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How the Pandemic Splintered the Appalachian Trail

The coronavirus scuttled plans and forced officials to ask people to get out of the woods. Of the thousands who hoped to hike the trail this year, only a few hundred remain.



Siler Bald, a mountain along the Appalachian Trail in the Nantahala National Forest in North Carolina. Credit...Danny Eyerman and Molly McDonald

By Alan Yuhas

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When Kelsey Foster started hiking the Appalachian Trail in early March, she had left her whole life behind — her job, her apartment, her family.

The mood was still lighthearted as news about the coronavirus trickled out to hikers in those first few days. “There started being kind of jokes about it, like, ‘You left society at the right time,’” Ms. Foster said. “There’s no way to social distance better than being a backpacker.”

But by the end of the month, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the organization that leads management of the trail, which crosses 14 states along its 2,190-mile route from Georgia to Maine, was urging hikers to stay away. It set off an exodus from the trail and a bitter debate about those who stayed behind.

After weeks of struggling to decide, Ms. Foster ultimately went home, joining millions of other Americans who were suddenly set adrift as the coronavirus battered the economy. Just as the annual hiking season was beginning this spring, the pandemic has devastated trail towns up and down the East Coast, created rifts in a tight-knit community and left hikers, small businesses and the trail's caretakers facing almost impossible questions.



Kelsey Foster after completing 200 miles of the trail.

Is backpacking still safe, or does it put hikers and the towns they visit in danger? Should a hostel ordered to close still serve a hiker in need? What if the hiker refuses to wear a mask, or the hostel is going bankrupt? And how do you manage nearly 2,200 miles of trail, served by thousands of volunteers and businesses, overseen by a patchwork group of parks and agencies, in the middle of a pandemic?

Officially, the trail itself is not closed. But access to it depends on jurisdiction: Shenandoah National Park is closed, for instance, and the U.S. Forest Service has shut down some shelters, access points and trailheads in line with local guidance. (On Wednesday, as some states began to ease stay-at-home orders, the conservancy offered a safety update to day and overnight hikers, while still asking thru-hikers to postpone their trips.)

Sandra Marra, the president of the conservancy, said the request to stay off the trail was not made lightly. Infections were rising around the country — and cases included park service employees. Volunteers who clean shelters and privies do not have protective equipment. There was a fear that hikers could bring infections to vulnerable towns, and an injury on the trail could further strain medical resources.

And even though hiking may seem like an exercise in isolation, Ms. Marra said, “you can’t hike the trail for more than a day or two before you’re walking into towns, roads, businesses and people.” Normally, 3,000 to 4,000 people attempt to thru-hike — only about one in four succeed — and 3 million people visit part of the trail every year.

Ms. Marra said that the overwhelming majority of thru-hikers — those who try to complete the entire trail — heeded the request to stay away. But a few hundred hikers have stayed on. “They call themselves the resistance,” she said.



Hikers were asked to leave the trail in March as trailheads closed. Credit...Sarah Blake Morgan/Associated Press

On social media, where the trail community is usually an oasis of positivity — lots of trail stories and tips about gear, and very little politics — venom started to fly. Some users accused hikers of selfishly endangering others; others compared trail closures to fascist decrees.

Janet Major, 61, who stayed on the trail, said she had endured a wave of “hate and actual threats of violence” after someone accused her of being a “spreader.” Many hikers said that misinformation had swept through the community, and that they undertook a daily battle to counter it with accurate information about closures and resources.

Caught between were hostel owners and “trail angels” like Odie Norman, who every year travels up and down the trail in his school bus, knitting the community together as he compiles a hiker yearbook. Mr. Norman, 37, said he helped hundreds of hikers get off the trail this year, and also helped dozens more resupply to stay on.

“My heart has chosen to serve the hiking community and that’s on both sides of the coin right now,” he said. Other trail angels provided protective equipment or even took hikers into their homes to quarantine. Mr. Norman has since gone to live in his parents’ attic in Alabama. “Me going on my bus from town to town is not congruent with what we should be doing in America,” he said.

He has applied for government aid, but is preparing for a brutal year ahead. “Small businesses along the trail, one of America’s national treasures, they’re being ignored,” he said. “I’m willing to bet we’ll see 50 percent of hostels along the trail will close.”

The Open Arms Hostel in Luray, Va., normally has hundreds of visitors in the spring. This year, its owner, Alison Coltrane, had one guest between April 6 and May 14 as she abided by a county ban on short-term lodging. Ms. Coltrane, 55, was able to get a three-month deferment on her mortgage, and to stay afloat, she started delivering pizza for Domino’s at night and working 5 a.m. shifts at a Walmart distribution center.



Alexandra Eagle, right, and Jonathan Hall on the Appalachian Trail in Cosby, Tenn., in March. Credit...Sarah Blake Morgan/Associated Press

“I am a one-woman show,” she said. “It’s been rough. I miss my hikers.”

Colin Gooder, the owner of Gooder Grove Hostel in Franklin, N.C., was an early bearer of warnings to hikers, even before he shut down in mid-March. While most hikers followed official guidance, he said, some were offended that he asked them to take precautions and wear masks.

“There was almost a subculture of indignation about it,” he said. “The division that has hit all of society is now affecting the Appalachian Trail’s society and culture.”

And he said that although his business has been devastated — his application for government aid is in limbo, and he is only now cautiously reopening under state guidelines — he did not regret raising an early alarm. “It’s hard to tell people that something they had planned for years, for the next six months of their lives, is impossible right now,” he said. “Don’t shoot the messenger.”

Some hostels have tried to continue serving thru-hikers. David Magee, the owner of the Station at 19E in Roan Mountain, Tenn., said he has had hikers stranded from Europe and Hawaii.

“What do I do? Close and go home while I’ve got these grubby hikers here?” he said. “I can’t turn my back on hikers.”

“It’s a hard choice, it’s like there is no good answer,” he said.

Many hikers, on and off the trail, suggested there was no right answer for everyone. Even those who disagreed with the conservancy’s decision said they respected the organization and understood its leaders’ rationale.

“They had to cover themselves and do something,” said a thru-hiker who asked to go by her trail name, Caboose, to avoid the backlash some hikers have experienced. “The question everyone is asking themselves is what could the A.T.C. have done to make sure that we could still have the hikers and still have the distancing. I don’t know.”

Ultimately, she said, she and her sister decided to start hiking this month. “We’re doing it for us,” she said.

David Chandler, a 39-year-old thru-hiker, said that most hikers he encountered had stayed for “a spiritual journey” and were trying to act responsibly by wearing masks in towns and minimizing time off the trail. “No one’s out here wanting to violate federal law. We want to walk through the parks,” he said from a hostel near Pearisburg, Va.



David Chandler in front of the Woods Hole hostel near Pearisburg, Va.

Hikers described the experience of the trail this year as sometimes moving, sometimes unnerving and often eerily quiet. “There are many day hikers and a few long section and thru-hikers, but the trails seem empty,” said a hiker who goes by Triton. “The bears don’t seem to mind.”

But while it can be a relief to find room in a shelter at the end of the day, many hikers also miss forming bonds with others traveling in their “bubbles.” Trail Days, the festival in Damascus, Va., that draws tens of thousands of people every year, was canceled. For many who went home or never started out this year, a route emptied out of thru-hikers was also drained of the generous community and “trail magic” they were searching for.

Mark Waligora, 51, had quit his job of almost three decades to hike the trail, “refocus with people again and be more connected with nature.” The pandemic scuttled his plans. As the weeks passed, he realized that in addition to the safety risks, “it would not have been the experience I wanted, having all these international folks from all walks of life and all the great states.”

Still, he said he would not judge the people who carried on. “I wish people listened to the A.T.C., but if people decided to stay, then by all means I hope they’re being safe. Personally, I don’t know what to believe, what’s right or wrong in relation to Covid,” he said.

“Hike your own hike, you know?”



Damascus, Va., is quieter now that many hikers have postponed their treks up and down the Appalachian Trail because of the coronavirus. Credit...Sarah Blake Morgan/Associated Press

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