

Working as a park ranger, however, was not all beautiful views, and Vietze was far from a happy camper. *This Wild Land* sometimes bogs down with his gripes about less-rewarding aspects of the job: lugging picnic tables, cutting firewood, cleaning toilets, and dealing with undesirable people. “We’ve had people drive stolen cars into the park, bring firearms into their cabins, kick in outhouse walls, carve up cabins, launch motorboats on Daicey Pond, fly prohibited drones, smash the thwarts of canoes to unlock them and use them illegally, and pack twenty people into a cabin that fits six,” he writes. Dwelling on these unpleasant acts is perhaps unavoidable. After all, Vietze was not vacationing in Baxter; he was working in a demanding job.

He also paints a sobering picture of how the park has evolved because of climate change: “I’ve hunkered through ever more violent storms, each one trying to fell more trees than the last. It seems every year for the past several we’ve witnessed dramatic weather events. . . . We’ve been thrashed by successive October nor’easters, leaving piles of downed trees almost as tall as the young trees left standing. And now drought. There is no normal anymore.”

Vietze may have abandoned his magazine office, but readers should be grateful that he hasn’t forsaken writing. This warts-and-all account could serve either purpose: Inspire some to pursue new career paths, or lead others to think long and hard before following in his bootsteps.

—Steve Fagin

Tangled Roots: The Appalachian Trail and American Environmental Politics

By Sarah Mittlefehldt

University of Washington Press, 2014, 280 pages.

ISBN: 978-0-295-99430-7. Price: \$24.95 (softcover).

Editor’s note: Although this book was first published in 2014, it came on our radar recently, and we feel it deserves attention even now.

ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL, SURROUNDED BY TALL TREES AND DENSE FOREST, it’s easy to think we’re traversing an ancient footpath through old woods. I’ve thought, “Thank goodness we preserved this sliver of nature before it was chopped down, mowed over, paved, and developed.”

That way of thinking about the AT is almost completely wrong, as I learned from Sarah Mittlefehldt’s *Tangled Roots: The Appalachian Trail and*

American Environmental Politics (University of Washington Press, 2014), a research-heavy dive into the environmental ideals, political compromises, setbacks, and breakthroughs that established and protected the footpath from Georgia to Maine (currently 2,194 miles long).

The AT is not ancient; some sections were blazed only in the past few decades. It was not preserved from old woods but rather carved through private farms and logging tracts, including properties that have been purposefully cleared of their human history so as to create a more “natural” experience for hikers. Only 1 percent of today’s trail has not been relocated or rebuilt.

That hidden history of the AT is an essential part of understanding how the trail was tediously cobbled together through a mix of community negotiations and strong-arm government tactics in what Mittlefehldt argues is a distinctly “American” version of environmental politics that blends federalism and grassroots organizing. Unlike Philip D’Anieri’s more recent *The Appalachian Trail: A Biography* (Mariner Books, 2021), which focused on such eccentric characters as Grandma Gatewood and Bill Bryson who built up the mythology around the AT, Mittlefehldt’s book is more of a study in trail-building realpolitik.

“Over the course of nearly a century, the AT project has combined the horizontal, dendritic roots of grassroots social action with the strong central taproot of federal authority,” writes Mittlefehldt, a professor of environmental history and policy at Northern Michigan University. “These two sources of political power evolved in dynamic interaction with one another, tipping at times toward one side or the other, but never fully separate.”

Known formally as the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, it was proposed in 1921 by Connecticut native Benton Mackaye, a U.S. Forest Service worker who was in the first Harvard class to graduate with a forestry degree. In a 1921 issue of the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, Mackaye noted how a trail following “the skyline along the top of the main divides and ridges of the Appalachians would overlook a mighty part of the nation’s activities” and might help address the unemployment, class antagonisms, and mental health problems that all appeared on the rise in a society “infected by a kind of spiritual malaise that came from being disconnected from nature.” (Mackaye’s wife had died by suicide that year.)

The essay led to a 1925 gathering in Washington, D.C., of the inaugural Appalachian Trail Conference, which would evolve into a nonprofit organization known today as the Appalachian Trail Conservancy responsible for managing the footpath. A loose-knit group of advocates began investigating potential trail locations, to varying levels of local support.

Moonshiners in Georgia tangled with trailblazers stumbling upon backwoods distilleries. An angry mob in Virginia, in what would become Shenandoah National Park, threw stones at trail volunteers and stole their shelter construction materials. Such resentment bubbled up over the decades. In the 1980s, thru-hikers in Tennessee encountered fishhooks dangling from a fishing line at eye level, presumably strung there by landowners unhappy about being pressured to sell their land. In the same area, arsonists torched an AT shelter and a posse of locals smashed a USFS vehicle with rocks and clubs.

The AT needed government support. In the 1930s, the Maine lawyer and trail enthusiast Myron Avery—who chaired the Appalachian Trail Conference from 1931 to his death in 1952—recruited the Civilian Conservation Corps to help blaze the trail, and in 1937 a CCC team marked the last remaining link of the AT between Spaulding and Sugarloaf Mountains in Maine. The following year, the Appalachian Trail Conference’s annual meeting was attended for the first time by the National Park Service, underscoring the government’s growing role following Congress’s 1936 passage of legislation to promote cooperative agreements between states in planning recreational areas.

By the late 1960s, however, the AT remained a largely ad-hoc string of public and private trails. Many sections had no more than a handshake agreement to allow hikers to pass. The Appalachian Trail Conference still needed to acquire 630,500 acres to create a publicly protected, 2,000-mile-long corridor 200 feet wide. (Later, trail advocates realized that the AT needed more than just a “skinny right of way” between housing developments, so in a 1978 federal bill, the corridor was widened to 1,000 feet.)

In 1968, Congress passed the National Trails System Act, with the AT and Pacific Crest Trail named the country’s first national scenic trails, thus inducting the AT into the national park system while deferring management and land acquisition to the ATC. Whereas volunteers had previously followed whatever “path of least resistance” could be negotiated with landowners and townships, according to Mittlefehldt, the AT now had federal money and the federal power of eminent domain to pursue the most scenic path, which is how spots like McAfee Knob in Virginia became part of the trail.

McAfee Knob was not along the original AT, which for its first four decades traversed the nearby Jefferson National Forest. Today, McAfee Knob is considered one of the most scenic spots on the fourteen-state footpath, and it only became a reality because of “a combination of grassroots support and the expanded power of eminent domain” from the 1968 Trails Act and a 1978 amendment expanding federal authority over trail creation, according

to Mittlefehldt. (The late Bob Proudman, the former Appalachian Mountain Club trail worker who built the Garfield Ridge Campsite in the White Mountains and went on to direct trail projects on the AT, played a key leadership role in acquiring McAfee Knob.)

In these ways, the creation of the AT can be interpreted as both federalist *and* confederalist, liberal *and* conservative; liberal in its focus on the environment and public good, conservative in its decentralized development and deference to landholder rights; federalist in its usage of eminent domain and government money, while antifederalist in its reliance on grassroots organizers, community-based groups, and volunteerism. (AMC, for example, maintains nearly 350 miles of the AT in five states.)

I learned a lot from *Tangled Roots*, and yet I wanted more from this book. Mittlefehldt conducted field research while thru-hiking the AT in 2007 on her honeymoon, which she briefly mentions. She and her husband hiked and hitchhiked into libraries and archives during the trek. I was left asking, How did librarians respond to Mittlefehldt showing up covered in mud, her grimy hands touching their archival documents? How did Mittlefehldt safeguard her research when back on the waterlogged trail?

Mittlefehldt strongly endorses the AT approach to environmental politics. I can't help but wish there was a better way. A century after Mackaye first proposed the world's longest hiker-only footpath, seven miles of the AT remain privately owned (and thus unprotected), and the trail corridor still doesn't routinely reach the targeted 1,000-foot width.

—Stephen Kurczy

Imaginary Peaks

By Katie Ives

The Mountaineers, 2021, 304 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-68051-541-1. Price: \$26.95 (hardcover).

ON AN EXPEDITION TO PERU IN 2021, A FRIEND AND I CLIMBED A NEW ROUTE of ice, snow, and rock on a 5,765-meter peak called Jangyaraja. Afterward, when I began looking into prior ascents of the mountain, things got weird. There were various spellings of its name. On Google Maps the mountain was labeled as Jatuncunca. Another trip report from the 1970s described three separate summits—though my partner and I only saw one obvious high point. By the end of my research, I wasn't even sure what mountain we had climbed.