

The Virginia Triple Crown Segment Draft Visitor Use Management Plan

Appalachian National Scenic Trail

US Department of the Interior

National Park Service



Project Purpose

What is a Visitor Use Management Plan?

The visitor use management plan is developing a collaborative vision for providing visitor access and managing use on the trail.

The planning process examines current and potential visitor opportunities and develops long-term strategies, connecting visitors to key visitor experiences, and managing use.

The plan incorporates best practices for managing visitor use to protect resources and promote high quality visitor experiences, while meeting legal requirements.

Project Goals

This plan aims to achieve the following goals.

- Apply the Interagency Visitor Use Management Framework in collaboration with local Appalachian Trail management partners.
- Redesign, more actively manage, or add new campsites to improve visitor experience and protect natural resources.
- Identify best options to actively manage parking lots and provide guidance for any improvements or future updates to those lots.
- Identify strategies to accommodate a range of hiking experiences in this area.



Sunrise at Dragon's Tooth © Diana Christopulos



McAfee Knob Vista © Jeannette Matkowski

Purpose of the Plan

The purpose of the visitor use management plan is to develop strategies to protect resources and to determine opportunities for visitors to safely use, experience, and enjoy the trail.

The plan will examine management options to support health and human safety and to enhance the protection of natural, cultural, and scenic resources and values, while providing visitors with opportunities to be inspired through personal connections with those resources.

Need for the Plan

The plan is needed to:

- Alleviate impacts to the Appalachian National Scenic Trail experience.
- Alleviate negative impacts to resources.
- Provide guidance for how to update parking areas to address safety concerns, particularly for McAfee Knob parking lot on Virginia Route 311.



Appalachian Trail Foundations

Appalachian National Scenic Trail Purpose

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail is a way, continuous from Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia, for travel on foot through the wild, scenic, wooded, pastoral, and culturally significant landscapes of the Appalachian Mountains. It is a means of sojourning among these lands, such that the visitors may experience them by their own unaided efforts. The Trail is preserved for the conservation, public use, enjoyment, and appreciation of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural and cultural quality of the areas through which the trail passes. Purposeful in direction and concept, favoring the heights of land, and located for minimum reliance on construction for protecting the resource, the body of the Trail is provided by the lands it traverses, and its soul is the living stewardship of the volunteers and workers of the Appalachian Trail community.

Appalachian National Scenic Trail Significance

- Conceived, designed, and constructed by volunteers, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail is unprecedented in scale and collaboration. It is one of the longest continuously marked, maintained, and publicly protected trails in the United States and was also one of the nation's first national scenic trails.
- The Trail is one of the greatest testaments to volunteerism in the nation. Volunteers are the soul of the Trail and, since 1921, have contributed millions of hours to the creation, conservation, promotion, and management of America's premier long-distance footpath.
- The Trail is an internationally recognized example of a public-private partnership. Hundreds of agencies and organizations, diverse in size and membership, collaborate in the Trail's management. Their initiative and dedication are fundamental to the preservation, traditions, and integrity of the Trail.
- Traversing 14 states through wildlands and communities, the more than 2,100-mile world-renowned hiking trail and its extensive protected landscape protects the most readily accessible, long-distance footpath in the United States. The Appalachian National Scenic Trail offers healthy outdoor opportunities for self-reliant foot travel through wild, scenic, natural, and culturally and historically significant lands. It provides a range of experiences for people of all ages and abilities to seek enjoyment, inspiration, learning, challenge, adventure, volunteer stewardship, and self-fulfillment, either in solitude or with others.
- The Trail's varied topography, ecosystem diversity, and numerous view points offer a visual showcase including wild, natural, wooded, pastoral, and historic environments. The Trail offers opportunities for scenic enjoyment, ranging from the subtle beauty of a trillium to tranquil ponds and streams to the grand view of mighty Katahdin.
- The north-south corridor of the Trail, traversing the highest and lowest elevations and myriad microclimates of the ancient Appalachian Mountains, helps protect one of the richest assemblages of temperate zone species in the world and anchors the headwaters of critical watersheds that sustain more than 10% of the population of the United States.
- The Trail corridor is one of the nation's most significant cultural landscapes, revealing the history of human use and settlement along the Appalachian Mountain range and the resulting distinct regional traditions. Visitors to the Trail have the unique opportunity to interact with the communities and resources representing these diverse eras in US history and prehistory.



Key Issues



Cars at McAfee Knob © Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club



Crowd at McAfee Knob © Ethan D. Smith



Large Camping Group at Lost Spectacles Gap © Suzanne Neal



Active, Unattended Fire at Lost Spectacles Gap © Suzanne Neal



Trash in the McAfee Knob Area © Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club



Fire Ring at McAfee Knob © Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club



Fire at Tinker Mountain © Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club



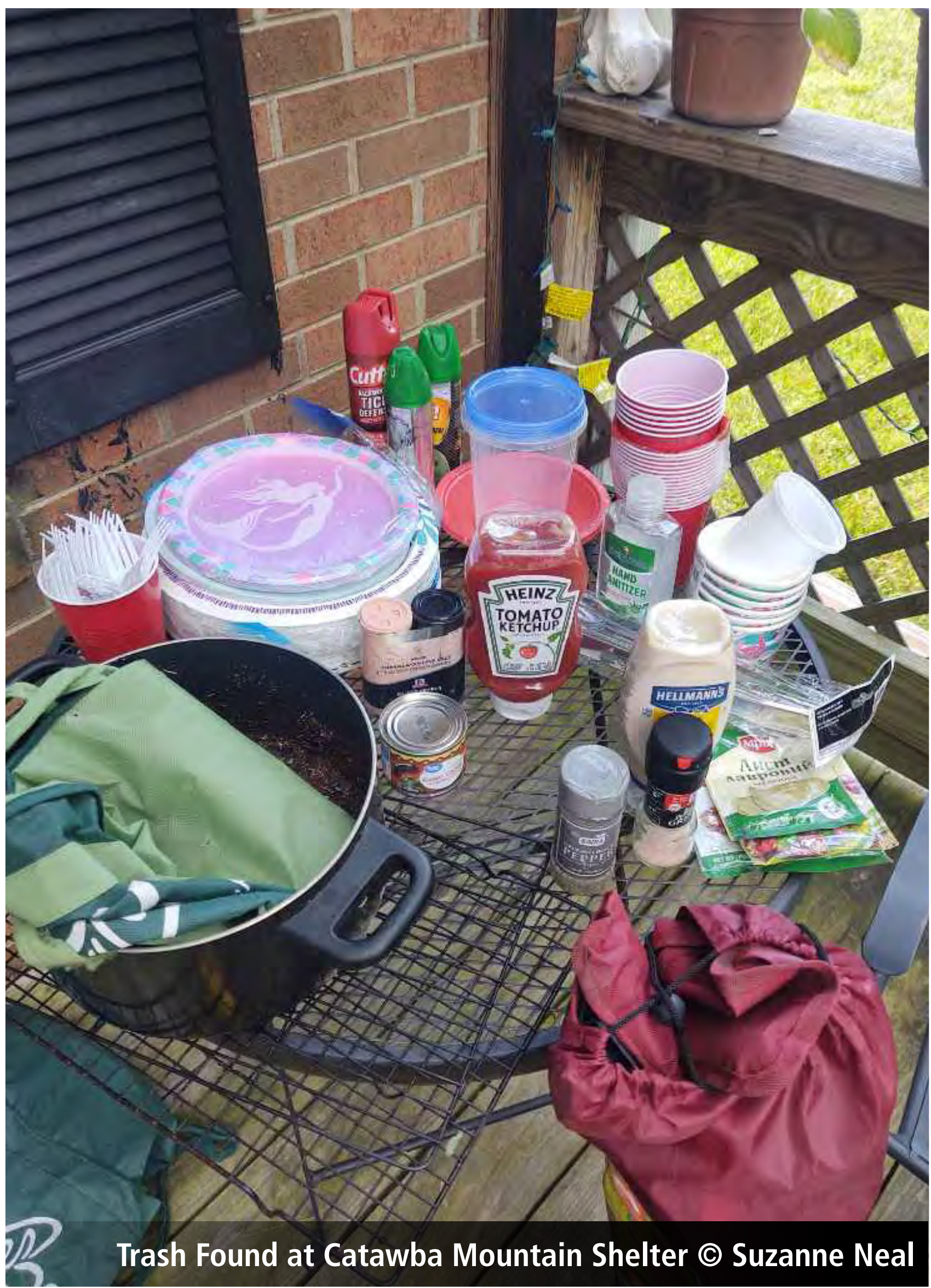
Crowded Conditions at the VA-311 Lot © Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club

This Visitor Use Management Plan will address the following issues.

Increasing Visitor Use Levels. With more than 50,000 people annually visiting McAfee Knob and around 30,000 people annually visiting Dragon’s Tooth each year, this section of the Appalachian Trail experiences crowding levels that sometimes degrade the visitor experience and social conditions along the trail. There may also be user conflicts with uses beyond hiking such as drone use, climbing, and trail running.

Resource Degradation. Intensive visitor use is causing unacceptable impacts to critical resources—including soils, vegetation, water, wildlife, cultural resources, facilities, and the visitor experience. Trail widening and shortcuts as well as visitor-created campsites along portions of the trail are proliferating, causing loss of vegetation and erosion. Visitor-created fires and visitor-wildlife conflicts occur more regularly.

Facility and Safety Concerns. Basic trailhead amenities such as wayfinding and vault toilets are lacking. There are also several dangerous highway crossings along this section of the Appalachian Trail.



Trash Found at Catawba Mountain Shelter © Suzanne Neal



Graffiti at Devil’s Kitchen © Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club



Tinker Cliffs Management Strategies



McAfee Knob and Tinker Cliffs Trail Sign © Ethan Smith

Camping

- Redirect unauthorized ridge campers to other locations, such as Lamberts Meadow.
- Identify a location to establish a group campsite between McAfee Knob and Tinker Cliffs.
- Design wayfinding signage for campsites and designated viewsheds using Appalachian National Scenic Trail design specifications.

Trail

- Continue to evaluate tread improvements to reduce impacts from water runoff and facilitate hiking activity. Evaluate options to widen the corridor to improve trail alignment via voluntary easements or acquisitions.
- Design and update bridges for safe visitor crossing and use. Address maintenance and improvement needs at the large Catawba Creek Bridge.



View of Tinker Cliffs from McAfee Knob © Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club

Andy Layne Trailhead

- Improve signage and wayfinding.
- Work with local partners to improve and formalize the parking area to address safety concerns and relieve pressure on other parking areas within the Virginia Triple Crown segment. Improvements could include paving, marking spaces, and providing accessible parking areas.
- Ensure that the lot and associated facilities meet universally accessible standards.



Segment Wide Management Strategies

Trails

- Trail tread and associated structures will be continually evaluated, improved, and maintained, especially in high volume areas.
- Signage will encourage visitors to protect the resource by staying on the trail.
- Land protection to protect viewsheds will be encouraged.



Campsites / Shelters

- An inventory of all current campsites for the Triple Crown segment will be created.
- Campsites will be evaluated based on site selection criteria to identify problem areas and the future of sites.
- Spacing of camping options will be improved and group sites will be designated.
- Sustainable camping best management practices will be implemented. This includes establishing dimensions for formal group and individual campsites, establishing reference point data for formal campsites, and ensuring all campsites align with NPS and USFS policies on food storage.
- Options for water-free/dry campsites would be explored.



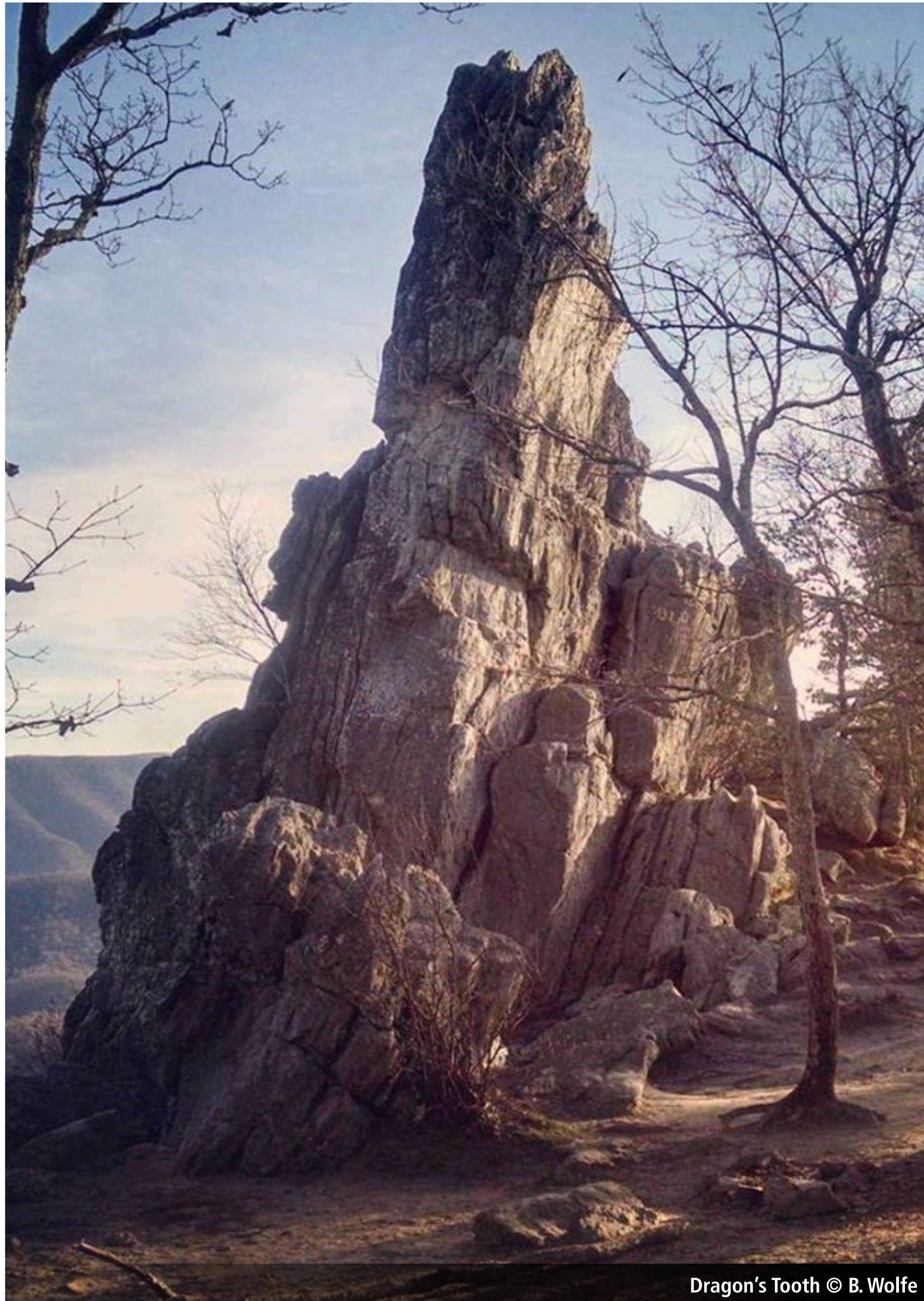
Regional Strategies and Partnerships

- A coordinated communication plan will be created among partners and other community stakeholders to advance communications and projects that would improve the visitor experience.





Segment Wide Management Strategies



Dragon's Tooth © B. Wolfe



Hikers at Dragon's Tooth © Diana Christopoulos

Facilities and Transportation

- Manage transportation facilities and services by documenting authorized parking lot/roadside parking capacities, enforcing vehicle size limits, and restricting overflow parking and unauthorized road shoulder parking at trailheads.
- The need for a permanent day use shuttle will be evaluated.
- The need for facilities such as bathrooms, trash cans, signs, drainage, and fencing will be evaluated and developed.
- Universally accessible facilities will be established and maintained including access routes, parking spaces, restrooms, and kiosks.
- Safe road crossings will be evaluated, improved, and maintained.

Information and Education

- Informational materials will be developed for a wide variety of topics including locations for permitted activities, trail rules and regulations, and Leave No Trace practices. Materials will be made readily available to the public.
- Alternative trails, recommended direction of travel, and non-peak use times will be advertised to help reduce the number of visitors on the trail at one time.
- Trip planning information will be improved using technology, social media, and websites.
- When appropriate, maps and signage will be increased to include information on various destinations on and off the trail and the history of the Catawba Valley.
- Communications with local universities will be improved.

Enforcement

- Regulatory signs will be installed to inform visitors of parking policies so that parking and access restrictions can be enforced.
- Circulation and access issues will be resolved with crosswalks, bridges, and other pedestrian crossings.
- Organized "hiker feeds" within the Triple Crown segment will be prohibited.

Managed Access

- The Appalachian National Scenic Trail voluntary overnight registration system will be improved and promoted to visitors.



McAfee Knob Management Strategies

Camping

- Close and restore user-created campsites.
- Establish two group-camping sites near McAfee Knob.
- Use a voluntary registration system for group sites.
- Redesign camping facilities at Campbell Mountain Shelter and Pig Farm Campsite for better resource protection and visitor experience.

Trail and Knob

- Encourage the use of approved routes including connecting trails.
- Identify and implement new sustainable trail alignments. Decommission and revegetate decommissioned trails.
- After the pedestrian bridge and connector trails are constructed, communicate new circulation patterns with the public.
- Improve educational efforts related to the history of this trail section.
- Improve signage and wayfinding.
- Establish an information kiosk at the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and the McAfee Knob Fire Road crossing.
- Conduct a condition assessment of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and its access trails. Develop and submit a project proposal to implement the repair of any identified deficiencies.

Trailhead

- Work with the adjacent property owner to develop the parking area to include hardening the parking lot surface, designating parking spaces including accessible parking, installing a drainage system, defining the parking lot perimeter, providing a shuttle stop, installing trash and comfort station, and meeting universally accessible requirements.
- Provide trip planning information and signage.





Dragon's Tooth Management Strategies

Short Term (Next Five Years)

- Educate and encourage visitors on Leave No Trace practices.
- Ensure protection of natural resources, such as water quality, using management strategies to limit camping in sensitive areas.
- Restore dispersed camping impacts in unsustainable locations to natural conditions.
- Inform the public of dispersed camping areas.
- Encourage Dragon's Tooth hikers to make a loop hike or route with the Boy Scout Trail, Dragon's Tooth Trail, and the Appalachian Trail.
- Explore options for a safe crossing plan with the Virginia Department of Transportation at the Route 311 crossing at Dragon's Tooth trailhead to North Mountain trailhead.
- Evaluate the feasibility of hardening the lower part of the driveway into the parking lot.

