

Statement by David N. Startzell, Executive Director, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, before the
House Resources Subcommittee on National Parks Concerning the National Trails System Act.

July 26, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is David Startzell. I am representing the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (formerly the Appalachian Trail Conference) where I have served as a member of the staff since January 1978 and as its executive director since 1986. I also presently serve on the board of directors of the American Hiking Society, and chair its conservation committee, and as a member of the Leadership Council for the Partnership for the National Trails System.

Mr. Werner, representing the Partnership for the National Trails System, will describe some of the benefits and challenges associated with long-distance trails at a system-wide level, including both national scenic and national historic trails. I will focus on some specific aspects of the Appalachian Trail (A.T.), which was one of the first long-distance trails to receive national scenic trail designation in 1968 under the initial National Trails System Act (P.L. 90-543) and also was the focus of trail-specific amendments to the Act in 1978 (P.L. 95-248).

Purpose : As you know, the overall purposes of the Act are outlined in its statement of policy as "to provide for the ever-increasing outdoor recreation needs of an expanding population and ... to promote the preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open-air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the Nation." The purposes of the Act were not limited solely to promoting the recreational aspects of long-distance trails however. With respect to national scenic trails in particular, the Act defines such trails as "so located as to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential *and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass.*" This language, as well as several provisions within Section 7 of the Act and the legislative history associated with both the original Act and especially the 1978 amendments to the Act, suggests that the intent of the legislation was to authorize federal conservation of more than simply a narrow footpath or right-of-way. As I will attempt to illustrate in the statements that follow, I believe experience gained in the Appalachian Trail project demonstrates both the ability to achieve the broad and forward-looking objectives of the National Trails System Act as well as the power and effectiveness of the sorts of public/private partnerships the Act encourages and supports.

Background : The Appalachian Trail is a continuous, marked footpath that traverses the Appalachian mountain chain from central Maine to northern Georgia for a distance of 2,175 miles. The trail was initially established between 1923 and 1937, primarily through the efforts of private organizations and individual volunteers, and has been maintained as a continuous footpath since that time. The footpath and its associated protective corridor form a greenway extending along much of the eastern seaboard, connecting more than 75 public land areas in 14 states, including six other units of the national park system and eight units of the national forest system, as well as many state park, forest, and game-management units. Virtually every mile of the trail is within easy access of a major population center, and some portion of the trail is within a day's drive for approximately two-thirds of the population of the United States.

Resource Characteristics : As the longest unit of the National Park System, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail provides opportunities for millions of visitors each year to traverse and experience much of the richness and diversity of eastern America: its highest mountains, its great rivers, its pastoral valleys, its cultural legacies. The trail also affords opportunities for continuous long-distance hiking that are perhaps unparalleled anywhere else in the world. An estimated three to four million annual visitors enjoy some portion of the trail, ranging from leisurely strolls to weekend outings to extended backpacking excursions. Notably, in contrast to a number of southern and western states, many of the areas crossed by the trail, particularly in the mid-Atlantic and certain New England states, have a very small percentage of land in federal ownership. As a result, in a number of the affected states, the trail greenway represents one of the most significant federal outdoor-recreation resources available to the public.

In addition to its recreational qualities, the Appalachian Trail and its associated corridor of public land represent an important reservoir of biological diversity. For example, due to its great latitudinal extent, the trail passes through four of the seven primary forest habitats of North America. Moreover, systematic natural-diversity inventories conducted in each of the 14 states along the trail have identified more than 2,000 occurrences of rare, threatened, or endangered plants and animals at more than 500 sites. Those findings rank the Appalachian National Scenic Trail as *the* most biologically diverse unit within the National Park System and have led a number of natural scientists to conclude that the trail and its greenway will play an increasingly important role in providing conserved habitat for many species of flora as well as a migratory corridor for a variety of fauna in the eastern United States. Similarly, recent inventories in selected states suggest that the Appalachian Trail corridor may harbor an equally rich array of cultural resources.

Partnerships and Volunteer-Based Stewardship : For more than 80 years, the Appalachian Trail project also has been nationally recognized as one of America's most successful examples of private-citizen action in support of natural-resource conservation and outdoor recreation. Since the initial construction of the trail in the 1920s and 1930s, volunteers affiliated with the Appalachian Trail Conference (now Conservancy) have constructed, reconstructed, and maintained the footpath as well as its system of more than 250 shelters and associated facilities such as tent platforms, privies, bridges, signs, and trailheads. In 2004, for example, more than 4,700 volunteers contributed more than 180,000 hours of labor on the trail as well as many thousands of additional hours off the trail—an annual contribution valued in excess of \$2 million.

Moreover, since 1984, as a result of a unique agreement between the National Park Service and ATC, the Conservancy has accepted management responsibility for most of the lands acquired by the National Park Service along the trail. ATC, through its network of 30 club affiliates and many thousands of volunteers, is now responsible for virtually all phases of “park” operations, including access control, structures management, public health and safety issues, and natural and cultural resources management. In addition to the contributions of labor by volunteers, each year the Conservancy and its club affiliates devote more than \$2 to \$3 million in operating revenues to support volunteer-based stewardship of the trail and trail lands and to provide educational and other forms of assistance to trail visitors. In addition, ATC, through its land trust program, has conserved more than 28,000 acres of lands along the trail.

In other words, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail project represents a true public-private partnership. While the cost of land acquisition along the trail has been supported primarily by annual appropriations from the Land and Water Conservation Fund—a fund wisely established and dedicated by the Congress for the purpose of conserving the nation's irreplaceable natural resources—the majority of costs associated with managing the significant federal estate embodied in the trail greenway are supported by the private sector, represented by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, its 35,000 members from across the nation, its 30 club affiliates and their approximately 100,000 members, and thousands of affiliated individual volunteers.

Land Acquisition : As noted previously, with the adoption of the initial act in 1968, the Appalachian Trail gained federal recognition as one of the nation's first national scenic trails. The act also provided the initial authorization for state and federal land acquisition to acquire a permanent right-of-way along portions of the trail route that were not already situated on publicly owned lands. Amendments to the act in 1978 substantially expanded that land-acquisition authority. At that time, more than 600 miles of the trail were situated on lands in private ownership, often in areas with inferior natural or recreational qualities. Another 200 miles of the trail were situated along roadways, offering little or no primitive recreational experience and representing, in many cases, serious safety risks to trail users.

Today, as a result of the land-acquisition programs of the National Park Service and USDA Forest Service, 99 percent of the trail right-of-way is in public ownership. Indeed, at this point, only approximately 12 miles of right-of-way remain to be acquired. In the case of the National Park Service, through the acquisition of more than 2,500 parcels encompassing more than 109,000 acres of land in 11 states, the agency not only has established a permanent and much improved right-of-way along 695 miles of the trail, it also has conserved many of the finest natural and cultural resources in the eastern United States and effectively created the world's longest publicly owned greenway. While the agency has obligated a very significant amount of annually appropriated funds—more than \$134 million—its experience throughout this 27-year program has been remarkably cost-effective, with an average cost of \$1,229 per acre and an average cost per mile of \$219,513. This experience is all the more remarkable given the proximity of many portions of the right-of-way to populated areas including western Massachusetts and Connecticut, the Hudson Highlands of New York and New Jersey, central and eastern Pennsylvania, and central Maryland and northern Virginia. Moreover, the agency has made extensive use of a full range of land-acquisition devices in addition to fee-simple purchase, including both scenic and right-of-way easements, reserved interests, term estates, and life estates.

In conclusion, I believe the trail program is an outstanding example of the success that can be achieved through an effective partnership in meeting the needs of millions of Americans, both now and in the future, for primitive outdoor recreation and for opportunities to experience at least a sliver of the nationally significant natural, scenic, and cultural resources of the eastern United States. As an outgrowth of a recently adopted strategic plan, in the future, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, working in close cooperation with its federal and state agency partners as well as its many private-sector partners, hopes to expand upon the success of the Appalachian Trail project through a series of new initiatives including outreach to the many communities along the trail, through place-based education programs, targeted especially at our nation's youth and various underserved populations, through expanded natural and cultural resource-management programs, and through programs aimed at monitoring a variety of environmental-health indicators.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today in support of the national trails system and in support of the great promise and successes of the National Trails System Act as amended.

Respectfully submitted,

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Appalachian Trail Conservancy