

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF LONG DISTANCE TRAILS

APPALACHIAN TRAIL THROUGH VIRGINIA



The Appalachian Trail, America's first National Scenic Trail, stretches from Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia. Over 1/4 of the Trail (544 miles) travels through the state of Virginia although only 20 miles of the trail actually crosses into the Spearhead Trails region at Burkes Garden in Tazewell County.



The AT, as it has become known, was originally conceived as a greenway between these states in the 1920's and has become the most popular trail for day-hikers and thru-hikers alike that want to see the scenic wonders of the Appalachian Mountains. This 2,160 mile well-maintained hiking only trail has shelters conveniently spaced for overnight stays. *Note: Map from rhodesmill.org/thefox/maps/at4.gif*

In a study of hikers using the AT, it was found that 80% of those traveling the section through SW Virginia tend to be day hikers while the remaining 20% are overnight hikers.

Recommendation:

Tazewell County and SRRA should emphasize more the fact that the Appalachian Trail goes through their county. An excellent place to start is to add information about Burke's Garden on the state website noted below to encourage more hikers to take this section of the trail. Currently the website does not mention Burkes Garden.

www.virginia.org/site/features.asp?featureid=229.



PROPOSED LONG DISTANCE TRAILS

There are a number of examples of long distance trails creating positive economic impact for those communities along the routes.

- The Appalachian Trail user study, and spending statistics by Day Users, Overnight Users, Section Hikers, Thru Hikers. The majority of AT users are 1/3 Day and 1/3 Overnight, so Looping and Connecting Trails are very important for community economic development. In the SW VA area, 80% are Day, and 20% are Overnight, which could be applicable to the “Tricorn Trail” area of the GET.
- Nearly 2000 million people hike the Appalachian Trail each year. Of these, about 2000 start a thru hike with plans to walk the entire distance. Only 400 actually complete the hike.
- The Great Allegheny Passage is a 150-mile rail-turned-trail from Cumberland, Maryland to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania that has become a main thoroughfare for trail users seeking a wilder experience. Attracting both national and international visitors, the Passage generated over \$12 million in direct spending in 2007, up from \$7.3 million in 2002. Towns all along the trail serve as centers of commerce for trail users seeking food and other supplies.

GREAT EASTERN TRAIL



The Great Eastern Trail, stretches from Alabama to New York. With 327 miles, Virginia has more trail than any other state. The trail intersects three of America's eight National Scenic Trails, and provides a unique back-country experience.



The Great Eastern Trail (GET) is America's newest long distance trail. It is modeled after the Appalachian Trail known as a premier wilderness experience for hikers and backpackers in the rugged mountains bordering Virginia and West Virginia. Although sponsored by hiking clubs up and down the Eastern Seaboard, much of the GET, especially across Virginia, will be multi-use.

The Great Eastern Trail will be a trail for all non-motorized users. It is an approximately 1,800-mile, long-distance trail from Alabama to New York. The GET in Northern Virginia comprises 207 miles, stretching from the southern boundary of Sleepy Creek Wildlife Management Area in West Virginia through Northern Virginia. It exits Virginia on Allegheny Mountain in the Warm Springs Ranger District of the George Washington National Forest, and continues into the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia.

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After following the Allegheny Trail, it returns to Virginia and connects with the Appalachian Trail (AT) on Peters Mountain, continuing along the Virginia-West Virginia boundary. The GET then has a gap of over 120 miles from the AT to Breaks Interstate Park, on the border with Virginia and West Virginia.

In June of 2009, a Great Eastern Trail Summit was held at Breaks Interstate Park. The purpose of the summit was to:

1. Identify a route to fill the 120 mile +/- gap between Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia
2. Create a local chapter of GET



Representatives from all three states were in attendance in what is now called the Tri-Corn section of the Great Eastern Trail. At issue was the fact that a preliminary proposed route skirted southwest Virginia entirely.



Tom Johnson, volunteer coordinator for the GET Initiative, led the discussion at the Summit

Two Routes Proposed through the “Tri-Corn”

Kentucky Route

Kentucky representatives proposed a route that followed the Pine Mountain Trail into Elkhorn City then continue northward through Pike County KY, closely following the KY/VA line for a distance and the proposed ATV trail routing for Skyward Trails, but working toward single-use routings for motorized and non-motorized trails.



Much governmental support is available for owning, developing, managing, maintaining, promoting the trail and trailheads, and ensuring there is potable water along the way. Letters of support and commitment have been received. Statutes are in place to protect the state and property owners. Funding has been released to start trail acquisition and construction. Attractions include the Hatfield-McCoy Feud sites and stories, spur trail to Fishtrap Lake. Trail Towns include Phelps and Elkhorn City.

The route would then cross into West Virginia through Mingo & Wyoming County. Letters of support and commitment have been received. The proposed route through West Virginia has been hiked & a major portion of it GPS'd. This particular section is part of the National Coal Heritage Area in southern WV. Matewan is being studied for designation as a National Park unit, due to mining labor history. The Hatfield-McCoy feud story & sites are along a portion of this route. Traveling this route will also provide the opportunity to view active and reclaimed coal mining operations. Public lands include RD Bailey Lake and Twin Falls State Park. Trail Towns include Matewan and Stephenson.

Virginia Route

Virginia representatives proposed a route from Elkhorn City (Pine Mountain Trail) Dickenson & Buchanan County routing will be further scoped as part of the Spearhead Trails Feasibility Study. Current thinking is to route from Elkhorn City (or Pine Mountain Trail), over to the VA side to the Russell Fork River, upstream to Haysi, rail-trail to Vacey, to South Gap/Poplar Gap to Grundy to Vansant to Whitewood following another rail-trail to Peapatch at the Virginia/West Virginia stateline.



The entire route has been GPS'd and photos highlighting interesting features along the route identified.

A follow-up meeting with West Virginia representatives suggested the route continue into McDowell County WV heading east to Berwind Lake to War to Anawalt to Camp Creek in the Bluestone/New River area then east to Pipestem State Park. The route would follow the 10 mile Bluestone Turnpike Trail to Bluestone State Park, then cross the river near Hinton, and follow the New River right descending bank (east side), crossing at Glen Lyn, following River Road to Narrows, then up Mill Creek trail to the Appalachian Trail at Angels Rest. Co-align with the AT for less than 10 miles, crossing the New River. Divert away from the Appalachian Trail by following the east side of Peters Mountain on Forest Service dirt roads, then intersect/co-align with the Appalachian trail again on top of Peters Mountain along with the Allegheny Trail. Trail Towns include Hinton, Glen Lyn, Narrows, Pearisburg.

Note: Alternative route would be from Peapatch to Tazewell to the AT at Burkes Garden area. Attractions and Trail Towns along both routes have been identified.

Consensus of Summit - Create both a Northern & Southern route. The conference ended with a decision that a request will be made to have both a northern route of the Great Eastern Trail (through Pike, Mingo and Wyoming counties) and a southern loop (through Dickenson, Buchanan, McDowell and Tazewell Counties). Both routes will be included in all promotional materials and marketing.



IMMEDIATE ACTIONS TO TAKE: Letters of support are needed from all the communities along the proposed southern route. A formal proposal should be submitted to the GET Board of Directors as soon as possible. To this end, the consultants have GPS'd the entire route through Virginia. They have also met with representatives in West Virginia for confirmation of their support for the southern route and to ask for both letters of support and assistance in putting a two-state proposal together.

Create a Local Chapter

It was also highly recommended that a local chapter be developed in each state. The organization needs to file for Incorporation with the state, file for 501c3 status with the federal IRS, develop Bylaws, and use pro-bono lawyers. The club must also have a beneficial purpose and not just recreational so that it qualifies as a charity. With this organizational structure, the club can accept trail easements, property and funds, and protect its officers from liability in case of work party injuries.



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RECOMMENDATION: Heart of the Appalachia Trail Authority should become the local chapter for Virginia and then organize a committee, made up of representatives from Buchanan and Dickenson County and interested citizens. A letter should be included in the formal proposal reflecting the Authority's willingness to serve in this capacity along with a list of those who make up the committee.



Follow-up work to be completed:

- Consider “roads to trails” using old roads that are still public ways.
- Consider a GET trailhead along Rt 460.
- Consider a Pike/Dickenson/Buchanan County loop.
- Identify ownership of abandoned rail lines, and possible use as “rails to trails”.
- Prepare your town as a Trail Town, using the online Manual found at <http://greatalleghenypassage.com/pdf/1TTManual.pdf>
- Review the 2000 Appalachian Trail User Survey, found at <http://www.nps.gov/appa/ParkMgmt/PublicInvolvement.htm>
- Get sample bylaws from Tom Johnson, for a trail club.
- KY/VA folks will join Pine Mountain Trail Conference, and extend the GET via county chapters.
- WV folks will look into joining WV Scenic Trails Association, and form a GET committee.
- Tom to email everyone the brochure: “Protecting Your Land with the PATC”.
- Review the VA SCORP (Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan), found at http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational_planning/vop.shtml. Each state has one.
- Review the Recreational Use Statutes for each state, found at <http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/recreationaluse/index.html> or <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/archive/article/124/>
- KY Fiscal Court can adopt roads back into the system, ie Knott County did so by ordinance.
- Find out the status of this.
- Apply for VISTA workers to assist locally.



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The GET is a volunteer project being pursued by the Great Eastern Trail Association, a coalition of existing trail clubs dedicated to completion of the trail. It enjoys official sponsorship and assistance from the American Hiking Society and the National Park Service through the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program. Other partners include the Alabama Trails Association, Alabama Hiking Trail Society, Finger Lakes Trail Conference, Friends of Green Ridge State Forest, Georgia Pinhoti Trails Association, Mid State Trail Association, Pine Mountain Trail Conference, Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, Standing Stone Trail Association, Cumberland Trail Conference and the West Virginia Scenic Trails Association.