

Great Eastern Trail Concept Plan



An 1800--mile hiking trail, paralleling the Appalachian Trail, linking Alabama and New York.

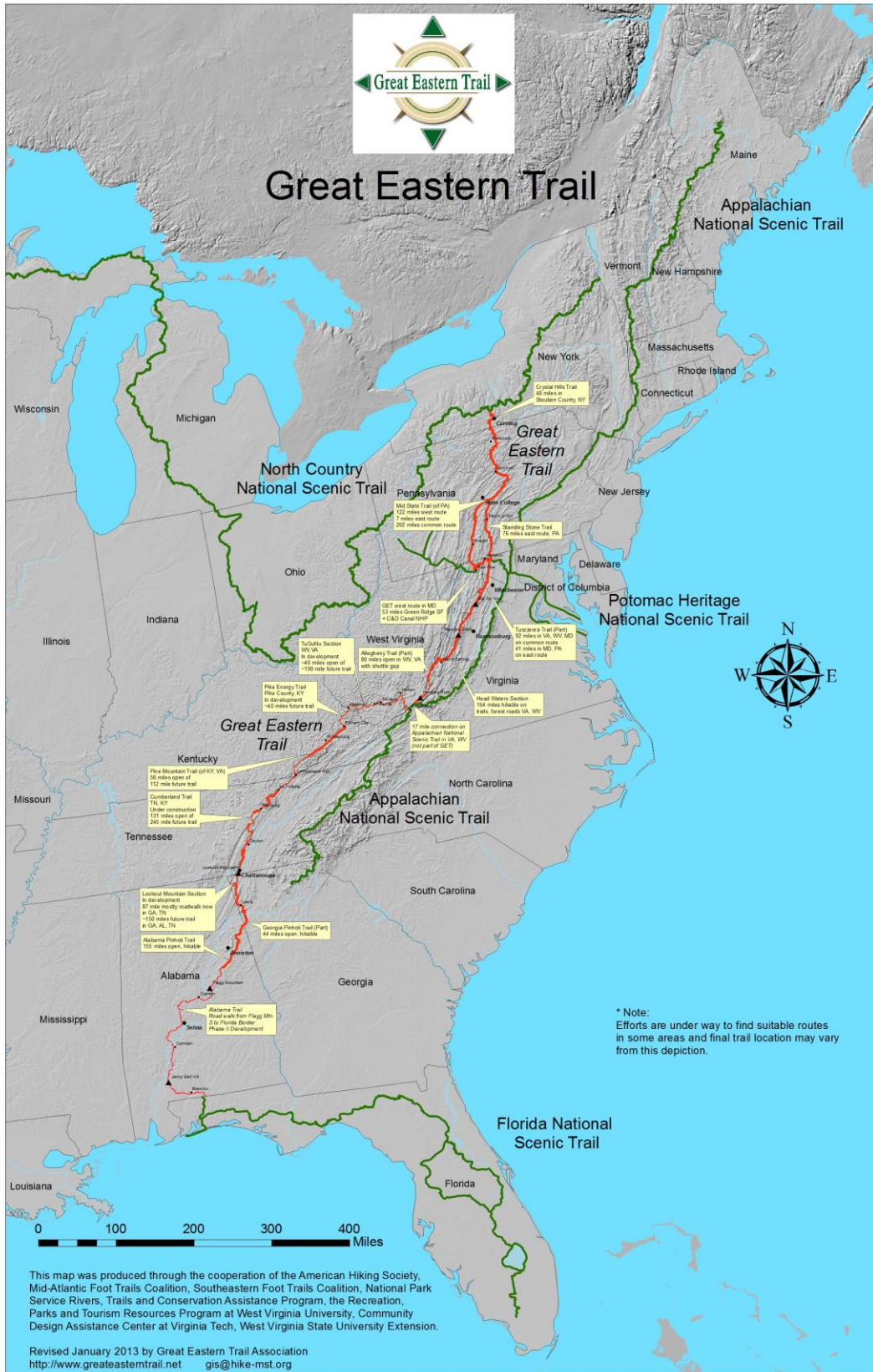


www.GreatEasternTrail.net

October 2009



Great Eastern Trail



* Note:
Efforts are under way to find suitable routes in some areas and final trail location may vary from this depiction.

This map was produced through the cooperation of the American Hiking Society, Mid-Atlantic Foot Trails Coalition, Southeastern Foot Trails Coalition, National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, the Recreation, Parks and Tourism Resources Program at West Virginia University, Community Design Assistance Center at Virginia Tech, West Virginia State University Extension.

Revised January 2013 by Great Eastern Trail Association
<http://www.greateasterntrail.net> gis@hike-mst.org

Background:

After his legendary hike in 1948, Earl Shaffer, the first Appalachian Trail (AT) thru-hiker, came up with an idea for a new trail. He sent the idea to his brother John in a letter in 1952. Why not create a new trail west of the AT? Trails were already out there – they just needed to be linked together. Shaffer's idea was first publicly articulated by Stan Murray, the chairman of the ATC Board of Directors, in 1969, at the opening meeting of the Tennessee Trails Association. This new trail took on the name of the Western Appalachian Alternative (WAA).

The Appalachian Trail became a huge success, and as time went on, became more and more popular (and crowded). In 2000 Lloyd MacAskill of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) published an article in the *Appalachian Trailway News* calling attention to the existing trails to the west of the AT and saying “Don't look now, but parts are already in place.” He named some of the various trails that could be linked to provide a western alternative.

In the fall of 2003 PATC) proposed to the Southeast Foot Trails Coalition (SEFTC) which had just formed in Chattanooga, that the two organizations begin discussing such a project. SEFTC accepted the proposal and in an executive committee meeting in April of 2004 endorsed it as a central organizing theme and Coalition objective. The idea was to make certain southeast foot trails part of this new trail.

American Hiking Society (AHS) and the National Park Service/Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program, which had partnered to form SEFTC, offered to assist in the early organizational effort. In the fall of 2004 NPS/RTCA, AHS, and PATC signed a memorandum of agreement.

In 2007 eleven trail groups, some of them from SEFTC, joined together to form the Great Eastern Trail Association (GETA).

The Vision

The Great Eastern Trail will link existing trails in the Appalachian Mountains into a new long-distance trail stretching ultimately from the Florida National Scenic Trail at the Florida/Alabama line, north to the Finger Lakes Trail in New York, part of the North Country National Scenic Trail. This will provide a premier hiking experience on a series of existing trails that become linked to each other. Due to its location in more remote areas of the Appalachians, hikers will have a more primitive backcountry experience, providing an alternative to the relatively crowded Appalachian Trail.

The Proposed Route

From South to North. In Alabama, a gap needs to be closed between the Florida National Scenic Trail and the Alabama-Pinhoti Trail, which links to the Georgia-Pinhoti Trail. In northwest Georgia a trail will be extended from the Pinhoti Trail to the Tennessee border, where a new route is being laid out linking existing trails on Lookout Mountain with the Cumberland Trail State Scenic Trail near Chattanooga. This trail now links to the Pine Mountain Trail by way of Cumberland Gap. The Pine Mountain Trail now ends at Breaks Interstate Park at the Kentucky-Virginia border.

A new link needs to be selected between the Pine Mountain Trail and the Appalachian Trail. A primary route has been tentatively selected through proceeds north from Elkhorn City, Kentucky, to

Matewan, West Virginia, and then east across the National Coal Heritage Area of southern West Virginia to Pipestem State Park. The route then follows the Bluestone and New Rivers into Virginia and a brief connection with the Appalachian Trail near Pearisburg. Once on the AT, the new trail takes the route of the existing Allegheny Trail back into West Virginia. At Lake Sherwood in West Virginia a new link has been fashioned along the Virginia-West Virginia border area to the Tuscarora Trail on Great North Mountain in Virginia. It then proceeds north through West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle, crossing the Potomac at Hancock, Maryland. There it diverges into two routes, forming a loop.

1. The eastern route proceeds along the C&O Canal towpath, turning north along the Tuscarora Trail into Pennsylvania. (The C&O Towpath National Park is also designated as the route for the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail.) Just north of Cowans Gap State Park it doglegs northwest on the existing Standing Stone Trail. In central Pennsylvania the Standing Stone Trail meets the Mid State Trail. This trail ends near the New York border, and a new link has recently been constructed to the existing Finger Lakes Trail, part of the North Country Trail.

2. The western route will proceed west along the C&O towpath to Green Ridge State Forest, and will use that trail system to link with the southern end of the Mid State Trail.

Side Trails and Linkages

It is anticipated that other trails will link with the central trail corridor. Such trails may become part of the formal organization and will be designated "side trails" using the parlance of the National Trails Act of 1968. In addition, the Great Eastern Trail will connect with the Florida, Appalachian, Potomac Heritage, and North Country National Scenic Trails.

The Volunteer Paradigm

The paradigm of this trail is volunteer effort. The initial organizational scheme will involve existing volunteer trail clubs, augmented where necessary by new volunteer groups. The model will be the Appalachian Trail, which was initially constructed almost entirely by volunteer effort. Volunteers will work closely with governmental entities, but the emphasis will be on volunteerism.

The Nature of the Trail

The Trail will be primarily a hiking trail, and its support comes from hiking trail clubs. There are parts of existing trails, however, that are already multi-user, and there will be no attempt to change the nature of those trails, or the user groups. Thus parts of the trail will also be open to equestrians and mountain bikers, according to decisions by the relevant land managers.

The Trail will be non-motorized throughout. No motorized segments will be incorporated, except when road shoulders or jeep trails must be used. The objective is to get the trail off roads entirely.

The initial mission of the project is to establish an organizational structure that will encompass the entire length of the trail, including all organizations involved, and begin building capacity for new trails in those areas where there are gaps. In August of 2007 the trail groups involved in the effort incorporated as the Great Eastern Trail Association, and held an organizational meeting in Virginia in November of 2007.

The Trail will consist of more than just a narrow track. Since it will be a long-distance trail, overnight

accommodations may be created. The preferred option is the three-sided shelter similar to those constructed on the Appalachian Trail. Parts of the trail lacking shelters may have campgrounds. Accommodations will be approximately 8-12 miles apart. Each shelter or campground will have a privy and water source. Maps will show trail access points and parking facilities.

Trail Standards

Initially the Trail will adopt the AT standard, but the width will be three feet (vice four feet for the AT) to account for its more primitive nature. *Appalachian Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance*, by William Birchard, Jr., and Robert Proudman, will be adopted for most trail sections. Where the trail is multi-use, the construction standards already in place will be used for that section of trail.

Mapping and Description

Individual organizations now involved with portions of the trail will create maps and guide books unique to their trail sections.

Gaps

Beginning with five gaps, the clubs of the Great Eastern Trail Association have selected routes across three of the gaps:

The gap between the Tuscarora and the Allegheny trails has essentially been closed. About one mile of new trail remains to be built.

The same is true of the gap between the Mid State and Finger Lakes trails. This route has been selected and blazed – the trail is scheduled for completion in 2013.

In June 2009, a conference held at the Breaks Interstate Park selected the route from the Breaks to Pearisburg. This route has been GPSed and mapped, but landowner permissions must be obtained. Most of the route can be hiked today because it consists of existing trails and road shoulders, and memoranda of understandings have been signed with several public land managers (state parks, localities, and the National Park Service).

Two gaps must be closed.

From the northwestern endpoint of the Florida Trail, north through Alabama, to meet with the Alabama Pinhoti Trail.

From the Georgia-Pinhoti to the Cumberland Trail, a distance of approximately 70 Miles. Part of the route has been tentatively selected, and much of the trail through that area has already been built. More planning work needs to be done.

Benefits of the Trail

This trail complements the existing eight national scenic trails, providing recreational opportunities for the entire East Coast. It is further from population centers than is the AT, but with the advent of the interstate highway system, remote areas of the Appalachians are reachable in only a few hours; in

MacKaye's day just reaching trail heads in places like West Virginia was a more daunting task. The increasing number of day hikers and backpackers demands an ever-expanding network of trails, especially in the populous Atlantic Seaboard.

Anticipated Results

For minimal expenditures in time and money, the project, when completed, will make available to the hiking public a new 1800-mile trail. Each trail club that assumes responsibility for a section of the new trail will determine the user groups and signage. It is anticipated that where new trail is to be constructed, the emphasis will be on hikers only. The trail will not be for motorized users.

Support for the Project

The following organizations are supporting this effort:

Great Eastern Trail Association (GETA), consisting of representatives from the following trail organizations involved in the project (GreatEasternTrail.net)

Alabama Trails Association
Alabama Hiking Trail Society
Georgia Pinhoti Trail Association
Friends of Green Ridge State Forest
Cumberland Trail Conference
Pine Mountain Trail Conference
Finger Lakes Trail Conference
Standing Stone Trail Club
Mid State Trail Association, Inc.
Potomac Appalachian Trail Club
West Virginia Scenic Trail Association

American Hiking Society

National Park Service -- Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program

National Park Service, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park

Southeast Foot Trails Coalition, an organization of 29 trail groups,

The George Washington and Jefferson National Forests has signed a memorandum of understanding with GETA.

The GET route will not be co-aligned with neither the Florida National Scenic Trail nor the North Country National Scenic Trail. GET will simply link them together.