

International Appalachian Trail backers say progress made toward linking 3 continents on trail

AUGUSTA, Maine — Organizers of an extension of the Appalachian Trail that spans two and will eventually link three continents are making progress stitching together the pieces of long pathway.



In this photo provided by Wilfred E. Richard, organizers of an extension of the International Appalachian Trail hold hands across the millennias-old geological divide that separates North America and Europe in Iceland, in June 2012. Traveling to Iceland from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, the IAT trail extends the Appalachian Trail from its northern terminus at Mount Katahdin, Maine, to eastern Canada, Greenland, Iceland and then to Europe, where it meanders from Ireland and Britain and south to Spain. (AP Photo/Wilfred E. Richard)

At least symbolically, they've united North America and Europe through the International Appalachian Trail.

Representatives of the countries that are part of the trail held their first annual meeting outside of North America last month.

Traveling to Iceland from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, they gathered at the Mid Atlantic Ridge National Park and held hands across the millennias-old geological divide that separates North America and Europe. Their gathering took place across the crevice that is one of the original fissures in the supercontinent of Pangaea. It starts a series of fissures that still runs down the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, separating the North American and European continents.

The IAT trail extends the Appalachian Trail from its northern terminus at Mount Katahdin, Maine, to eastern Canada, Greenland, Iceland and then to Europe, where it meanders from Ireland and Britain and south to Spain. The plan is to end the trail in Morocco's Atlas Mountains, said IAT founder Richard Anderson.

Much of the trail encompasses long-used pathways and trails in hiking-happy Europe, so the IAT is now being used. Gaps that still exist are being closed step-by-step as the IAT works with parks and recreation officials in the countries to outline routes, Anderson

said. Hikers must find their own ways to cross portions of the ocean that break up the trail, from Newfoundland to Greenland and Iceland, and then to Europe. The trail is free to use in some places and fees are charged in other places.

The exact length of the entire trail on both sides of the ocean isn't known because it's incomplete on the European side. But it could be in the range of 10,000 to 15,000 miles in the future — there is no target date — when it's complete. On the North American side alone, the Appalachian Trail and IAT alone account for roughly 4,000 miles.

Some Appalachian Trail hikers in North America who are familiar with the IAT are skeptical of the idea of using the Appalachian name across the ocean, said Gary Beagles, who runs the Hikers Welcome Hostel along the trail in Glenciff, N.H.

"They think it's a big joke. They see it as where they're just trading off the name," said Beagles, who goes by the trail name Phatt Chapp. Beagles said the overseas trail "doesn't have anything to do with Appalachia or the cultures of Appalachia."

Others, in international circles, are taking the idea very seriously. The IAT's annual meeting in June in Reykjavik was marked by the presence of the American, Canadian and Norwegian ambassadors to Iceland. Next year's meeting will be in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The geology of the world rimming the Atlantic forms reasoning behind the roughly horseshoe-shaped trail. After the continental plates of Europe and North America collided millions of years ago, they broke up and drifted toward their present locations. What remains of that collision formed mountains that now line the sides of the North Atlantic.

The trail follows those mountains, whose separation begins at the Mid Atlantic Ridge in Iceland's Thingvellir National Park, where the IAT representatives joined hands.

"It was symbolic of the basic principle of the IAT, which is connecting the pieces of the Appalachian Mountains which were separated when the continental rift was created," Anderson said last week.

In another move to symbolize international cooperation, the IAT hopes to open a trail that traverses a bridge connecting Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, Anderson said.

Online:

International Appalachian Trail: <http://www.iat-sia.com>

Link :

<http://www.therepublic.com/view/story/8eb9ae91cdab4ca49f2fca2f9f655e73/ME--International-Appalachian-Trail>