

Beth Boyst's Long hike

The U.S. Forest Service PCT Administrator
retires after 30 years of public service

By **Mark Larabee**, PCTA Associate Director of Communications and Advocacy



Long-distance hiking and land management were not really in the game plan as Beth Boyst was contemplating the summer before her junior year at the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing in early 1982. But one day, in the cold of winter, she was walking and thinking and recalled a newspaper article she'd read about hiking the Appalachian Trail. She wasn't a backpacker, not even a hiker, but decided at that moment to thru-hike the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

"By May of 1982 I was hiking on the AT, just like that."

It wasn't that she did not have the outdoors bug. Childhood ties to eastern North Carolina and her maternal grandparent's farm and beach house gave her a window to the outdoors. They simply didn't do any hiking. But her Girl Scout leader, **Nell Smith**, planted the seed.

"I was not very interested in it, and it took a lot of encouragement to get me up the hill," Beth said. It came in the form of Mrs. Smith not letting Beth "bargain" her way out of summing Stone Mountain in Georgia – "I'll just stay here and wait for you to come back" – a story Beth reflected upon in one of her early columns for these pages.

That experience was a constant reminder for Beth on how important it is to connect young people to the PCT and the outdoors. Understanding how deeply those early roots are seeded helps you to understand the circuitous route Beth took to her job as the **U.S. Forest Service** PCT administrator. She spent the last 13 years of her 30-year Forest Service career working to improve the PCT experience with tireless dedication and idealism.

The AT hike began a period of self-discovery for Beth that continues. It was certainly the beginning of a lifelong love of long-distance hiking. After the AT hike, she graduated from nursing school and settled into work as a pediatric nurse for the University of Virginia hospitals. Nursing was inspired by her mother, also a registered nurse.

"She gave me a great example of the importance of taking care of people," Beth said.

A move west to a job at Denver Children's Hospital as a pediatric orthopedic nurse brought her closer to her destiny with the PCT.

"Nursing is tough and rewarding work," Beth said. "The ability to work with children and their families and help them is something that is with me to this day. Helping people through difficult times is really gratifying."

However, she also knew it wasn't for her long term. In 1987, after four years of nursing, she started grad school at Colorado University, eventually earning a master's degree in forestry. She completed the degree by working two 12-hour night shifts every weekend at the hospital and attending school full time during the week for three years.

"I realized I wanted to do something different," she said. "Being a hospital nurse is truly some of the most challenging work. I knew I would not be able to sustain that over 30 years."



Opposite: Beth Boyst on the summit of Mount Katahdin, at the completion of her 1982 AT thru-hike. Above: Beth's Girl Scout leader, Nell Smith, planted the seed that would lead to Beth's love of wilderness and land management.

"The reason that the PCT administrator position was interesting to me stems from core values I have in terms of public service and the importance of wild places. Public lands and trails must have a public interface for them to succeed."

Her AT hike surely came back into play. She wanted to learn more about wilderness and land management and was really interested in people's connection to place and the conflicts that arise. During grad school, on the urging of her adviser, she interned with the Forest Service in the Gila National Forest. The time gave her connections and real-world field experience.

In May 1991, she quit her nursing job – not for a forestry job, but to hike the PCT from the Southern Terminus to Sonora Pass. She applied for jobs with the **Peace Corps** and the Forest Service and had opportunities at both. At the end of that summer, she went to work for the White River National Forest in Colorado.

At first, she worked with outfitters and guides and on improving recreational opportunities while minimizing human impacts on the landscapes. Her career there grew to include trail and wilderness management. Eventually, she was the wilderness manager for the entire forest and was responsible for trails on two districts, including a section of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. She was there for 17 years.

Colorado is also where she met her husband, **Phil Bowden**, a forester who spent his career with the Forest Service as an expert in timber and vegetation management and fire suppression. They both loved living in Colorado but eventually started asking whether they would spend the rest of their careers there. They wanted to be sure their next jobs were even more meaningful.

"Were there other places we could enjoy?" Beth said. "It took a really good job for us to leave."

The opportunity to manage the PCT fit the bill. In 2007, they transferred to the agency's Region 5 headquarters in California. Her longevity with the agency in these two



Beth explores Native American cliff dwellings at Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico, 1994.

homes, she said, “speaks to the jobs I’ve had and how much I loved them. It speaks to community and place. I’ve been really fortunate in my career.”

Phil retired in January 2017, and Beth will follow him in January 2021. She’s ready to go full time in their next adventure together. They both enjoy hiking and rafting and have had several trips through the rapids of the Colorado River.

“He’s been able to do a whole bunch of things that I’ve been able to join late,” she laughed. “I’m looking to enjoy some of those trips on the front end now.”

She likes these adventures because they’re simply about the freedom of being outside. “I feel mentally and physical healthy when we’re doing those things – the joy of friends and family, movement, quiet and being submerged in nature.”

Beth has been a steady hand who helps guide the PCTA’s work to maintain, protect and advocate for the trail. She sincerely values the spirit of volunteer stewardship that it takes to maintain the trail.

“When I think about what Beth has accomplished for the PCT, I think about the strong partnership we have with the U.S. Forest Service, thanks to Beth,” said **Liz Bergeron**, PCTA executive director and CEO. “Through this partnership we have

given so much more to the PCT than any of us could have as individual organizations. I also think of Team PCT and how this is one of Beth’s favorite responses when we talk about how we are going to get things done. A huge thanks to Beth for the legacy she helped create.”

That feeling is universal among PCTA staff members.

“She has an extraordinary ability to listen to people’s ideas, discuss complicated issues, and move toward strong, well-thought-out solutions,” said **Justin Kooyman**, PCTA’s associate director of trail operations. “All those who endeavor on the PCT are having a better experience, whether they know it or not, because of Beth’s hard work and dedication to the trail.”

“Her dedication to the PCT has been inspirational, and the trail is better for it,” said **Ian Nelson**, PCTA regional representative. “Her smile and positive energy are always accentuated by her love of purple. I wish her and Phil all the best on their next adventure!”

“Through her actions, words and non-verbal communication, Beth has taught me so much about the person I want to be,” said **Anitra Kass**, PCTA regional representative. “Her empathy, understanding, and genuine interest in my well-being after my mother’s death was much needed and greatly appreciated. The way she makes sure you know your voice



Decked in purple on a PCT hike (left), and with trail crew members (right) from the American Conservation Experience.

has been heard and is valued is second to none. And her ability to navigate challenging and stressful situations while instilling calm and assuredness that we will find common ground are all things that I admire and appreciate about her."

Knowing Beth, it's impossible to see things any other way. She worked hard to bring out the best in all of us with encouragement, kindness, intelligence and a strong will.

"The reason that the PCT administrator position was interesting to me stems from core values I have in terms of public service and the importance of wild places," she said. "Public lands and trails must have a public interface for them to succeed. That's made it very easy to embrace partnerships. It's our shared work and value. Making sure we align in terms of intention is something the PCTA and I have put a lot of energy into, and I think the program has grown really well because of it."

She admits it is not always easy. This work is surprisingly complicated. But having a strong foundational partnership means you have a way through conflict, she said. That sets up the next PCT administrator with a path for success.

"I'm really looking forward to the next administrator bringing their strengths and helping the program grow," Beth said. "It's really good to have that change. I really do celebrate that."

There's always room for another in this group. There's plenty of work to go around. Beth has certainly set the bar high for all of us.

"Having worked with literally hundreds of agency partners over the last 40 years, there are a handful who really stand out in terms of dedication and ability to accomplish things, and Beth is one of these," said **Mike Dawson**, formerly the PCTA's trail operations director. "I would be remiss if I didn't also mention that Beth has always truly cared for her organization partners as individuals: their health, well-being, and their professional growth. I could not imagine a better partner in the true sense of that word."

Perhaps that's why all of us at the PCTA who value Beth as a team member also see her as a friend. The age of COVID is frustrating because we can't celebrate her retirement in person. For now, we wish her well and we look forward to raising a glass later and hearing about all those upcoming adventures.

"I'm very sad about not being able to see folks," Beth said. "I'm not quite ready to say goodbye yet, and I'm certain it will just be 'see you later.' The relationships we've created over these years are for a lifetime." 🍷