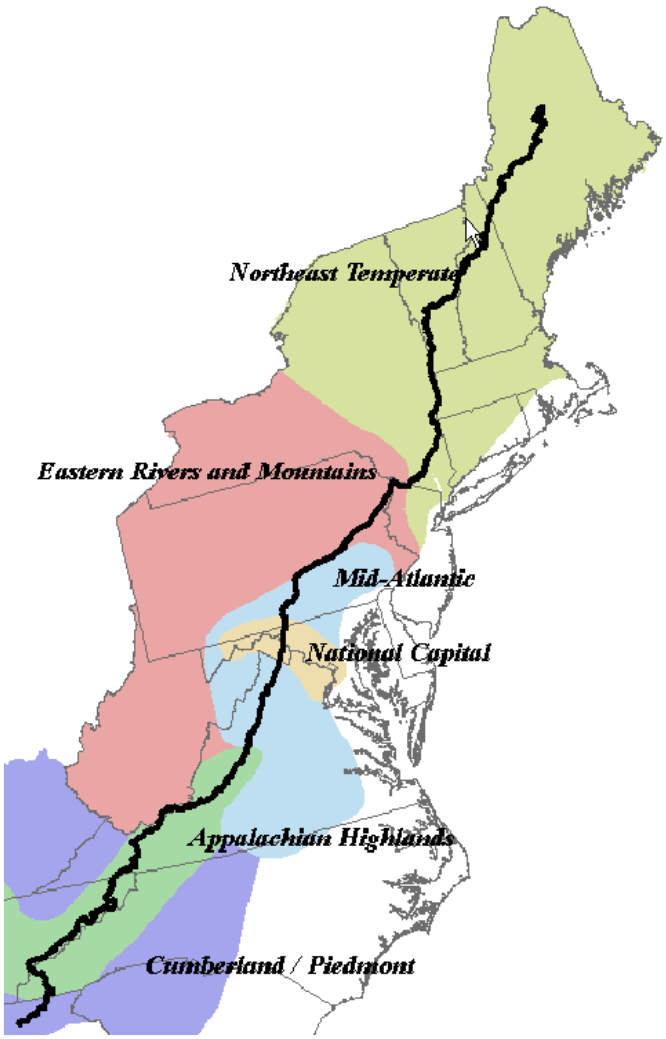
May 18, 2009

Introduction

The first four and half months of 2009 have been busy. While progress was sometimes hard to see, like anything else it gradually builds and becomes apparent when you look in the "rear view mirror." I have used this time to continue to build potential partnerships, and consider the many ideas that have floated my way. Nearly everyone is still enthusiastic about using the A.T as an environmental monitoring laboratory and we have made progress toward defining the purpose and structure of the A.T. MEGA-Transect.

To some it might seem silly that we have put so much time and energy into defining the MEGA-Transect but details are important and at some later point I think we will recognize the value of those details.

The first part of the year has also seen a few changes in staff at the Appalachian Trail Park Office and at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. Turnover is inevitable but not always at the best moment. A few of our plans have had to be adjusted due to those changes, but we are still pushing forward.



What Has Happened

- A.T. Rare Plant Monitoring -- The new monitoring protocol is being implemented! We held a train-the-trainer workshop in March to introduce regional coordination staff to the numerous changes and improvements, and just this past weekend a volunteer workshop was held in Harpers Ferry.
- Network 3rd Year Review -- The Northeast Temperate Network was evaluated by a team of reviewers and the Appalachian Trail part of the Network was viewed favorably. To nobody's surprise, the reviewers cautioned against setting goals too aggressively and reiterated that the A.T. program should focus on obtaining and analyzing existing natural resource data and not attempt to design a program that depends too heavily on 'new' data.
- A.T. Vegetation Mapping -- The veg mapping project is under way.
    - Aerial photography is to be obtained for the southern third of the trail this fall
    - Community type classification is nearly complete, and

    - Actual mapping is scheduled to begin next year.
- Dr. YQ Wang's NASA proposal was selected! The project will create an improved "decision support system" for the A.T. that will integrate existing data and satellite imagery into a system that is intended to give resource managers the ability to quickly evaluate resource conditions and management alternatives.
- Lucile Pacquette, our NETN funded and ATC administered Water Quality intern, is nearing completion of her project and has helped us to identify a select number of existing Water Quality monitoring programs and protocols.
- The National Phenology Network, NETN and the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) are collaborating to develop a 'citizen science' geared monitoring protocol. The effort complements the phenology efforts that NETN launched last year as well as the existing program run by AMC, and when ready will be tested on the A.T. as well as Acadia NP.
- Work has begun on the Appalachian Trail Environmental Monitoring Plan. Following the NETN 3rd year review, we discussed the merit of creating a monitoring plan specific to the A.T. and agreed that it would be beneficial. The plan will borrow from each of the six I&M networks through which the A.T. passes plus any other applicable network plan. The goal is to complete the plan mid to late FY 2010.

What is Going to Happen

Continued coordination and collaboration! Working with other agencies and organizations to interpret the condition of the A.T.'s natural resources and identify common goals and objectives is one of my highest priorities. Viewing the A.T. as the ribbon that ties together and unites existing programs will benefit everyone more than attempting to create a new, and possibly isolated A.T. program. To do this I hope to work with other I&M networks, National Forests, Fish and Wildlife Refuges, and other agencies to identify our common interests.

Parting Remarks

Forming an identity for the Appalachian Trail Environmental Monitoring Program is clearly a challenge. Following the 2006 A.T. symposium I think many people envisioned a rapidly expanding program with unlimited fund raising potential. Interest still remains quite high and there is clearly potential for growth, but I envision the future for the program differently. I see a future built around aggregating resources more than a new data collection infrastructure. A look at the online travel world with numerous travel focused search engines may provide a useful analogy. There is not shortage of online travel systems, including: Orbitz; Travelocity; Priceline; Expedia; and certainly many more. Each system has strengths and weaknesses, but in the end they all do pretty much the same thing. If the A.T. Environmental Monitoring program was structured to collect new data, we would be a bit like another travel search engine that does something very similar to nearly every other travel search engine. However, if the A.T. program helps to aggregate results from all the other monitoring programs, it would be like the Kayak.com of the travel world that pulls together results from all of the other travel sites and presents them together. Dr. Wang's NASA project may be a good step in that direction as it seeks to unite existing data from a variety of sources. Perhaps the high profile program that some envisioned following the 2006 symposium is still possible, but it would gain prominence by making sense of all the work that is already happening.

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