

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Although Cape Cod boasts not a single mile of the Appalachian Trail, this renowned wilderness path enjoys special recognition and reputation among many Cape Codders just as it does with millions of Americans all over the country, many of whom have never set foot on it.

At one time or another most Easterners have walked parts of the Trail, perhaps only a few yards of it, perhaps several miles. Most of us, while jaunting about New England to enjoy autumn foliage, or en route to warmer climes during winter months, or on ski trips upcountry, have wandered a few miles of the Trail or at least seen the signs or noted the dotted line that marks the Appalachian Trail on our road maps.

Stretching from Maine to Georgia, the 2,000-mile foot-path shares many of the characteristics of a river. Since its founding in 1933, it's been fluid, has frequently altered its course; its rights-of-way across public and private land have been ever-changing, with negotiations and re-negotiations maintaining its continuity.

While its southern terminus is in the heart of Georgia's Amicalola Falls State Park, about 25 miles south of the North Carolina line, the Trail snakes northeast through the Great Smoky Mountains, follows for a way the border of North Carolina and Tennessee, then wanders through the Iron Mountains into Virginia where it crosses from Jefferson National Forest to George Washington National Forest, and leads up through the Shenandoah National Park to Harper's Ferry.

Its path then drives almost due north through Catoctin Mountain National Park into Pennsylvania, where it passes west of Harrisburg, and on to the Delaware Water Gap. Now twisting east into New York State and Bear Mountain State Park, the Trail crosses the Hudson River and finds itself in northwestern Connecticut. Rising north once more, it takes a winding course through the Berkshires of Massachusetts, passes into the Green Mountains of Vermont, turns east through the Delectable Mountains, and crosses the Connecticut River at Hanover, New Hampshire.

On it goes, through the White Mountains; it eventually slips across the Maine line to the Mahoosic Range and finally terminates at Mt. Katahdin, Maine's highest mountain, in Baxter State Park.

For a decade or more, the great wilderness trail has been threatened by encroaching development, by road building, and by the increasing numbers of hikers. Already the Trail has been forced onto paved roads for 175 miles of its length.

In 1968 Congress passed the National Trails System Act which authorized \$5 million for land acquisition to protect the Trail for the four million hikers who use the Trail each year. The 1968 bill gave the National Park Service powers of eminent domain to take a corridor of up to 1,000 feet in width, or as much as 125 acres per mile of Trail, to assure its protection.

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On October 25, 1977, the U.S. House of Representatives voted, 409 to 12, to authorize \$90 million to be spent over the next three years for the same purpose.

If the Senate passes the bill as voted by the House and it becomes law, negotiations for land takings between Park Service representatives and individual landowners could start this year.

The direction in which the proposed legislation is moving is raising controversy among land-owners, park service personnel, and hikers as well. Of particular concern is a rapidly developing part of Vermont through which the Trail flows.

Park Service people, charged with maintaining the Trail as an unbroken wilderness hiking experience, see compelling reasons for acquiring land in some areas where subdivisions and development appear imminent.

Where the Trail leads east of Sherburne Pass between Route 12 and the Connecticut River, there's been a recent history of rising land prices and increased numbers of land transactions. Development could sever the Trail. A wilderness trail through a housing tract would be ludicrous.

Historically, landowners have voluntarily accepted the Trail's passage across their lands. They have put up with the problems: vandalism, fires, litter. They have tolerated the isolated instances of trespass beyond the Trail.

And they have mended fences, moved shelters to better locations at their own expense, and picked up trash. Surprisingly, there is still a reservoir of good will on the part of the landowners toward hikers. Most of the hikers respect the property they use and the environment they've come into the wild to experience.

Yet the federal determination to protect the Trail through outright acquisition or perpetual easement is the bottom line; it's non-negotiable.

Park Service personnel question the federal move to acquire a government-owned corridor, feeling Congress would like to "get it settled" and go on to something else rather than continue the practice of voluntary, informal agreements with as many landowners as possible.

In the past, agreements have been signed with a number of landowners along Vermont's Long Trail, and there appear to be positive values in continuing the stewardship of landowners.

If a landowner wants to sell to the government, the appropriated funds could be used to acquire that portion of the corridor; on the other hand, taking by eminent domain is neither tidy nor quick, nor does it permit the Trail to be relocated in the future.

And the landowners: how do they feel?

One, a 27-year-old consulting forester, who owns 55 acres of land along the Trail, said, "I wouldn't mind signing an agreement to keep my land in agriculture under good management, but a corridor of 200 feet would cripple me, and one of 1,000 feet would wipe me out."

He feels the federal plan is bad for hikers, bad for landowners. In many instances, he asserts, the trail would cut right through a person's land, dividing it in pieces. The owner would eventually have to sell out to the highest bidder.

That, he believes, would lead to more rapid development and, "you could end up with a green strip between two residential tracts. The sensible alternative would be to help the farmer, the forester, stay in business, and negotiate agreements for the Trail so its path can be changed to meet unforeseen changes in land use."

Looking up the mountain at his woodlot where he's been thinning trees and planning for the future, he said, "This is a beautiful place and I'm perfectly willing to share it."

Not all of the four million hikers who use parts of the Trail each year are up-in-arms. Not all worry about one short section in Vermont. Hundreds of thousands never have and never will approach that part of the Trail. Hundreds of thousands more, however, feel a proprietary interest in the Appalachian Trail from one end to the other.

Many aspire to hiking its entire length. They believe its natural characteristics of wilderness may be destroyed should the Trail come under government control. In large measure, its charm lies in the variety it offers as the path passes from one owner to another.

Here, they find, it crosses a meadow, edges a swamp, leads along a river bank, narrows to a wooden foot-bridge. Over the next hill the Trail broadens beneath towering trees and through miles of forest.

If the Park Service takes over, they fear, it will become stereotyped. Furthermore, the responsibility for treating the land gently because it belongs to another individual, and you're permitted to use it only because you respect his ownership, will no longer be a part of the experience.

More vandalism, more fires, more litter -- and worse, more hikers -- may result. Hiking the Appalachian Trail has wide appeal because it provides an opportunity to escape increasing population pressures. It's been a path to walk alone in the wilderness.

Before Congress makes the Appalachian Trail a part of the National Park System, it might be well to consider the negative effects that may result. It's not so much the \$90 million; if we can protect the Trail in the future as we have in the past, we may preserve an intrinsic quality only possible if the land remains in private hands.

Your senator in Washington might welcome your opinion on the question.