



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

**SHORT-TERM VOLUNTEERS
WORK TO PRESERVE NATURE & LANDSCAPE
Along the Appalachian National Scenic Trail**



National Park Service
Northeast Region
Appalachian National Scenic Trail
and the
Mid-Atlantic Exotic Plant Management Team

Meeting the Challenge

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail inaugurated its *Short-term Volunteer Program* with *Earth Day 2008*. Need for the program became apparent when funded management efforts could not keep up with the existing and expanding invasive situation. The program is a collaborative venture in setting priorities, garnering support, and conducting field work.

Cooperating with the Trail organization, the Mid-Atlantic Exotic Plant Management Team formed the volunteer program with two goals of increasing public understanding about invasive threats and accomplishing work in the field.



Figure 1. Mile-a-minute vine invades the Appalachian Trail near Front Royal, Virginia. Here, kids from Friends of the National Zoo Nature Camp help pull down the invader, July 2008.

Invasive Examples

Several invasives are emblematic of the growing threat to the Trail's natural and cultural resources. Mile-a-minute vine is a relative newcomer from Asia. Disturbingly, it spreads like a wildfire in two ways. Its own vegetative expansion is very rapid, hence its name. It also produces thousands of berries, mid-June through

September, which birds eat and pass through their digestive tracks to deposit out ahead of the main infestation. Thus, the plant spreads like an advancing blaze with spot fires ahead.

The Blue Ridge Mountains are also impacted by nonnative plants that were originally planted to enhance game bird habitat. Recognized too late as invasive, they now dominate large areas. Such species include autumn olive, multiflora rose, and wineberry, among others.



Figure 2. Multiflora rose produces fruit hips which birds eat and pass to other areas. It is also profusely thorned, making it difficult to manage.

Volunteer Army

Volunteers become a citizen army to “do good” for public lands. That is in keeping with the proud history of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s which had many camps in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

During the period April 2008 – November 2010, more than 1,350 volunteers who contributed 3,960 hours toward invasive plant control. The program increases public awareness of the issues surrounding invasive species. Each field event includes a safety briefing and introduction to invasive species challenges, outlining ways that people can help reduce invasive problems at home.

The volunteer program is made up of three aspects: special events open to the general public, group events by appointment, and a speaker's bureau to provide talks in the public square. The Trail's invasive plant management volunteer program began with Earth Day 2008. All along, the effort has been a collaborative venture to identify priorities, get organized, garner support, and conduct field management.

Special Events

Earth Day is a national observance held April 14 of each year. The Trail participates in the observance by recruiting a school group to work on the 14th itself and by setting up group events on either Saturday. The Earth Day events serve as a seasonal kick-off for the program. Field work begins again. Spin-off benefits include increased Trail visitation during a seasonal period of low attendance, and creating an opportunity for volunteers to appreciate spring wildflowers and native species, while encouraging them to participate in protecting public resources.

In springtime, volunteers uproot invasive garlic mustard which threatens nearby state-rare assemblages of nodding trillium in the Trumbo and Reservoir Hollow areas.



Figure 3. One of several groups that attended *Earth Day* events along the Appalachian Trail, April 2010.

National Public Lands Day is held nationally on the last Saturday of September. It is an excellent opportunity to capitalize on the national advertising that the NPLD organization conducts. The Trail's project work site is listed in the NPLD website and draws people from the Northern Virginia and surrounding areas.

In the fall, volunteers uproot Oriental lady's thumb and Japanese stiltgrass, and cut invasive shrubs and trees.

Special events draw about 7% of all volunteers, contributing over 530 hours of labor. Though a small part of the Trail's total, special events are important in two ways, offering a venue to plug into for individuals that are not part of a group, and creating media advertising which benefits the overall program.



Figure 4. National Public Lands Day volunteers proudly stand behind a mountain of stiltgrass, wineberry, and Oriental lady's thumb which they pulled along the Appalachian Trail, September 2010.

Events by Appointment

Group appointments draw by far the largest source of volunteer field help, 93% of all volunteer turn out. Direct recruiting of groups by telephone is effective in generating first appointments. A localized database of potential volunteer organizations and individuals, created by the Mid-Atlantic Exotic Plant Management Team, contains 432 records. It includes schools, colleges, clubs, civic organizations, nonprofit granting agencies, and for-profit companies.

Repeat group events are common. Once a group experiences its first field event, they usually make room for more in their future. The percent of repeating groups is an impressive 64%. This indicates strong identification with the NPS mission and keen interest in these events as service learning opportunities for their members.

Groups include middle and high schools, colleges, summer camps, special interest organizations, and clubs. Schools and college groups are most available in spring and fall, while summertime is more limited to scouting groups, youth camps, and clubs.

Group events generated over 1,250 volunteers who contributed over 3,400 hours of their time controlling invasive plants.

Groups helped control garlic mustard, Japanese stiltgrass, Oriental lady's thumb, mile-a-minute, Oriental bitter-sweet, wineberry, autumn olive, and Japanese barberry, among others. The work they do helps protect native species and preserve natural and historical landscapes.



Figure 5. Classical Cottage Home School gathers before heading out to pull invasive garlic mustard along the Appalachian Trail, April 2010.



Figure 6. Middle school age children, part of the Friends of the National Zoo Nature Camp, ascend the Appalachian Trail to cut autumn olive and multiflora rose, July-August 2010.



Figure 7. Members of the Defenders of Wildlife get ready to head out to control garlic mustard and invasive shrubs, May 2009. Earlier groups cleared this meadow of invasive autumn olive trees along the Appalachian Trail near Linden, Virginia.

Public Speaking

Long-term volunteers and the Mid-Atlantic Exotic Plant Management Team director provide talks to schools and other public forums. Most often, presentations are on the topics of invasive species biology, general ecology, careers, and benefits of volunteerism. There have also been radio and TV interviews regarding invasive species challenges and upcoming volunteer events.

To date, long-term volunteers are most comfortable giving brief talks at volunteer events and working at community fairs where they engage the public in conversations about their own roles in volunteerism and hand out literature.

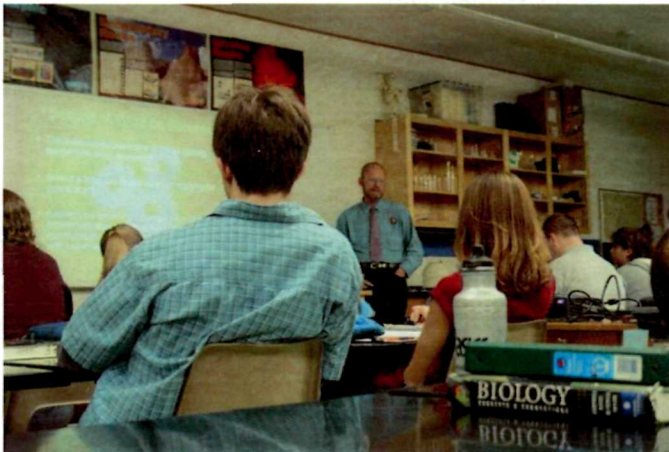


Figure 8. James Åkerson, Director – Mid-Atlantic Exotic Plant Management Team, speaks to an ecology class at Eastern Mennonite High School in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

In the three years of the Appalachian Trail short-term volunteer program, public speaking efforts reached several thousand people. Speaking engagements included media interviews, school presentations, professional conferences, and public forums with clubs, community fairs, and

colleges. These efforts help inform the public about invasive species problems and indicate how people can help reduce future invasive problems at home by use of native nursery stock in their own gardens. Our hope is that people not only become energized to join volunteer field events but also advocate for programmatic initiatives for early detection and landscape restoration.

Long-term Volunteers

A spin-off of the short-term volunteer program is the development of long-term volunteers to help run the program. To date, five people volunteer many hundreds of hours to lead field events and speak to groups on the importance of invasive plant management along the Appalachian Trail.



Figure 9. Volunteer leaders Ted Pryor, Robin Williams, and Wendy Ebersberger stand at the gathering canopy for the September 2010 National Public Lands Day event. They contribute by shepherding volunteers to keep them safe and guide field work. They led field events on several occasions without NPS assistance.

The short-term volunteer program reaches out to persons of all ages. Special interest groups and clubs are typically made up of middle-to-older adults while summer camps, schools, and colleges bring much younger volunteers. To date, schools and summer camps have contributed the most time to the program.

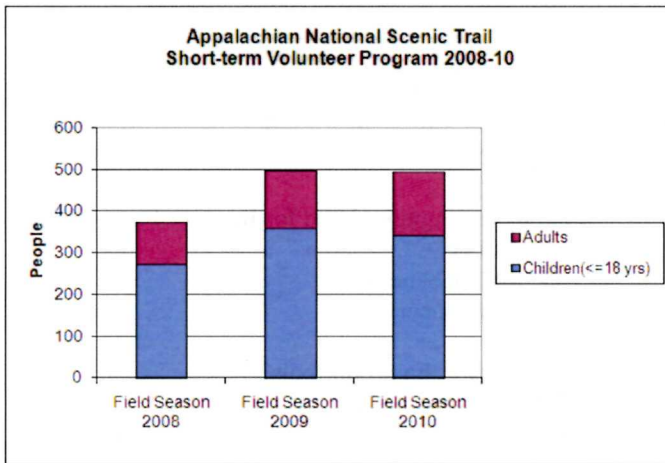


Figure 10. Persons 18 years of age or younger make up 71% of the volunteer base to date. The largest source of young volunteers comes from schools and summer camps.

Phone calls and personalized email messages are the most effective communication methods for generating scheduled events. The program also works with news media to distribute op-ed articles about weekend events and program initiatives.

Creating field events that are two-to-four hours, punctuated with a hike along the Trail to a pleasant viewpoint makes for experiences that people remember fondly. Such events typically create good will for return volunteerism.

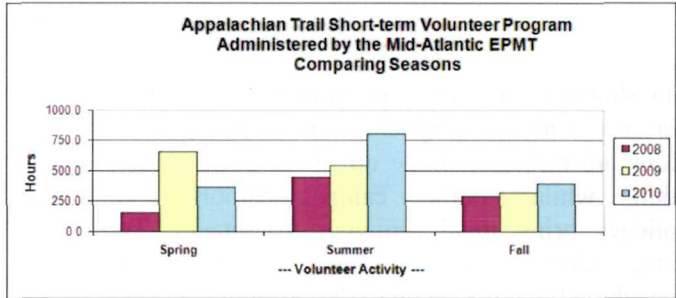


Figure 11. The short-term volunteer program operates during spring, summer, and fall. Winter has not been attempted to date to avoid weather related scheduling uncertainties.

Equipment & Supplies

The Appalachian Trail short-term volunteer program is run with a simplicity of equipment. The following items are routinely available.

Equipment / Supplies Used for Invasive Plant Control

- First-aid kit
- 18" folding handsaws
- 26" hand loppers
- Gloves
- Plastic carry boxes for tools
- 5-gallon water cooler
- Poison ivy skin cleaner and paper toweling
- Snacks for groups that stay longer than 2 hours
- Literature / hand outs
- Digital camera
- Canopy tent for special events

Figure 12. Young volunteers have fun lopping invasive autumn olive, September 2008.





Figure 13. The Appalachian Trail is enjoyed by people from around the world. The Trail stretches from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mount Katahdin, Maine.

Sponsors

The short-term volunteer program benefits from nonprofit and corporate cooperation and sponsorship. We appreciate their support as we strive to fulfill the mandate of the National Park Service to preserve and protect the Appalachian Trail. Sponsors include:

- National Audubon Society of Virginia and Toyota Together-Green Foundation (providing seed money and staff to conduct early special events)
- National Park Conservation Association (providing staff, publications, drinks, and a canopy tent for a special event)
- Tauck Foundation (supplying seed money to establish the Shenandoah NP volunteer program which acted as a model for the Appalachian Trail)
- Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (providing site coordination and speakers for special events)
- Shenandoah National Park Association (providing bookkeeping for donated funds by others)
- National Public Lands Day, Inc. (providing national advertising and literature for NPLD events)
- Leave No Trace (providing literature and snacks)
- McKee Foods, Inc. (providing snacks)
- Invasive Plant Control, Inc. (providing snacks).



Figure 14. Shown are representatives of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, National Audubon Society of Virginia, National Park Service, and National Park Conservation Association, September 2008.



Figure 15. Volunteer leader Ted Pryor and NPS staff James Åkerson meet with public at the Rappahannock County Habitat Fair, February 2009.

Figure 16. Volunteer Bryan Bovard, Defenders of Wildlife, holds invasive Oriental lady's thumb, October 2009. The plant is pulled in late summer and fall.



Figure 17. After a morning of invasive plant control, home school students relax under an apple tree, part of the historical landscape being protected, April 2010.

The 1916 National Park Service Organic Act (in part):

...The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks...by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purposes of the said parks...which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail preserves and protects its natural and cultural resources through its Short-term Volunteer Program and other collaborative ventures.



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