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Smokies: Species' ground zero**

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More than 100,000 species are thought to live in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park --- which is why it's ground zero for the largest inventory of living creatures ever attempted, the "All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory."

Thousands of scientists, volunteers and schoolchildren are expected to participate over the next decade or so in the effort centered on this 520,000- acre park that straddles the Tennessee-North Carolina border and attracts 9 million visitors a year.

"The Smokies ATBI has been called the biological equivalent of sending a man to the moon, it's that grand an undertaking," said Jody Flemming, spokesman for the nonprofit group **Discover Life in America**, which is supporting the project. Scientists can name and identify only about 10 percent of the species in the park, which has some of the world's most diverse habitat.

Participants don't expect to discover new mammals or birds, but expect to find thousands of unidentified species of plants and invertebrates, many smaller than the nail on an infant's pinky finger. Scientists will take the specimens they collect back to their home laboratories.

This summer is the ATBI's pilot season, when organizers test collection and trapping methods. Even mundane needs such as finding lodging and arranging transportation need to be ironed out before the full-fledged effort can begin.

**Discover Life in America** is using a grassroots approach to getting the job done. It has its own Internet Web site ([www.discoverlife.org](http://www.discoverlife.org)), and volunteers are encouraged to get involved when they log on.

Volunteers are needed for field work, specimen sorting and processing, and to serve as guides, photographers and even Web page designers.

John Pickering, an insect ecologist at the University of Georgia whose expertise is in parasitic wasps, sees enormous benefits in assembling all of the scientific data collected for the ATBI and posting it on the Internet.

"This is huge, daunting, monumental," he said. "Frankly, it becomes frightening to me. I'm very enthusiastic, and I want to do it right." And public involvement is essential.

"We need an interface between the scientists and the people," he added, " because there's simply not enough scientists to do this."

