

How public is public land?

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The Appalachian National Scenic Trail, colloquially known as the Appalachian Trail or the AT, is the longest continuous hiking trail in the world. It spans 2,197 miles from Georgia to Maine. Three million people visit sections of the trail every year, and in 2023, more than 3,000 people attempted to hike the entire AT (known as thru-hiking). Thru-hiking the AT is considered the Everest of long-distance hiking and holds cultural significance among serious hikers.

The AT's northern terminus is the peak of Mount Katahdin in Baxter State Park, Maine. The park was established by a land and monetary donation in 1931 to the state of Maine from former Maine governor Percival Baxter, under the condition that it be kept forever wild. Baxter stated his goal for the park in his trust: "Katahdin in all its glory, forever shall remain the mountain of the people of Maine." To fulfill that mission, the park has unusually strict rules. There can be no hiking groups of more than 12 people, no pets, and no alcohol. There are also strict limits on reserving camping spots and building campfires. In recent years, the park has tightened regulations on AT thru-hikers. In 2015, the park began issuing a limited number of permits to long distance hikers – notably less than the number of full thru-hikers, and significantly less than the number of people hiking long sections of the AT each year. As of 2024, Baxter issues a maximum of 3,150 permits per year to long distance hikers on Katahdin even though the number of full AT hikers has increased to nearly 4,000. The permit system is strictly enforced and hikers without a permit are fined \$1,000.

Many hikers view the permit system as an injustice to the thousands of hikers every year who will be denied the chance to finish the trail. Permits generally must be obtained on the day of the hike because it is implausible to calculate exactly when one will finish the trail on a journey that takes 5-7 months. This means that many hikers will spend months away from civilization, hiking over 8 hours a day, only to be refused a permit to finish their endeavor. It is customary for AT thru-hikers to finish in large groups of more than 12, which Baxter's strict rules deny. In general, Baxter's rules are significantly stricter than usual for state and national parks in the United States.

However, it is the stated mission of the park to keep Katahdin "the mountain of the people of Maine." Although the land is open to the public, AT thru-hikers are generally not Maine residents. The park aims to preserve its wilderness as much as possible and adhere to the values it was founded on. Allowing more thru-hikers on Katahdin could irreparably alter the mountain. Although it may not necessarily be damaged, human presence and its evidence could become far more prominent.

Discussion Questions:

1. Does the park have an obligation to alter its rules based on the presence of AT thru-hikers?
2. What ought to determine the purpose of public land – its founding principles, or how the public most commonly wants to use it?
3. How should conservation be balanced with heavy public interest in certain natural areas?
4. How much authority should state agencies have in how public land is used?