

## CMC to Kick Off a Trail Ambassador Program at Max Patch

by Paul Curtain

As you may know, CMC has been working with the USFS and the ATC within the framework of the Visitor Use Management process to improve the hiker/user experience at Max Patch and to make it more sustainable. As one of the crown jewels of the Southern A.T., it is being "loved to death." We have made a lot of progress at Max Patch on the ground, but we need to connect with hikers in a personal way to take the final steps needed. That connection will be made by Trail Ambassadors. Trail Ambassador programs are becoming more common in the 31 maintaining clubs on the trail from north to south as the number of users increase.

Why are Trail Ambassadors needed at Max Patch? How did we get to a point in history where there was room for such an idea as this?

In 1921 Benton MacKaye wrote his now-famous article entitled, "An Appalachian Trail: a Project in Regional Planning." In that article he proposed a footpath that would serve as a sort of retreat or refuge from a civilization which was becoming too mechanized." At the time, the idea that American citizens might want to hike and camp in the mountains was a novel one. Since the concept of the A.T. was approved in 1927, CMC members have built and maintained the A.T. in NC/TN, making it one of the best hiking trails anywhere.

One of the reasons for this program is that we have done too good a job. Now the Trail is overused and abused, especially at high profile areas like Max Patch. Many of those hiking on it know or care little about how precious the resource actually is. That presents the desperate need for trail ambassadors.

Despite the abundant resources regarding nature, outdoor recreation, and conservation, most hikers come to nature unprepared. It is this lack of concern coupled with the ever increasing number of hikers that threaten the resource. Many in the general public who utilize trails in our region are under the impression that some government agency, state or federal, will take care of everything and clean up their mess. Of course we, the volunteers who make up the Carolina Mountain Club, know different. That's because we are the ones who take care of everything and who clean up all the mess. Max Patch is particularly vulnerable because of the high numbers of inexperienced day hikers who go there.

The dream of the Trail Ambassadors program is that there must be a better way to protect our beloved Trail. That better way is to meet the hiker on the Trail and teach him or her the better way. The better way is the principles of "Leave No Trace."

Benton MacKaye probably never envisioned the need for such principles. He would probably be amazed to discover how many folks come to hike his footpath every year. He would probably be even more amazed at the mess those folks leave in their wake.

We are fortunate at CMC in that the Georgia club has already instituted a Trail Ambassador program and has developed best practices that we can follow. They are also eager to help with training our new ambassadors, and ATC will also provide training.

Activities of Trail Ambassadors may include:

- Serving as a role model by practicing Leave No Trace ethics.
- Picking up litter.
- Counting overnight visitors.
- Helping visitors by answering questions about the local area.
- Utilizing Leave No Trace awareness or training along with the “authority of the resource” to educate visitors on local regulations as well as best practices for enjoying the natural environment.
- Practicing and promoting Leave No Trace Principles is central to our mission.
- Dismantling fire rings at visitor-created campsites and re-naturalizing the area.
- Directing hikers onto designated trails and guiding them off user created ones.

CMC plans to hold an informational meeting about the new program. We will select a time and place convenient to the most interested parties. Please contact Paul Curtin at [pmcurtin@hotmail.com](mailto:pmcurtin@hotmail.com) if you are interested in learning more about the program and would like to become a charter member of the CMC Trail Ambassador program.

Interested in becoming an AT section maintainer? We have two open sections:

Brown Gap to Max Patch Rd. - 2.7 miles

Big Stamp to Little Bald incl Bald Mtn. Shelter - 2.3 miles

If interested, contact Paul Curtin at [pmcurtin@hotmail.com](mailto:pmcurtin@hotmail.com)