

A group of hikers is seen on a trail in a forest. In the background, a large tree stump with exposed roots stands prominently. The hikers are wearing backpacks and hats, and the trail is rocky and uneven. The forest is lush with green foliage.

SYNERGY AFTER THE STORM

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BY HEATHER B. HABELKA
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~Frank White, Mt. Rogers Appalachian Trail Club's Regional Partnership Council Representative in Virginia

After the Trail Days Festival in Damascus in May, enthusiastic volunteers joined the Hardcore crew to work on Trail impacted by Hurricane Helene. Photo by Ben Earp

WHEN HURRICANE

Helene slammed into 800 miles of Trail in North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia, the Appalachian Trail's Cooperative Management System (CMS) was put to the test. It stood strong during the storm and in the aftermath — expanding partnerships, engaging new members, re-energizing volunteers, and creating deeper connections within Trail communities.

The CMS is often compared to a three-legged stool. In broad terms this means the ATC, its thirty affiliated and independent A.T. Maintaining Clubs, and its agency partners each represent a leg of the stool that supports Trail conservation — working in concert to fund, maintain, and protect the world's longest footpath. “The three-legged stool is a great analogy, because without one of those three parts it will fall over it. It won't work,” says Frank White, Mt. Rogers Appalachian Trail Club's (MRATC) Regional Partnership Council Representative in Virginia. “To me it's amazing. All of these different entities, from government agencies to youth volunteers, working together for the greater good. It points out the shared vision and the importance of the Trail to people. Without the Cooperative Management System there's no way the sections of Trail devastated by Helene would be open right now.”

A METHODOICAL AND COOPERATIVE RESPONSE

“From the very start people wanted to help, but we asked volunteers to stay away from the affected Trail,” explains Kathryn Herndon-Powell, the ATC's Regional Director for the Virginias. “Our initial focus was on life and safety. We needed to make sure our ATC communities, including our colleagues, Trail Club volunteers, and agency partners were safe.”

As the ATC's Internal Helene Response Task Force came together, the ATC stepped in to support its federal agency partners by filling a critical gap. “We established a separate point of information and communication because in the immediate aftermath, our agency partners didn't have the capacity to focus on the A.T. It's a recreational resource, and they were making sure their own people were safe, getting campers out of campgrounds, restoring communication towers, and clearing roads for power companies,” Herndon-Powell says.

“Clubs have experienced severe storms before. Immediately after Helene, our volunteers were ready to go out and do Trail assessments. But what I hadn't experienced before was the severity of the damage. The Forest Service had a pretty significant concern about our safety,” shares Steve Perri, the Regional Partnership Council Representative for the Tennessee Eastman Hiking and Canoeing Club (TEHCC). “We were thinking how bad could it be? Little did we know. I'd never seen trees pushed over like that before.”

However, placing this short-term pause on Trail recovery didn't stop Clubs from mobilizing. “The Trail Club volunteers, instead of staying at home, immediately started working in their communities. The Carolina Mountain Club (CMC) helped people who had lost their homes or who were clearing trees, mud, and debris from their homes and yards. This speaks to what a great asset our Trail community is. It speaks to the heart of people that the A.T. attracts,” recalls Anne Sentz, the ATC's Regional Manager of the Smokies and North Carolina.

“After the initial life and safety assessments were complete, the ATC began facilitating communication, streamlining response processes, guiding volunteers, and centralizing ways to conduct Trail assessments and clear Trails,” explains Herndon-Powell.



CMC and TEHCC volunteers gather before heading to the Trail to clear Helene debris near Roan Mountain in Tennessee. Photo courtesy of Paul Curtin, Carolina Mountain Club



Top: In November, the CMC coordinated a workday — with 130 participants — to help restore area trails and parts of Hot Springs impacted by Hurricane Helene. On the Trail north of Tanyard Gap, Matt Drury, the ATC's Associate Director of Science and Stewardship, and a volunteer from Florida worked on tree removal. Photo courtesy of David Huff. Bottom left: After the tree was removed, a group of new volunteers repaired the tread. Photo courtesy of Rocko Smucker. Bottom right: In honor of National Trails Days in June, ATC staff — including ATC's Volunteer Engagement Specialist Jessie Johnson — coordinated with the CMC to clear and repair parts of the Trail near Hot Springs. Photo by Maddy Kaniewski/ATC

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF A.T. MAINTAINING CLUBS

Jerry Kyle, the ATC's High Country Regional Manager works with three of the four Clubs that were, and continue to be, most heavily impacted by Helene: Piedmont AT Hikers Club (PATH) in North Carolina, MRATC in Virginia, and TEHCC in Tennessee, which was hit the hardest. “Our Clubs play a critical day-to-day role in keeping the Trail open. But each of my three clubs were even more cohesive after Helene hit. They were unified by focus, process,

and wanting to get out there and open the Trail corridor,” he shares. According to Kyle, all three Clubs gained new members, re-engaged volunteers, and put in countless volunteer hours. Clubs even worked through the winter months to re-open the Trail for thru-hiker season and to support the local businesses that count on the season for their survival.

To that end, CMC's Friday Crew, which before Helene included fifteen members, has seen an uptick in volunteers. After the hurricane, close to forty people often participate in weekly Trail maintenance.

According to Paul Curtin, A.T. Supervisor for the CMC, volunteer hours increased during recovery by 25% which has resulted in increased memberships and donations, “The most new members we ever had was 180 in 2023. In 2024 we added 500 new members. We’re on pace for another 500 this year and will have 2,000 members by the end of this year.” While this growth can cause challenges, Curtin highlights the possibilities, “It’ll be great for the future of Club leadership. There’s talent within this new group and they’ll rise up. Our leadership will grow stronger and stronger.”

In Tennessee, TEHCC recorded 190 recovery events totaling 8,043 volunteer hours, with 867 of those hours completed by skilled sawyers trained in the safe use of chainsaws and crosscut saws. “I think everyone became more confident, and more skilled for everyone’s benefit, not just our Club’s,” stresses Perri. “We completed recovery work without any accidents. To me that is a testament to the Forest Service’s sawyer training. Helene recovery has improved our ability to get out in the field, work efficiently and consciously, and be aware of hazards when doing sawyer work.”

Kyle also observed a shift in how the Clubs approached recovery efforts. “Clubs tend to be siloed. They take care of their section without a lot of outside help. With Helene, they pulled together internally and really opened up to help during the recovery. We had sawyers and maintainers from other Clubs come

in, form teams, and help clear sections of the Trail.” White agrees, “It doesn’t come into question that there was a huge amount of devastation and destruction in the area. It’s pretty remarkable that the Trail, at this point, is even passable. And it’s because of all the hard work and cooperation of our partner agencies, ATC staff, and Club volunteers.”

According to Perri, Helene recovery has expanded and strengthened the Club’s already solid relationship with the Forest Service, “There is an increased awareness of our Club’s work. They trust us when it comes to safety,” he shares. “They observed us in action out in the field and saw how we took a technical and staged approach to repairs from assessments to execution to volunteer safety.”

IMPACT TO THE TRAIL’S BIODIVERSITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

With the exception of 5.5 miles of the 800 impacted miles, the Trail is open. However, Kyle stresses that the “Trail may be walkable, but it’s certainly not optimal by any means. Trail maintenance plans are being assessed, expanded, or modified. Many trees that are still standing are damaged as are their root structures. This inter-connectivity creates an ongoing falling threat.”

White echoes Kyle’s assessment. “Our big focus is on bringing the Trail back to its intended state, instead of a workaround state,” he says. “We’re also keeping an



In March, during the Southern Partnership Meeting in Blowing Rock, NC, the four Clubs most impacted by the hurricane provided presentations about the situation on their sections of the Trail. The ATC extended their appreciation and recognized the Clubs’ extraordinary contributions to the Trail after Helene. From left to right: Steve Perri (TEHCC), Jerry Kyle (ATC staff accepting on behalf of MRATC), David Atkinson (PATH), and Paul Curtin (CMC). Photo by Suzanne Neal/ATC



Hardcore crew members and volunteers who attended Trail Days get ready to hit the Trail. Volunteer opportunities like these are made possible thanks to the A.T. Resiliency Fund, the TEHCC, the Appalachian Long-Distance Hiker Association, and the ATC. Photo by Ben Earp

eye out for any impending safety issues that are a holdover from the storm while continuing to bring the Trail up to the standard that it was.”

Canopy reduction is also a concern, resulting in significant changes to the Trail’s landscape including expanded views, new clearings, increased sunlight, erosion, and altered water runoff channels. In addition, canopy reduction is impacting biodiversity, although the extent is unknown. “The Trail will be going through a new cycle of seasons. There’s places where we have rare species of flowers and plants. We don’t know how they’re going to adapt,” Perri explains. “Hikers will notice nature’s impact and evolution.”

In response, the ATC is planning for the short- and long-term phases of Helene recovery. “It’s going to be a long road, and many years before we can say we’ve really recovered and before we know what the long-term impacts are,” stresses Herndon-Powell. “More sunlight on the Trail means more invasives taking hold. Sections of tread may need to be relocated as we navigate water runoff and repair rootball holes. There will be ongoing removal of fallen trees and extra weakened trees that present overhead hazards to campers and hikers. Bridges and shelters will need to be inspected, stabilized, or rebuilt. And there is an increased fire risk both from downed trees and from branches hanging from above.”

WEATHERING THE NEXT STORM AND PROTECTING THE TRAIL

The nation’s political climate is also posing a significant threat to post-Helene recovery plans.

According to Franklin Tate, ATC’s Regional Director - South, “Our Forest Service and National Park Service partners are staying the course in a time when the future of their agencies remains uncertain due to budget cuts,” he says. “The same holds true for the global community who supported the Trail’s recovery. People from around the world contributed to the Appalachian Trail Resiliency Fund — an amazing testimony to how much folks love and support the A.T.”

This support is vital to protecting the Trail and ensuring access to it. Sentz emphasizes how important the Trail is to many, “After a disaster, people really need these types of outdoor spaces for their mental and physical health. We felt a sense of urgency, and we still feel that sense of urgency, to make sure the Trail remains a safe place for people to explore. I had my life changed by the Trail. It’s not just this isolated footpath. It’s something that people really need in their lives.”

For Helene recovery resources and updates, visit appalachiantrail.org/helene

To find volunteer opportunities, visit appalachiantrail.org/volunteer

To learn more about the ATC and its partners’ initial response to Hurricane Helene see “Communities Clearing the Way” from the Spring 2025 issue of *A.T. Journeys*. journeys.appalachiantrail.org/issue/spring-2025