It is fall and all the other trail projects are wrapping up for the season. Despite the quieting of the trail, there is a bustle in Western Massachusetts. A crew of AmeriCorps members have been recruited by Dan Hale, the ATC’s Natural Resource and Land Stewardship manager, and have been stationed with the Berkshire Appalachian Trail Committee to assist with trail maintenance.

This group of six is a unit; their attire is relaxed yet congruent with each other. They all are wearing their khaki pants with T-shirts and sweatshirts emblazoned with the AmeriCorps emblem on their sleeve. They are matching down to the same belt and shoes. Despite their similarities in attire, they come from every corner of the United States with many different backgrounds and interests to serve together through AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps). AmeriCorps NCCC is a program that places young adults ages 18-24 in a 10 month service program in the United States. Through their experience, these members are able to develop leadership skills, travel, and gain applicable job skills while serving communities. Throughout the 10 months, NCCC members log 1,700 hours of service throughout multiple locations across the country.

So why are they here in Western Massachusetts? For one month, they are working with Dave Pirog, the A.T. Committee’s Boundary Maintenance Coordinator by assisting in clearing out the corridor boundary trails that are surrounding the AT. Over the years, the National Park Service (NPS) and the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) have obtained parcels of land on both sides of the AT which act as a protective buffer against encroachment; ensuring the trail will remain ‘unspoiled’, and each hiker’s experience be pleasant, scenic, memorable, and as close to the natural world as possible. Boundary clearing is not for the faint of heart with off-trail navigation, often ungraded scrambles, and wrestling through thick brush. It is hard physical labor, cutting thousands of plants that obstruct the boundary, all in an effort to clear the boundary lines which will inevitably become overgrown within another two years. It seems like disheartening work but it is essential to managing and preserving the Appalachian Trail.
This is not the first project they have worked on. Before this project, the crew was working at the Shiloh National Military Park in Tennessee creating a river view by clearing vegetation and small shrubs. Additionally, they worked on a Habitat for Humanity project in Greenville, Mississippi where they assisted in building a house for the community. Each project they have done has given them a new set of skills to build off of for their next project.

Heaven Horvath is from Chicago and had no outdoor experience besides urban walking before AmeriCorps. At Shiloh National Military Park, she learned to use axes and chainsaws to chop down trees, as well as many other tools. In Tennessee, they established a good foundation for trail work that they could bring with them to Massachusetts. Heaven says learning how to use tools and learning to hike has been beneficial and a skillset she can use in the future.

Meet Madison Thiel, she is from California and is serving as their team leader for this group. When she speaks, she is clear and confident. Joining AmeriCorps seemed like an easy choice after college, she notes, “I knew I liked doing service work, so this was a great way to give back. I get to travel, there is an educational award at the end, and it is a great resume builder for when I get into my career.” For Maddi, the community interactions have been invaluable. It has been rewarding to see the direct impact her work has done throughout her projects to the people. During their Habitat for Humanity project, local churches would serve them lunch every workday. She describes that the locals were so happy to have them there and how she felt so grateful to interact with people she would never have met without this experience.

For Noah Hann-Deschaine, the service work on the Appalachian Trail has been the most rewarding so far. He is 19 and taking a gap year before he plans to attend Colgate University in New York. He lives across the street from the highest point in Delaware—450 feet above sea level. For him, and many of his other teammates, the trail work is a completely new experience compared to how they grew up. Noah enjoys the physical challenge of the trail work, and has learned to appreciate the accuracy and the history behind it. He notes, “there is so much history in every single axe blaze, people have surveyed these monuments to the 100th of an inch, and people have been and will be working on these same sections for hundreds of years after me.”

Some of these projects help to steer new career interests that might not have been found without AmeriCorps. Cierra Peterson is from Montana, she is on a non-traditional path who has gone through a vocational education program rather than college. While on the Habitat for Humanity project, she enjoyed the construction process and is now considering it as a potential career path. Nick Mourousas is from New Hampshire and needed a change from working full time. After AmeriCorps, his plan is to travel throughout Europe and hopes to go to trade school or join the Military. Nick has enjoyed learning about the different communities and their way of life as well as developing new skills that he can utilize in the future.
Iowan native, Brianna Lund was feeling burnt out after college and decided to take a break through AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps has been a life changing experience for Brianna, “AmeriCorps has given me a lot more connections to different career paths and helped me figure out what I do and don’t want to do with my life. It has also really helped me to believe in myself and push myself. Because when you are doing physical labor, you cannot just quit when you are in the middle of the woods,” Brianna says. Through her last project working with the Forest Service in Kentucky, now she is considering a career change from Chemistry to a career in the Forest Service.

AmeriCorps and trail work seems to bring people together in unique ways and build relationships through shared experiences. When one of them answers a question, you can tell that they have been together for awhile. There is an exchange of secret smiles and giggles when one of them speaks as if they are sharing an inside joke that no one else is privy to. While living and working together, they have gone from strangers, to teammates, to friends in a short time. AmeriCorps has allowed strong relationships to form for unlikely people who may have never met in any other circumstances. Their futures hold different goals and ambitions but their experiences with each other are lasting.

Throughout their month long service in Massachusetts, they are serving as ambassadors for AmeriCorps and the Appalachian Trail. In addition to clearing trail on the AT, they have met with the Great Barrington schools to share their projects and tales with the students in hopes of inspiring future members of Americorps.

Their next assignment is in Newport, RI working with the Boys and Girls Club after which they will return to Vicksburg, MS where they will await their next assignment after the holidays.

The Berkshire section of the Appalachian Trail has greatly benefited from having devoted and hardworking AmeriCorps members on our crew this year. Together they logged over 500 hours on the trail which was crucial to our boundary maintenance. The Americorps team cleared 16 miles of boundary trail in sun, rain, and snow through all types of terrain. This distance would normally take a whole season to complete was finished within a few weeks. Some of this section of trail had not been maintained in many years. It is hard work that was once foreign became easy as they developed their knowledge and skill set for boundary maintenance and navigation. We commend them for their efforts and devotion to the trail and hope that this will spark interest in maintaining public lands in the future.

For more information on Americorps and how you can get involved or request your own Americorps team check out:
https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/americorps/americorps-programs
On Saturday October 26th, Appalachian Trail stakeholders convened at the Forest Service Headquarters in the White Mountains of New Hampshire to discuss the future of the trail at the New England Regional Partnership Meeting. We had members from Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Department of Conservation and Recreation, AT Next Generation, Appalachian Mountain Club, Green Mountain Club, Appalachian Long Distance Hiking Association, and members from various maintainers clubs across the Northeast.

Many of the management groups are facing the same issues throughout the region-- too much foot traffic and not enough volunteers. With the trail popularity increasing, the amount of trail “business” as increased as well--making waste management a problem that our privys struggle to keep up with. Additionally, our recruitment of new, stable volunteers is a constant challenge-- which means less people to help move the poop, and maintain the now heavily trafficked trail. These are constant struggles Trail-wide, but with the hope of better privy management and new recruitment techniques we can hopefully start to alleviate this issue.

With the increase in bear incidences on the trail, there was discussion about mandating a hard sided bear canister as hiker food storage throughout the entirety of the trail. There was much debate in regards to accessibility for weekenders, how to enforce, as well as education. The hope is to create a culture that supports hard sided canisters on the trail.

Additionally, we discussed the launching of a new Web APP developed by the NPS AT Park Office which is very detailed report and measurement of the trail. It is very accurate and monetizes and measures all aspects of the trail down to every single board that is on the trail. This could be useful for reporting damages you see on the trail as well as allowing trail clubs to put a price tag on the replacement of items on the trail for when they inevitably need to be replaced. If you are interested in learning more about it you can follow this link.
This newsletter is almost a year old! We want to know what you think about it and how you think it could be improved. Any input is appreciated.

Do you want to become a contributor? Do you have a story to tell, wish to be a volunteer spotlight or have some information that you think would be helpful for the rest of the club?

Fill out the Google Form or email me directly if you have any input or want to contribute to the newsletter.

https://forms.gle/vS14SSudaVoqDuxY8
or
email at monica3151@gmail.com

We will have a winter wildlife transect on January 4th Cooper Brook area checking out what the wildlife are up to in that area. If you are interested in joining you can contact Jim Pelletier at wanderer0131@yahoo.com.

Trail and Corridor Monitors feel free to continue monitoring your sections over the winter and spring if you choose.

After the AT Gathering, be on the lookout for the new project schedule. Happy Holidays, and see you all next spring!

Our Annual AT Gathering will take place on February 1st at 9am-2pm. Location to be announced soon.

Come celebrate the completion of another service year with us! Stay Tuned for more info.

There will be food, breakout groups, giveaways, and a swap table.

After volunteering please enter your own hours regularly. You can use this link to easily input them yourself:
https://airtable.com/shrKYlfaKlEExtJrc

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