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In His Own Words: An Interview with Lester Kenway, MATC President

1. How did you get started with MATC?

My first experience with MATC was on a Bates College Outing Club trip to work on the trail in 1972, which coincidentally was when I met Dave Field. As Overseer of Trails in Western Maine, Dave was flagging sections of the Appalachian Trail for a relocation project and we followed behind to clear it.

2. What drew you to trail maintenance?

I like to build things and enjoy the process of restoring an area that's been impacted by people or weather conditions. It's gratifying to improve the trail by installing steps to stabilize the trail and to make it easier on which to walk. Building step stones or bog bridges in wetland areas is very rewarding because the resource recovers rapidly through regrowth.

The most significant improvement project that I recall is rebuilding the last half mile of the Appalachian Trail on Katahdin when I worked for Baxter State Park. The AT consisted of loose gravel and rock that traversed arctic alpine tundra terrain creating difficult hiking conditions. We installed stone steps and waterbars over the course of five years to stabilize it and make it a "good walk."

3. How has MATC changed over the years?

I've witnessed changes throughout the years. In 1975 when I joined MATC, there were 30 trail assignments for 267 miles of the AT. Today, we have nearly 120 assignments, spanning two to seven mile stretches. This is a significant success both by attracting more volunteers to maintain the trail and also shortening the length of trail individuals need to manage.

Two Clubs that continue to maintain sections of the AT are the Maine Outing Club at the University of Maine, Orono and the employees of LL Bean. This means that many more people in the past three decades have accepted the opportunity to roll up their sleeves and help maintain the Trail.

Griphest and rigging equipment have enabled trail crews to move large rocks uphill and downhill to improve the trail. These techniques were introduced during the 1980s and have helped crews accomplish many difficult projects.

The use of electronic communications makes it easier to engage members on trail trips and club activity compared to the early days of connecting via telephone and mailing correspondence.

And in the 1970s, most of the AT was on private land. During the 1980s, MATC and National Park Service efforts put 80 percent of the Trail in Federal ownership, which is now managed by MATC. This is a profound difference now that MATC is a steward of Maine's second national park: "This is a little-known secret."

4. What is a typical day for Lester Kenway?

There is no typical day! Monday I can be driving 150 miles to the trail site and by Thursday I'm spending the day in front of the computer or making phone calls. *(It's difficult to remember Lester is a volunteer!)*

5. Please explain MATC's Privy Replacement Project and how it came to the club's attention.

Many of our campsites with traditional out houses were getting filled up within two years. The Club only recently became fully informed about accessibility requirements on public lands.

MATC is undertaking a 20-year commitment to update all 42 campsite privies that combines the environmental need of composting with accommodating the need for accessibility. Two issues using two technologies result in a good design solution.

6. What does MATC's future look like from where you're sitting?

MATC's future is bright. The Club continues to expand volunteer opportunities to reach a wider audience. The resource is secure now which was not the case two decades ago. MATC is more sophisticated in raising funds and anticipates that a modest increase in paid staff will be an essential need as the Club evolves.

7. Any final words?

Since the 1970s my philosophy has been to build the trail so it is sustainable in the long term. Personally, I see my work with MATC as doing good things for people and good things for the Earth at the same time.