

We were part of the 40th Appalachian Trail Conservancy Biennial Conference a seven day gathering held in Winchester Virginia in July. The conference location changes - traveling up and down the coast to highlight the diversity of the trail and the span of the longest national park. Our group was diverse as well. Five women and two men hiking, two women and two men supporting. We represented four hiking clubs and three of us were from the Midwest not members of any club. They were my sister from Kansas City and two of her friends. For two it was their first overnight hike.

Turks caps lilies hung like glowing lanterns along the trail with butterflies feeding from them. White Queen Anne's Lace and bee balm lit up the trail. A bear and her cub sauntered within shouting distance of the trail and numerous deer crossed or followed our path. Milkweed swayed spreading a sweet fragrance. Fortunately no ticks were seen.

Our evenings included vantage points to green valleys, towns and distant mountains and lakes. There was also a bountiful supply of food prepared by Jeanne of the PATC and dancing. Carina from Roanoke, Va. taught us the Merengue a dance from her native country of the Dominican Republic. Paul kept the dark cabins illuminated with his solar lantern. Everyone pitched in to get the cabins opened, closed and mattresses in their proper places. Although there was some snoring, earplugs, a sense of humor and exhaustion made it not a barrier to getting sleep for this hiker.

Unique to this section of the trail are the cabins maintained and managed by the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club. We stayed in two cabins and one research station originally built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the 1930s. The research building had electricity, the others did not. They did have fireplaces, bunks and views. The club has about 40 cabins located not only in Virginia where we were, but in Pennsylvania and Maryland and west Virginia.

The original vision by Benton MacKaye for the Appalachian Trail was to provide a refuge from the industrialized life and connect idyllic communities. Walking continuously for days in a canopy of trees lit by sunshine provides that rest.

Thirty one hiking clubs maintain the trails and schedule regular hikes on the AT and other trails. The conference though is one of the times the clubs can share a hike, exchange ideas and their love of the outdoors. The club's range from having 500 members to 150,000 members.

On the last day a hike leader who is also a ridge runner found an ill placed fire ring on the trail a scar on the landscape. We all worked together lifting rocks, tossing them randomly into the woods along with the logs and ashes. It takes the gathering of diverse clubs and people during these conferences to maintain the spirit of the trail as MacKaye envisioned- a trail where "Cooperation replaces antagonism, trust replaces suspicion, emulation replaces competition." And sweat replaces complacent living.