence of inequities, or differences in resource allocation, is something that might not be visible upon first look for those coming from a place of privilege. By acknowledging privilege, we can harness hope and action for allyship toward justice.

This is a long journey. But together, with true north as our guide, and by honoring the people and communities that have come before us, we continue to reflect, readjust, and ask questions. We hope this compass helps you feel empowered to take this journey with us. We will work individually and collectively to orient ourselves toward justice, do the hard work, and ensure that the Appalachian Trail is a place of healing and inspiration for all.

Julie Judkins is the ATC's Director of Education and Outreach

FOR MORE LEARNING:

The Global Diversity & Inclusion Benchmarks: Standards for Organizations Around the World by the Center of Global Inclusion, is a resource that has helped the ATC build a framework for growth, providing strategies, best practices, and progress toward our goals through their systems for accountability. Broken up into the key areas, they provide dozens of modalities and guidance.

racialequitytools.org
pnts.org/new/resources/diversity-and-inclusion
appalachiantrail.org/training
theavarnagroup.com
appalachiantrail.org/jedi

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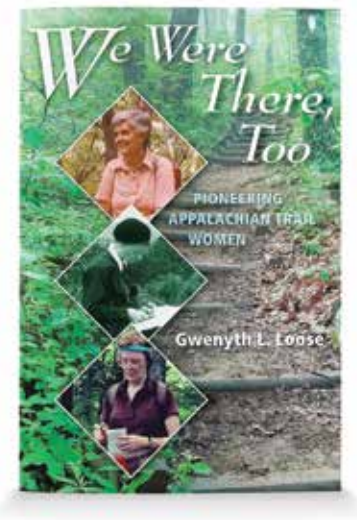
For more information visit:
appalachiantrail.org/bears

WE WERE THERE, TOO

THE OVERLOOKED STORIES OF THREE WOMEN

BY ANNE SENTZ



I DO NOT BELIEVE IT IS by accident that I finished my copy of We Were There, Too by Gwenyth L. Loose right around the time our nation inaugurated its very first female Vice President. As I read about three women whose efforts were vital to the success of the Appalachian Trail project, Loose's writing elicited strong emotion. These stories needed to be told and heard. Feelings of pride, intermingled with sentiments like, "finally," coursed through me.

We Were There, Too was published by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) in late November 2020, so it is new to bookstores — and it deserves a place on your own shelf. The book is a quick and engaging read that spans ten decades of female leadership within the Trail community. Yet readers should take away more from this book than an important history lesson. Loose's writing is a deep dive into the lives of women who deserve as much recognition as Benton MacKaye and Myron Avery. Yes, those two men are at the top of the list of the dreamers and doers who made the Trail a reality, but as the title of the book implies, there are other names Trail enthusiasts should know. *We Were There, Too* highlights three extraordinary women: Jean Stephenson, Ruth Blackburn, and Margaret Drummond.

Jean Stephenson is best known for founding and editing *Appalachian Trailway News*, an important communications tool established by the ATC (then the Appalachian Trail Conference) to inform, educate, and inspire. Stephenson also edited the first two generations of Trail guidebooks, but her skills went beyond writing and editing. She worked alongside Myron Avery to ensure the A.T.

Wild East Women (WEW) — an ATC affinity group working to support women in engaging with the Trail in meaningful ways — clear vegetation on Jerry's Run Trail during a WEW Trail Maintenance Day in 2020 at Ramsey's Draft Wilderness in Augusta County, Virginia. –Photo courtesy of WEW; Inset from top: Trail Pioneers Ruth Blackburn, Jean Stephenson, and Margaret Drummond

■

LOOSE'S WRITING IS A DEEP DIVE INTO THE LIVES OF WOMEN WHO DESERVE AS MUCH RECOGNITION AS BENTON MACKAYE AND MYRON AVERY. YES, THOSE TWO MEN ARE AT THE TOP OF THE LIST OF THE DREAMERS AND DOERS WHO MADE THE TRAIL A REALITY, BUT AS THE TITLE OF THE BOOK IMPLIES, THERE ARE OTHER NAMES TRAIL ENTHUSIASTS SHOULD KNOW.

■

project had a strong organizational foundation, and by the time of her death in 1979, she had served in crucial positions in both the ATC and the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC). *We Were There, Too* makes it clear to readers that the Trail would not be what it is today without the efforts of Stephenson. Loose quotes Gannon Coffey, then-president of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, who wrote in August 1963: "Without Jean in her key position, we'd all be floundering around."

While Stephenson's passion for the A.T. burned brightly from the start, by contrast, Ruth Blackburn slowly fell in love with the Trail. In fact, she described her first hike as "gosh-awful." Once she embraced her enthusiasm, though, it resulted in a lifelong dedication to the A.T. until her death in 2004 at the age of 96. Blackburn is known for her work to secure a protected Trail corridor, and she devoted years to researching private land ownership along the A.T. Eventually becoming president of PATC, she was recognized as an expert in land ownership from Virginia to Pennsylvania. Blackburn went on to become chair of the ATC from 1980 to 1983, which was a crucial time for land acquisition because of federal mandates to complete a continuous Trail and a protected corridor.

Like Blackburn, Margaret Drummond ultimately became chair of the ATC in 1989. She held the position for six years. She came into her position at ATC having been president of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club (GATC), so she carried a unique regional perspective that influenced her views on the national level. Drummond worked to affirm and reaffirm tireless Trail volunteers, focusing their attention on the enormous responsibility of maintaining the A.T. in the wake of new responsibilities authorized under the National Trail Systems Act. She was able to create enthusiasm within the volunteer corps while also underscoring the importance of skill standardization — and it was not easy, because the transition to a cooperative management system that included the federal government was not always readily embraced.

In the introduction to *We Were There, Too*, Loose describes the feeling of "wide-eyed wonder" she experiences when she is first introduced to the A.T. as a young child. The same could be said of me, too, as I read her book. I was reminded to be grateful for those women who have paved the way for so many of us to protect, maintain, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. I will think of Jean when I write a piece for *A.T. Journeys*, which is the successor to *Appalachian Trailway News*; I will remember Ruth when I talk to ATC partners about new and exciting landscape conservation opportunities; and I will recall Margaret's memory the next time I see the historical marker at the beginning of the Approach Trail in Georgia's Amicalola Falls State Park. I will carry the spirit of those women — and all others — who have dedicated so much to the A.T. and its preservation. *We Were There, Too*, and as Loose so eloquently maintains: we will continue to be here, now and into the future.

Purchase a copy of *We Were There, Too* from Mountaineer Books at **appalachiantrail.org/we-were-there-too**

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RAVEL MEDIA

Wild East Women
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Wild East Women is an affinity group working under the umbrella of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) to support women in engaging with the Trail in meaningful ways. We are excited to feature interviews with women who are involved with the A.T. in a multitude of ways, provide tips and strategies for outdoor adventures, and most of all help YOU to get involved with hikes and Trail days along the A.T. corridor. We can't wait to be a part of this community with you!

BY LUZ LITUMA

CHANGING OUTDOOR REPRESENTATION & NARRATIVES

AS CO-FOUNDER OF LATINXHIKERS, a community created to bring more diversity to trails, I am interested in addressing and changing the lack of diversity in outdoor recreation. Two major factors holding back progress are lack of access to public lands and lack of representation in the outdoor recreation industry. Julia Hartz, CEO of Eventbrite, once said, "If you can't see it, you can't be it," when speaking of women role models in the media. You must be able to see others who look like you to feel inspired and empowered. Representation matters. Representation is crucial.

Latinxhikers began as an Instagram account where Adriana Garcia, co-founder, and I would share personal experiences of being out on the trails. We wanted to create a space where we could share our stories as two Latinx women and provide advice for other Latinxs to go outdoors. I wasn't always what one would typically consider "outdoorsy." I am a first-generation daughter of two immigrants from Ecuador. Leisure time and family vacations were few and far between for us. This meant our vacations were usually staycations. We would do pig roasts at the lake or throw big outside parties with a lot of food. This was our way of being outdoorsy, and a lot of the Latinx community resonates with that version. It wasn't until 2016 – after I unexpectedly summited 17,000-foot Vinicunca, Rainbow Mountain in Peru – that I started hiking. I say unexpected because I honestly didn't know what I was signing up for. The guide told us to "just wear comfortable shoes." It was one of the hardest hikes I've ever done. After doing that, I felt like I could do anything. I switched up my way of travel and started visiting as many national parks as possible.

MY PERSONAL GOAL IS TO HELP PEOPLE GAIN A GREATER APPRECIATION FOR TRAILS SO WE CAN ESTABLISH A DEEPER CONNECTION TO THE LANDS AND IN RETURN, CREATE MORE LIFELONG STEWARDS OF THESE SPACES.

As the Latinxhikers community grew, so did our access to recreational opportunities. One of the best has been working with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and the Florida Trail Association (FTA) as a Latinx partnership coordinator. This position was created almost two years ago to bring more diversity to the outdoors and within environmental conservation organizations. My job is to create stewardship and volunteer opportunities for the Latinx community. But, my personal goal

Latinxhikers at a 2019 social event at Arabia Mountain Heritage Center in Lithonia Georgia –By Chris Restrepo

WHEN IT COMES TO THE OUTDOORS, LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO CHANGE THE STORIES, THE CONNECTIONS, AND THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE GREAT OUTDOORS.

is to help people gain a greater appreciation for trails so we can establish a deeper connection to the lands and, in return, create more lifelong stewards of these spaces.

Creating affinity spaces is critical when introducing the Latinx community to the trails. It helps our community feel safe and welcomed in places that have historically oppressed many people of color. During the COVID-19 pandemic, group gatherings – which were how we engaged with outdoor spaces in the past – are out of the picture. With that in mind, I wanted to make sure people were still motivated to go outside and explore their own backyard. One way we've invited the community to participate was by hosting a virtual hike for Latino Conservation Week (LCW). LCW was founded in 2014 by the Hispanic Access Foundation, to encourage the Latinx community to access nature and build a connection to outdoor recreation and environmental stewardship. By engaging with the outdoors among a group with shared identities, one of LCW's goals is to change the shape and narrative of outdoor recreation and dissolve the barriers that have kept the Latinx community from building a relationship with the outdoors.

By hosting a virtual hike during LCW, I encouraged people to get on a trail in their area and become aware of who maintains the trails they're enjoying. I think there's a common misconception that people get paid to do this work. Not many people know that the trails they recreate on are maintained by people like us – volunteers who help maintain and protect the paths that everyone can walk on. My hope was to inspire others to volunteer with the conservation organizations in their area (when it's safe). The feedback and participation were tremendous. And people did their homework by finding out who maintains their trails. We had over 80 mini-groups all over the United States join and become informed. Not only did those individuals bring awareness to their small group, but they also posted about it on social media, which spread the word to their networks, families, and friends as well.

Another way we've been engaging our Appalachian Trail and Florida Trail lovers is by creating opportunities to share stories of amazing women on the trail. Wild East Women (WEW) is an affinity group created to help and encourage women to engage with trails in meaningful ways. The group's goal is to create future women adventurers, stewards, and leaders in the outdoor community. WEW has been focused on hosting women's workdays, while responding to COVID-19's impact. Like the virtual hike for LWC, WEW is hosting a women's walkabout for National Public Lands Day (on September 25) that invites all to get out for a walk, stroll, or trek nearby. Everyone is encouraged to incorporate a service component if possible. A virtual happy hour will bring everyone together to share the stories of the day and connect the community despite our current social distances.

Sharing volunteer stories is a way to inspire other women to attend future events. Experiences shared by first-timers on volunteer trail crews, especially, show others that everyone is a beginner at one point. We're also sharing stories through different mediums like podcasts. The WEW group has worked with She-Explores to develop a podcast series called Where We Walk. This six-part series highlights trails through both the women who helped to build them and those who continue to make it what it is today. The series tells a multi-dimensional story through a range of voices from diverse backgrounds in the hope to engage a wider audience and encourage more folks to embark on their first volunteer journey.

There has been a greater appreciation for the outdoors during this pandemic. It is so inspiring to see people who previously had hardly ever gone outside now hit the trails and love it. With this new appreciation, we hope we can inform these newer hikers to join and to engage with organizations like the FTA and the ATC, and to learn about their efforts and hard work. Continuing with our focus to enhance representation, we are in the process of developing a Storytelling Campfire Panel and a cooking series in honor of Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15 through October 15). We hope to inspire many new first-time volunteers in the near future. Even if we can't be together, we'll find ways to make it work. When it comes to the outdoors, let's work together to change the stories, the connections, and the perspectives of the great outdoors.

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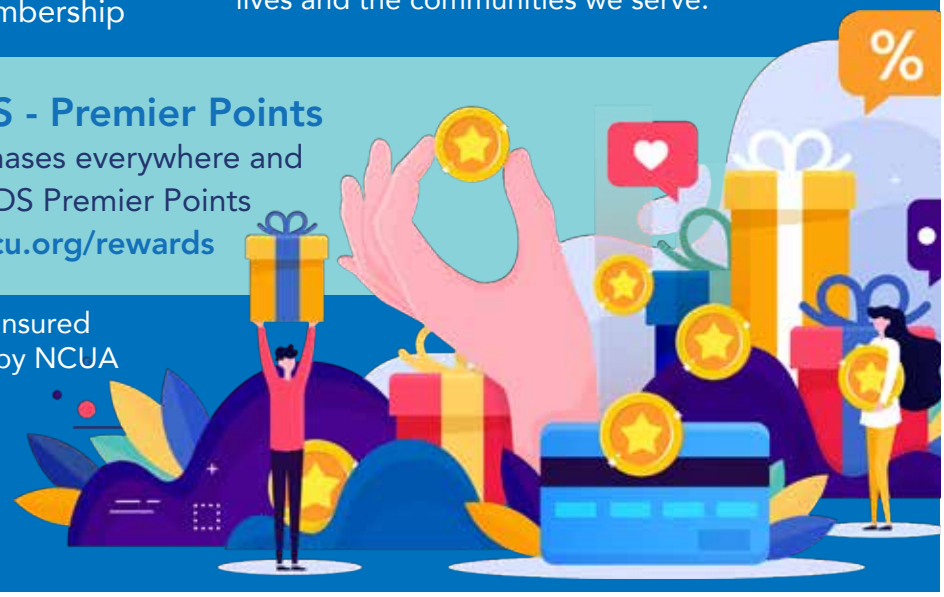

"AT APPALACHIAN GEAR COMPANY, WE'VE SPENT A LOT OF TIME CRISS-CROSSING THE TRAILS OF THE EASTERN U.S. THAT'S WHY WE'RE PROUD TO SPONSOR A '21 APPALACHIAN TRAIL **RIDGERUNNER** AS OUR SMALL WAY OF GIVING BACK TO THE PLACE THAT'S GIVEN US SO MUCH INSPIRATION."

- JOHN GAGE, CO-FOUNDER

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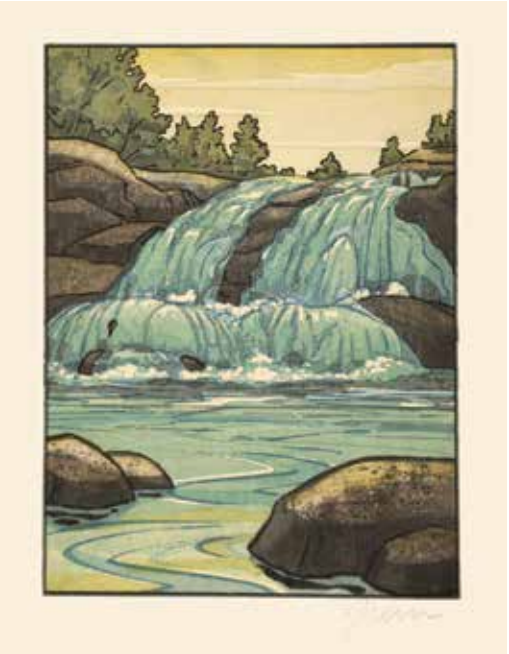
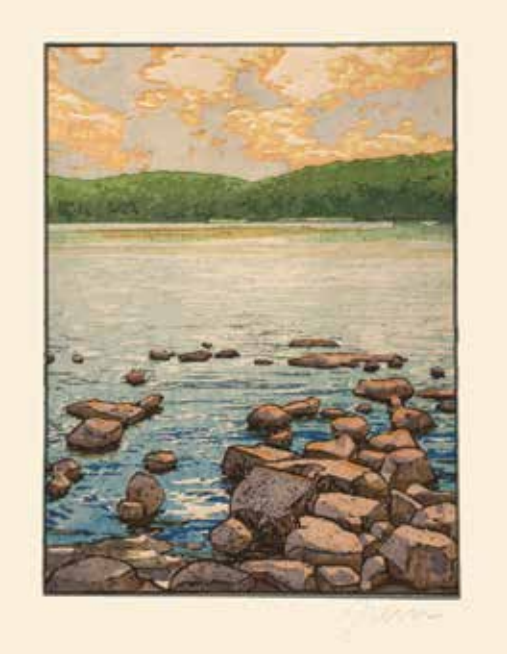
A.T. IMPRESSIONS





Clockwise from top left: A.T. woodblock prints of Tennessee, Connecticut, Jersey, and Massachusetts
Right: John with the project's 166 hand-carved woodblocks

tanukiprints.com

AS WITH SO MANY OF YOU, I OWE MUCH to the Appalachian Trail — that small ribbon of up-and-down following the ancient eastern mountains that has given me so many life-long things: friends, dogged determination, a sense of accomplishment, and a need to constantly re-connect with Mother Nature.

Back in 1980, after thru-hiking the Trail, I convinced myself that I'd join a maintaining crew as soon as I got back. At the age of 17, I first had to graduate dreaded high school. Soon came new paths. College, navigating careers, marriage, and kids. Forty years later, I realized that the best way for me to give back was staring me in the face — to combine my two loves of art and the A.T.

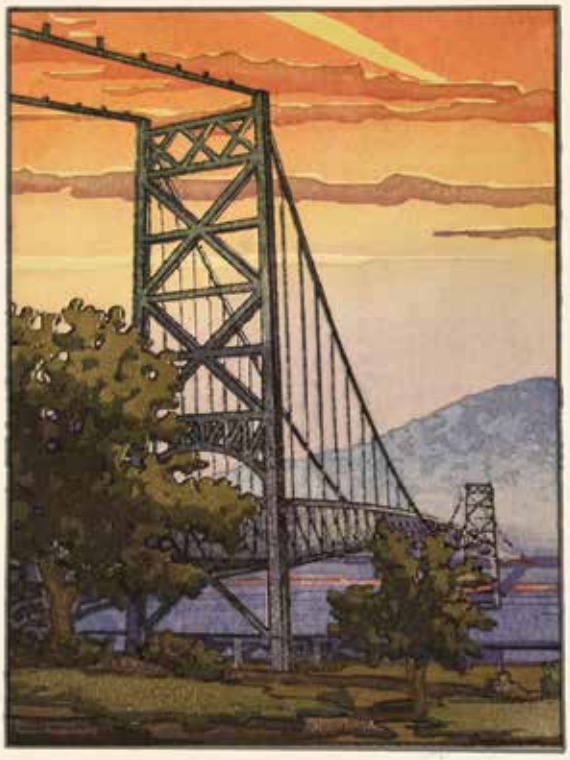
While working as an illustrator in the early 90s, I became enthralled by Japanese woodblock landscapes. Over the last 25 years, I have studied and worked in Japan as a printmaker, which led me to teaching printmaking. The natural materials of traditional Japanese printing (mokuhanga) techniques were strangely familiar to me — as were the countless repetitive steps and the challenging physical labor required. These elements reminded me so much of what I experience through hiking.

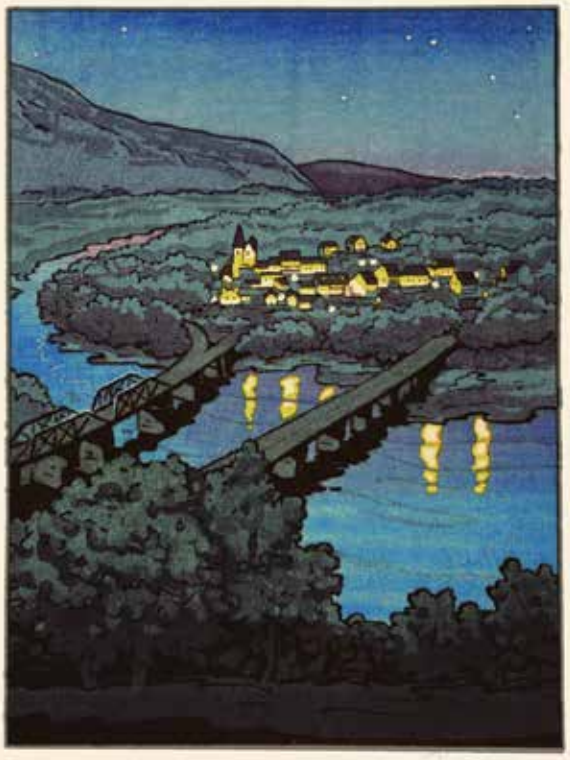
Unlike the four-and-a-half months it took me to hike the A.T., "The Appalachian Trail Print Collection" has taken me three years to complete. It required designing 14 images (one from each state along the A.T.), carving 165 cherry blocks, printing 32,000 colors by hand, and binding 220 volumes of prints. During this time, I also went through two surgeries, radiation therapy, and I lost my father. I drew on the lessons that I learned through hiking, mainly: "As long as you keep going, nothing can stop you."

My hope is to capture visually what it's really like to be immersed in a long-distance hike through the changing weather, time, and seasons. And to elicit such joys as the sound of rain falling on mountain laurel, the clear and golden crispness of a coming fall, the smoke-cured smell in a shelter's coolness, and the unexpected vista that suddenly unfolds before you.

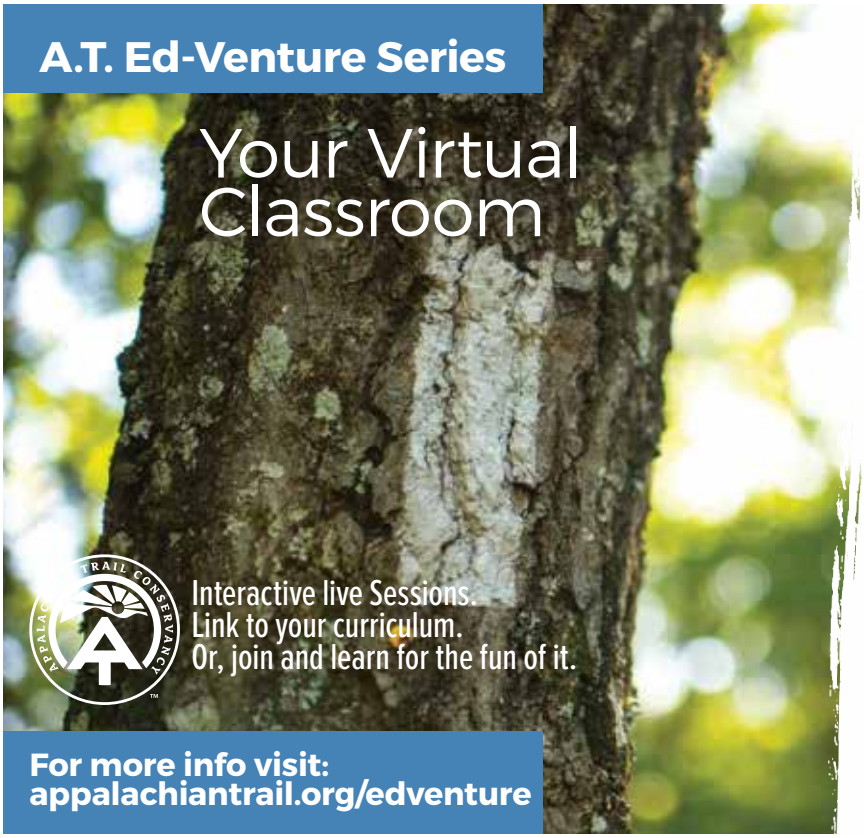
I want this project to connect with the A.T. community as well as to give back. I believe that the Appalachian Trail brings out the best of us. It certainly has done that for me.

–John Amoss





Clockwise from top: John hand-printing one of the 32,000 colors; A.T. woodblock prints of West Virginia and New York



Join the ATC on an amazing virtual A.T. Ed-Venture Series, created for young people but engaging for all ages. Starting in Georgia and traveling all the way north to Maine, each session is led by environmental educators providing exciting content across diverse disciplines that connect curriculum and students to the Appalachian Trail. These interactive sessions will be hosted live via Zoom, and then published to YouTube for access at any time.

Join us for the final sessions in this series on Wednesdays at 4:00 pm:
February 17th: Climate Change in NH's White Mountains
March 3rd: Hang Out with Me! I'm a Fungi.

A.T. - Beartown State Forrest, Massachusetts Photo by Raymond Salani III

Adventure & Gratitude

By Colleen Peterson

Colleen "Teala" Peterson enters the southern end of the infamous "Roller Coaster" the morning of the derecho –By Christian Peterson

THE JUNE 2012 MID-ATLANTIC and Midwest derecho is considered one of the deadliest and most destructive in North American history. Defined by Merriam-Webster as "a large fast-moving complex of thunderstorms with powerful straight-line winds that cause widespread destruction," a derecho is most often likened to a tornado. Long-distance hikers often experience a range of weather events and I've certainly had my share. But the intensity of the fast-moving thunderstorms underpinning the June 2012 North American derecho that claimed 22 lives and cost $2.9 billion in damage, tested everything I had learned about survival and, more importantly, what it means to be grateful.

Desperate to leave Virginia and to reach our rendezvous point of Snickers Gap where my husband would be waiting to take us home for a much anticipated four-day respite, my son and thru-hiker companion, Christian ("Texas Pete"), had entered West Virginia's infamous "Roller Coaster" the morning of June 29. A general malaise and increasing signs of illness, later determined to be Lyme disease, dampened my spirits as I cursed the pointless ups and downs of this short but challenging section. There was absolutely no air moving and the temperature climbed steadily until it hit 101 around 3 PM. My son — totally aware that he was responsible for my well-being — called a halt to our march just shy of our hopeful destination, Bears Den, where we had planned to sleep for the evening before an easy descent to our pick-up point on Route 7. I remember thinking that the air was so thick it was suffocating — as if some gigantic vacuum cleaner had sucked every possible movement out of the atmosphere. It was eerie and, had I had my wits about me, I would have realized that this uncanny stillness predicted something remarkable — and deadly — in its wake.

Typically, we didn't check weather reports while we were hiking, largely because cell phone service was spot-

ty, but Chris felt compelled to do so that evening. Thank goodness he did. "Mom, get in your tent now. A strong storm is headed toward us," he said. "We have just a few minutes." I had to think but there was no time, so I scrambled into my tent and heard Chris zip the fly over his hammock. What was he thinking? If it's a severe storm, his hammock is defenseless. What was I thinking? My tent weighed less than four pounds and was equally inadequate in a storm of any magnitude. Then I heard it — like a freight train barreling up both sides of my tent. The wind was unbelievable, and the calmness of that once airless night was shattered by the sound of falling trees. Were they the ones Chris' hammock was hooked to? And what could I do? Nothing, but hope and pray. So, I did.

The following morning brought intense sunshine and cooler, dryer air. Chris and I woke up at about 5:30. We had spent the night in deep slumber after checking on each other's safety once the derecho had passed. We couldn't even count the number of trees that had broken like matchsticks around our campsite. All I could think was: how did we manage to survive that? Was there a greater intervention? Did my desperate thoughts of how I would be more grateful if we survived prove to be the ingredient necessary to ensure our safety? I might never know why we survived but what I did know was that I would forever practice being grateful — because I was.

As we picked our way through downed trees — enough with white blazes that we could follow the Trail — we met volunteers who were clearing debris and checking on the safety of people like Chris and me who couldn't find shelter in such an incredibly dangerous storm. I've thought about that a lot since that June; about those volunteers dedicated to maintaining this national treasure called the Appalachian Trail who, on that summer morning, were making sure those of us who ventured on it in were safe. It's a life lesson I shall never forget.

Nine years later, I embrace my new relationship with the A.T., now in my sixth year as a volunteer on the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's (ATC) Board of Directors, joining hundreds of others who share the mission of the ATC — to protect, manage, and advocate for the world's most iconic footpath. My journey as a long-distance hiker allowed me to be an adventurer. Today, my role as a volunteer board member helps to ensure that others have the chance to experience the Appalachian Trail and to create their own adventures. And for that, I am grateful.

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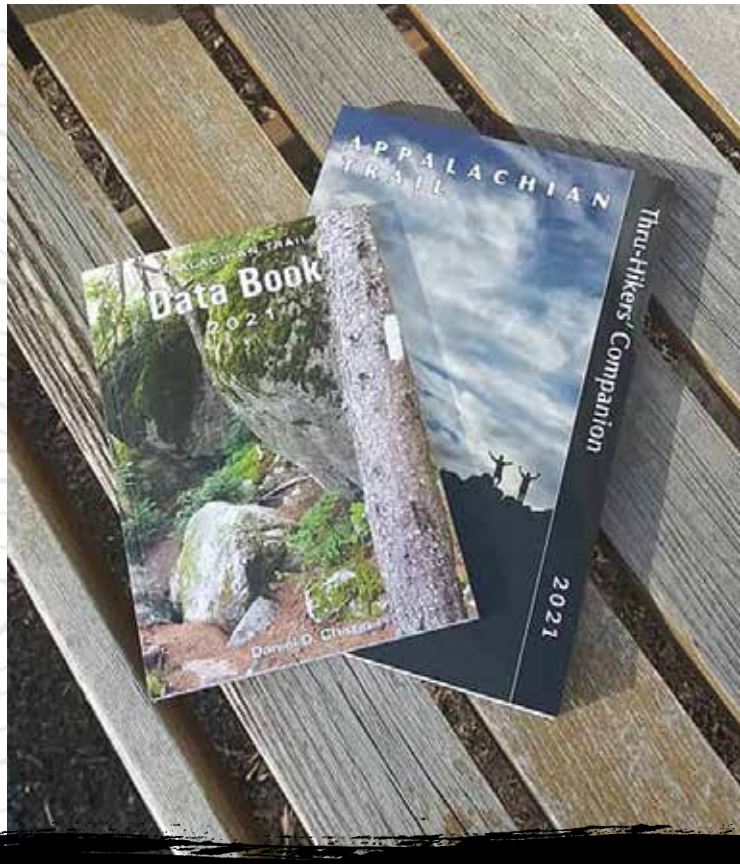

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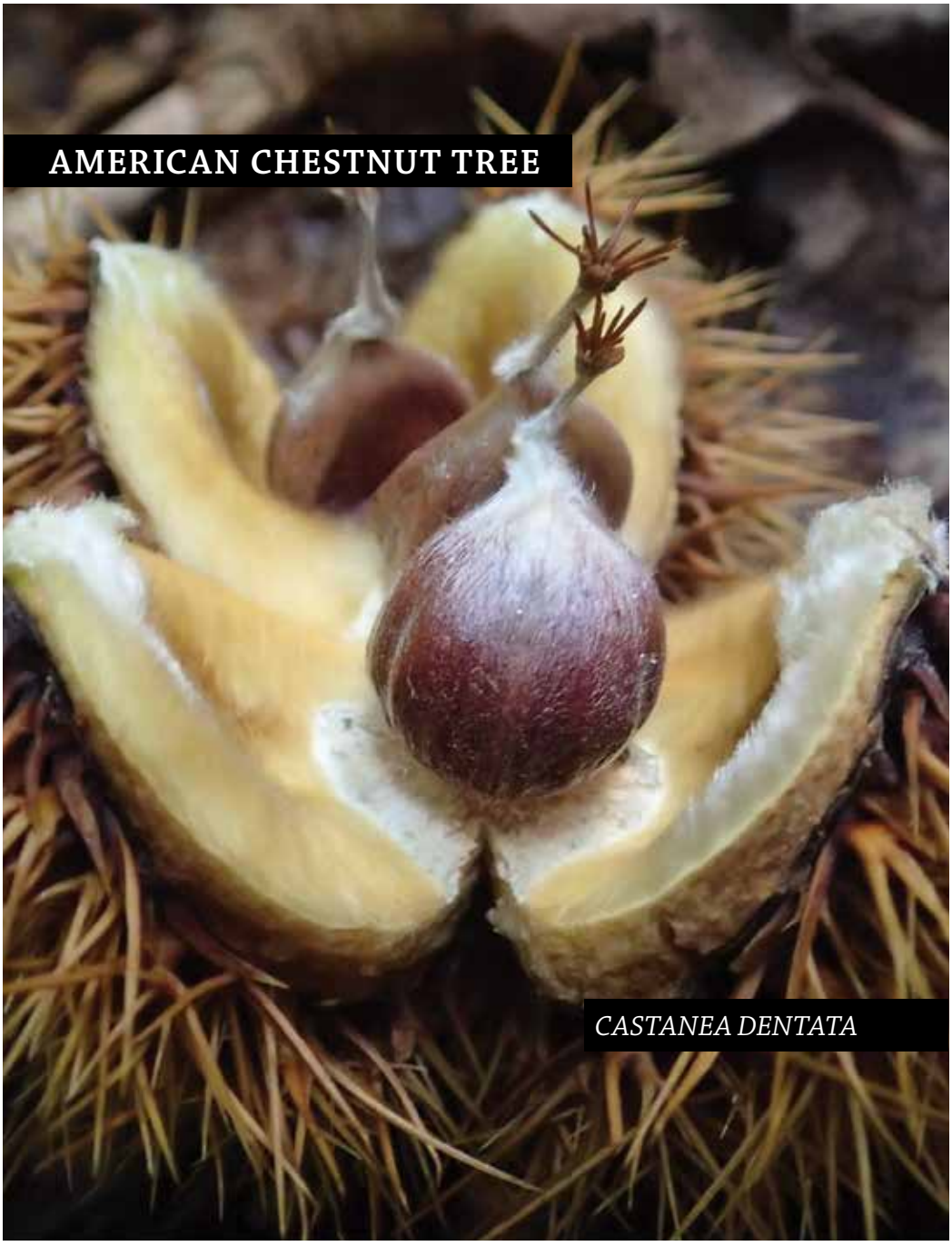

From left: An open American chestnut bur; Wild American chestnut trees growing in western North Carolina –Photos courtesy of The American Chestnut Foundation

By Dan Hale

AS THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL WAS first being built, the forests along the Trail were dramatically changing. American chestnut trees, the largest and most abundant trees in the forest, were dying en masse. Chestnut blight, a disease caused by the airborne fungus *Cryphonectria parasitica*, reduced the population of American chestnut trees from four billion (one quarter of all the trees in eastern U.S. forests) to functional extinction, meaning the population cannot reproduce enough to sustain itself.

Chestnut blight was accidentally introduced in New York City in 1904 and spread outward through the Appalachians over the course of 40 years. Picture the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) crews of the 1930s digging new trail through hillsides of dying, dead, or cut-down chestnut trees, weaving the trail around fat tree stumps. The CCC constructed many of the first A.T. shelters from some of the last available chestnut wood.

Before the blight, the American chestnut tree was incredibly valuable to the ecology, culture, and economy of Appalachia. Mature chestnuts are effectively absent from today's forests, their population reduced to small sprouts, but work is underway to bring them back, and A.T. hikers are uniquely positioned to help in this effort.

Called "the redwood of the East," the American chestnut was the largest tree in eastern North America. The average height of a mature forest chestnut was 100-105 feet, with an average trunk diameter five-to-eight-feet wide. Some of the largest chestnuts on the western slopes of the Great Smoky Mountains grew as high as 130 feet, with trunks over 10 feet wide. It would take more than five people to link their hands around the base of one tree. Today, the remaining chestnuts persist as small stump sprouts on the forest floor and nearly all die back from blight before they can flower and reproduce.

The American chestnut was a foundation species, shaping the structure and function of an entire ecological community. After the last frosts (usually late June), chestnut trees would produce long white male flower stalks called catkins that feed honeybees and other pollinators, and pollinate small female flowers on neighboring chestnut trees. Each pollinated female flower grew into a spiny capsule called a bur that contains three nuts. Every autumn, the plentiful burs would open up and nuts would fall to the ground, feeding wild turkeys, passenger pigeons (now extinct), blue jays, black bears, deer, racoons, squirrels, and chipmunks. The leaves of American chestnuts are a preferred food for insect larvae and

THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL RUNS THROUGH THE HEART OF THE AMERICAN CHESTNUT'S HISTORIC RANGE, MAKING HIKERS PERFECTLY POSITIONED TO FIND THE RARE CHESTNUT TREES THAT STILL PERSIST IN THE FOREST.

caterpillars, which in turn are eaten by other animals such as fish and birds. Even the soil is bolstered by the chestnut tree, because its leaves contain more nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and magnesium than other trees.

The loss of the American chestnut caused an ecological cascade that drastically altered the population dynamics of the forest. Wildlife perished up and down the food chain, decreasing the abundance of squirrel, deer, cavity-nesting birds, Cooper's hawks, cougars, and bobcats. Insect species suffered, and the American chestnut moth became extinct without its only food source. Even river water quality declined since nutrient-rich chestnut leaves provided the base of the food chain for aquatic macroinvertebrates (bugs) and the fish that eat them.

The chestnut tree was fundamental to the livelihood and culture of both Indigenous people and European-Americans. Among many tribes, the Indigenous word for chestnut was similar: chinkapin, chinquapin, chincapin, chincopin, and chechinquamin (as translated into European languages). The Cherokee, Iroquois, and Mohegan (Mohican) tribes in particular would burn and clear the forest to favor the growth of chestnuts, which they used for food, medicine, kindling, and woodworking. The nuts from the chestnut tree were roasted or ground into flour, in addition to many other culinary uses. Farmers would turn their hogs loose in the forest to fatten up on the nuts. Chestnut timber is straight-grained and rot resistant, making it useful for fence posts, building construction, furniture, and musical instruments. Tannins from the wood and bark were used to tan leather products. The devastating loss of the chestnut tree coincided with the great depression, deepening the hardship of that time.

New leaf growth on an American chestnut. –Photo courtesy The American Chestnut Foundation

Today, promising action is underway to restore the American chestnut tree. The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF), founded in 1983, leads work that combines traditional breeding and biotechnology to develop genetically diverse American chestnuts that are resistant to pathogens. Traditional breeding crosses the American chestnut with the blight-resistant Chinese chestnut over multiple generations to produce a hybrid tree that retains the characteristics of the American chestnut. TACF partners with the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, which leads biotechnology research that is producing a genetically engineered, blight tolerant American chestnut tree known as Darling 58. Darling 58 trees retain 100 percent of their natural American chestnut genes, and a single gene from wheat is inserted to allow the trees to survive the blight. This well-researched gene is commonly found in nature and there is no evidence of harmful effects to the environment. The Darling 58 tree is awaiting approval from the U.S. Department of Agriculture so that it can be planted out in the forest. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy is proud to have written a letter of support during the public comment period of the review process, which closed on October 19, 2020.

The Appalachian Trail runs through the heart of the American chestnut's historic range, making hikers perfectly positioned to find the rare chestnut trees that still persist in the forest. These wild American chestnuts are needed so that they can be bred with the blight-resistant trees produced by TACF, diversifying the gene pool and integrating local adaptations. On your next hike, keep an eye out for long canoe-shaped leaves with edges that have large prominent teeth that curve back on themselves like breaking waves. If the tree has long white catkins or spiny green burs the size of your fist, you were lucky enough to find a tree that survived to maturity. Your help finding one tree will contribute to restoring not only the American chestnut species, but the whole ecological community it supports.

Learn more about chestnut identification and how to report the tree you've found by visiting TACF's website at:
acf.org/resources/identification

Dan Hale is the ATC's New England Natural Resource and Land Stewardship Manager

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A.T. CONNECTICUT — PHOTO BY ALLISON DIVERDE

INSPIRED LEADERSHIP

THE NEXT GENERATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (NextGen) seeks to support the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) strategic goals of bringing new partners and new people to the A.T. In fostering a culture of inclusion, the ATC will cultivate greater strength and resilience as we work to manage and protect the A.T. and its greater ecosystem of communities and people. The council consists of 14 to 16 young, diverse leaders between the ages of 18 and 30 who serve two-year terms. Members work to address barriers, create a more inclusive narrative of people utilizing the A.T., and contribute advice to the ATC on programs and policies designed to encourage membership, advocacy, and leadership from a younger and more culturally diverse population than the current demographic. In 2020, that work included supporting strategic directions, advancement, advocacy during Hike the Hill, communications pieces (blogs, articles, podcasts, and more), and continued program participation during Youth Summits and education workshops. Our gratitude and thanks go to Kristin Murphy, Marcela Maldonado, and J.T. Stokes who completed their terms and provided incredible service over the last few years. And we welcome our four newest members, Sophie Mangassarian, Aaron Troncoso, Peter Shultz, and Jacob Wildfire.

KRISTIN MURPHY

An inaugural member of NextGen since 2015, Kristin served on NextGen's leadership team as Liaison for the last three years. Kristin hails from the suburbs of Chicago where hiking and camping were not a regular part of her life growing up. It wasn't until she had interned at Canyonlands National Park in Utah that she truly understood and appreciated the importance of conservation of our public lands. "After that, I was truly hooked on public lands advocacy," Kristin says. After graduate school, she advocated for Congress to fully fund and permanently reauthorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which provides funding for land acquisition projects including many projects along and near the A.T. through her position as campaign coordinator for the LWCF Coalition.

In her NextGen liaison role, Kristin represented the Youth and Diversity Committee of the ATC Stewardship Council, as well as the Board of Directors' Strategic Directions Committee. She served as the conduit between NextGen and the overarching ATC network. During her years of service, her impact to the organization was phenomenal — including suggestions that literally changed ATC's mission statement, speaking with members of Congress and staff about the A.T. during Hike the Hill, planning events and volunteer workdays during National Public Lands Day, and providing meaningful content for ATC's publications and social media posts. Most importantly, Kristin helped advance the NextGen Advisory Council into a group that provides incredible advice, feedback, and support towards ATC's Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion strategic direction. "The fact that we have a continuous path of wild lands that stretches north to south across the U.S. and that it continues to be protected to this day lends proof to the legacies that we are all capable of leaving," she says.

MARCELA MALDONADO

As a founding member of the NextGen Council, Marcela also helped create the council's base, which set their intention, goals, and mission. As a leading member, Marcela supported the foundational creation of NextGen's charter and goals. She facilitated difficult conversations around environmental equity, and assisted in the management of the council's calls, meetings, and events. Marcela's strong leadership and empowering voice encourages those around her to think differently. "It's important to bring new people to the Trail and show them that it is theirs," she says. "The future of the Trail is in exactly that, bringing in new people and adapting to new ways of using and caring for it." She also assisted in the planning of a National Trails Day event in New York that brought new and urban partners to the A.T. And she lobbied with congressional delegates during Hike the Hill in Washington, D.C. As an artist, Marcela contributed her talent to create thank-you cards for ATC's advocacy efforts. She currently serves as a Land Steward for the Nature Conservancy in New York and she hosts a podcast about the outdoors and the environmental field alongside her fellow NextGen council member, Dakota Jackson, called "Woke in the Woods."

J.T. STOKES

J.T. (Jillian-Taylor) Stokes is an eco-spiritualist and perennial student of off-grid homesteading, self-sufficiency skills, and all things botany. She served on the NextGen Council starting in 2018 and provided incredible facilitation skills to keep the group focused and on topic. She continuously delivered critical feedback to ATC staff and fellow NextGen members and contributed greatly to the structure of operations. J.T. led the 2020 Partnerships Task Force of the council, creating a framework for authentic partnerships and created solutions for this through innovative job descriptions for internships and regional NextGen councils. In 2019, she also led the effort to streamline and improve new member orientation, eventually titled the "Onboarding Task Force." After participating in the ATC's co-hosted Everybody's Environment Emerging Leaders Summit (E3) in North Carolina, she became a leader in a newly formed regional council. E3 Council members are working together to develop an organizational structure and action plan with a vision to serve as an inclusive community hub where young people are empowered to find new outdoor opportunities, network, participate in events, and develop leadership skills. She is currently the E3 Council facilitator.

SOPHIE MANGASSARIAN

Originally from Maryland, Sophie is a current Environmental Policy student at the University of Colorado Boulder. Through her graduate capstone project, she has been working closely with the Colorado Office of the Trust for Public Land to advance public space, active transportation policies, and highlight their role in health and social equity. Previously she has worked closely in both the nonprofit and governmental fields in research, program support, and science advocacy. Her interest in working with policies at the intersection of public land, environmental quality, and social equity began when she was a biology major at Virginia Tech. Living in Blacksburg, Virginia, Sophie got to experience the benefits of living near the Appalachian Trail and is committed to ensuring that everyone can feel welcome to form their own connections with the Trail.

AARON TRONCOSO

Aaron is an aspiring environmental advocate originally from New York City. As a rising second-year law student, he is currently pursuing a dual J.D. and Master of Environmental Management at Yale Law School and the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Before graduate school, he worked to help communities around Massachusetts prepare for the impacts of climate change at the grassroots nonprofit Communities Responding to Extreme Weather (CREW). Aaron is also passionate about conservation and long-distance hiking. As part of a senior thesis project, he hiked 1,100 miles along the A.T. from West Virginia to Maine, studying how an increase in use has affected the Trail's ecology and social dynamics. He has also section-hiked portions of the Continental Divide Trail in Montana and Wyoming.

PETER SHULTZ

Peter is a program manager at Microsoft, where he works on high-performance computing. He completed a northbound thru-hike of the A.T. in 2018 after graduating from the University of Michigan with a BS in computer science and economics. While at Michigan, he helped organize and run MHacks, one of the largest collegiate hackathons in the world. "I am excited to work with other members of NextGen and the ATC to improve the A.T. experience for everyone," he says.

JACOB WILDFIRE

Jacob lives in Alexandria, Virginia and works as a public sector consultant supporting government and nonprofit clients to more effectively achieve their missions, including clients like the Bureau of Land Management, Farm Service Agency, and National Park Service. Before working as a consultant, Jacob served as a teacher in rural Appalachia (Prestonsburg, Kentucky) with the Teach for America program, teaching English Language Arts. He attended and received his undergraduate degree from Johns Hopkins University. During his time there, he was president of the Outdoors Club and led backpacking and canoeing trips all over the Mid-Atlantic. Jacob originally hails from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where he grew up exploring the Laurel Highlands of western Pennsylvania with the Boy Scouts of America, eventually earning his Eagle Scout award. He also volunteered with the Student Conservation Association during one high school summer, cementing his love for Trail work and conservation.

The view across the fields near Fred's ancestral family farm in Maryland

AS THE PANDEMIC TOOK HOLD OF THE WORLD, group hikes and travel to hiking destinations became less safe and so the call of the trails increasingly uncertain. But the urge to get outside transformed into a constant craving. Eventually, as we all donned masks and dug in for the long haul, I headed to my Great Grandad's farm — the best place available for me to isolate. My family's status where I live is rare in Black communities. The U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics tell us that less than one percent of the rural land in America is owned by people of color. My family is among that lowly statistic, having the rare achievement of inhabiting a Centennial farm — one that has been in continual existence in the same family for at least 100 years. We are now "Indigenous" here. But local legends tell us that we acquired our permanent home because of a hex placed by an innocent man who had been hung from a tree like strange fruit on this very land. That same tree still stands in my front yard today. The story goes that in the early 1900s, a Black man could still be hung and lynched from a tree, and White people would chip in appreciative donations for a particularly "good" hanging. The legend says that the last Black man hung from that tree put a hex on his executioners who then encountered a series of bad breaks — including the loss of the farm. Eventually, my Great Grandfather acquired title to that once-failing and defunct farm in Prince George's County, Maryland — not far from the Appalachian Trail — a favorite and frequent hiking spot of mine.

And so, it was to that ancestral family farm that I retreated as my county became a COVID-19 hot spot. And, as the pandemic raged around us, I rediscovered my roots where from an early age, my playground had once been the wind, sun, sky, forests, and of course the nearby Patuxent River. It was a "homecoming" for me that helped calm some of my worries about the world. At night, as I drifted off to sleep with the sweet smell of rain in the air, the wildlife dramas in the woods played out. The eerie call of a barred owl down by the river, the growl of a bobcat, the bark of a fox, and the occasionally anguished cry of a varmint meeting an abrupt end from a nocturnal predator. As always, the nearby Patuxent remains an ever-winding water body with murky green depths that used to flood its banks and run up into the marshes where flapping fish were trapped in the shallows after those floods. My boyhood playmates and I could easily wade into the water and crouching over the struggling fish, flip them with our bare hands into buckets. In the 1960s, on hot afternoons when school was out, I used to ride with the farm workers on the backs of creaking, hard oak wood farm carts sagging under the weight of the day's harvest towed by spluttering vintage tractors. With the sun baking my face, I would lay on top of piles of freshly cut, green tobacco looking up at the blue sky as the cart bumped along the rutted paths. I could watch the flashing hot orb of the sun winking through the tops of the backlit treetops as we trundled along. Sometimes, we would stop in the cool shade next to black pools fed by bubbling underground springs and we could drink sweet, icy-cold water that came from deep in the earth. Often in summers we slept outside under warm skies thick with lightning bugs and watched falling stars tear through the atmosphere and wink out.

Sitting in the gloom of the last evening light waiting for the sun's rays to die out, most often the oldsters who raised me talked about the weather — and of daytime soap operas. They spoke in awe of massive storms from decades gone by that had changed the course of the river and the contours of the land, of the incredible gale that swept away the aluminum silo from the farm and marooned it two counties to the south, and of the time winds blew so hard they thought they would lose the tobacco barn. In the dusk of hot summer evening, we would sit in makeshift shelters made from old, patched mosquito netting while my grandmother's aged, gnarled hands would shell into a huge glass bowl, crisp fresh peas from her garden while she watched *The Ed Sullivan Show* on a battered black and white TV set plugged into the house via a precarious collection of mismatched extension cords strung together.

These are among the vivid memories and values that I reclaimed — and that have helped me retain equilibrium through a deeply troubling and challenging 2020. A rediscovery of my powerful bonds to a special "place." I have found fresh hope and determination as I have wondered and tried to envision what the new "normal" will be like ahead in 2021. Along the way, I have come to treasure and savor the simple gifts and joys of "home" and retuned myself to the natural rhythms of the earth on the land of ancestors.

-Fred Tutman

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A.T. in Grayson Highlands State Park, Virginia — which intersects with the Native American territory lands of the Tutelo and Moneton nations
–By Aaron Ibey