

# Resiliency, Case Study: Appalachian Trail Re-route on Bear Mountain

## New York-New Jersey Trail Conference (New York)

Resiliency National Benefit Description: For trails, resiliency may mean better route planning, mitigation of impacts, using recycled materials, and reducing erosion. To trail managers, resiliency is key to reducing expenditures on maintenance by better design of trails, and the use of appropriate materials and structures.

### *Key Terms:*

- Accessibility
- Interpretation
- Multi-Use Trails
- National Scenic and Historic Trails
- Rock Work
- Vegetation Management
- Wilderness Stewardship

### *Project Partners:*

- Appalachian Trail Conservancy
- National Park Service
- New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
- Palisades Interstate Park Commission

### *DOT Strategic Goal Alignment:*

- Infrastructure
- Innovation
- Safety

### *Best Practices:*

RTP funding was utilized in diverse ways on the Bear Mountain project, including helping build the first ADA-compliant section of the Appalachian Trail (AT) and constructing the AT's first outdoor interpretive exhibit. Much of the work Corpsmembers completed on the trail was done by hand.

### *Background*

In fall 2018, the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference (NYNJTC) finished construction on the Bear Mountain Trails Project, a historic and ambitious rehabilitation of the Appalachian Trail (AT) that launched the Trail Conference's Conservation Corps program. Over the last 14 years, the Trail Conference has rallied the community to help transform the AT at Bear Mountain from an eroded, washed-out, 10-foot-wide scar, into a safe, sustainable footpath and educational destination.

Over 2 million people visit Bear Mountain State Park in New York each year, making this original section of the Appalachian Trail the most heavily used. When issues of heavy use and degradation came to a head in 2004, a plan was developed to protect the mountain and accommodate the high volume of hikers. The Trail Conference and its partners – the National Park Service, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and Palisades Interstate Park Commission – initiated the Bear Mountain Trails Project to provide a solution for a high-use destination that requires educational components to better inform and prepare visitors.

#### *Project Work*

This project had two specific outcomes: build a better, safer, more sustainable trail for park visitors and develop a pool of trained volunteers to support the vast network of the trails in the Hudson River Valley. Training and deploying a Conservation Corps was essential in accomplishing both of these goals.

Work on the tread was primarily done by hand and involved hardening the trail with more than 1,300 granite steps, weighing an average of 500 to 800 pounds each, from the bottom of Bear Mountain to its summit. The project included building the first ADA-compliant section of the Appalachian Trail, and constructing Trails for People, the first outdoor interpretive exhibit aimed at teaching park visitors how trails are made.

Additionally, an abandoned group camp in Harriman State Park that had been repurposed to house NYNJTC Corpsmembers is now becoming a center for environmental and wilderness education. NYNJTC uses the facility to conduct classes in Wilderness First Aid, Leave No Trace, invasive species management, and trail building and maintenance.

The Bear Mountain Trails Project could not have been completed without the work of 25 Corpsmembers serving over the last five years. The Corps also enabled thousands of people from the community to contribute to stewarding trails in the Hudson River Valley: NYNJTC crews trained nearly 3,000 volunteers who donated more than 83,000 hours of service. Thousands of community volunteers were engaged on the Bear Mountain Trails Project alone; during one phase of the project, 380 volunteers contributed 3,009 hours of service valued at \$58,381.

Utilizing Corpsmembers to leverage community volunteers has been key to the success of the NYNJTC Corps program. Investing time to teach Corpsmembers how to engage community volunteers and give them a sense of ownership of their public lands has had a tremendous impact on the Trail Conference's projects.

As a result of developing a Conservation Corps for the Bear Mountain Trails Project, NYNJTC Corps program has doubled in size and capacity to include several crews performing trail work throughout the region. NYNJTC has crews working on terrestrial and aquatic invasive species management and will introduce a trail stewardship and education component to the program.

The Conservation Corps has allowed the Trail Conference to expand its reach and visibility by having a full-time presence in the communities in which it serves. The State of New York has reached out to deploy two crews in state parks to help implement Master Trail Plans and improve the recreational opportunities for the public. NYNJTC's contract to deploy crews in state parks has been renewed every year for the last five years. These crews have built a multi-use trail for equestrians, mountain bikers, and hikers, which has helped create new partnerships with these user groups.

### *Outcomes and Successes*

Four Corpsmembers have become full-time staff members of NYNJTC and two became seasonal employees who oversaw the final two years of construction on the Bear Mountain Trails Project. One quarter of Corpsmembers serving on Bear Mountain have gone on to employment with the Trail Conference; nearly all have become gainfully employed elsewhere. The skills the Corpsmembers learned during the project have led to nearly 80 percent of the crew successfully finding employment.

To complement the trail work, NYNJTC designed and built the Trails for People exhibit at the foot of Bear Mountain. Visitors learn about the history of the Appalachian Trail, the park, and the Trail Conference's nearly 100-year legacy of empowering volunteers to improve the outdoor experience for everyone. The planning phase for additional indoor exhibits celebrating Bear Mountain as the birthplace of the Appalachian Trail is underway. Seasonal Trail Stewards have been stationed at the Appalachian Trail at the foot of Bear Mountain to familiarize visitors to the concepts of safe and responsible hiking and front-country wilderness stewardship.

### *For More Information*

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### *Award*

The Corps Network Project of the Year Award