



Annual Report 2018

Introduction

Last year was another year of growth and exciting developments for both the TCTA and Transcaucasian Trail itself. In early 2018, the TCTA added several directors to our board and adopted a strategy to clarify the role of the TCTA in the general development of the trail and with our partner organizations and the many stakeholders across the Caucasus region. With this strategy in hand, and with the efforts of our board members, the directors of the local TCT NGOs in Georgia and Armenia, our other partners, and especially our many volunteers, we have set ourselves up for success in 2019 and beyond.

The TCTA has been instrumental in getting the idea of a trail across the Caucasus off the ground over the past 3 years, and has introduced models for volunteer conservation efforts in the region that are now being adopted by other organizations. In the coming years, much of the development of the TCT in Georgia and Armenia will be carried out by our affiliated NGOs, the Transcaucasian Trail NGO of Georgia and the Transcaucasian Tourism Support NGO of Armenia. We will also continue to cultivate other partners in the region through our local organizations and shift the role of the TCTA to one primarily focused on grantmaking to the local NGOs, coordinating between the organizations as the TCT expands, and serving as the international representative of the trail and trail related activities to volunteers, donors, hikers, and other stakeholders. We will continue to pursue our mission to develop, promote, and maintain the Transcaucasian Trail in order to improve access to the region's diverse cultural and natural heritage and encourage its preservation, benefiting local communities and trail users through the development of sustainable tourism.

This document highlights our achievements in both Armenia and Georgia in 2018 both as a part of TCTA-directed activities and achievements made possible by the support that the TCTA provided to the local NGOs in Armenia and Georgia and other partners.

Developments in Armenia in 2018

Extension of the Dilijan National Park trail network

In partnership with the newly-formed Trails For Change NGO, under the leadership of TCT Armenia council member Hans Keifer, we won a tender to design and build four new trails in Dilijan National Park, to mark and renovate a further 11 existing trails, and to install supporting trail infrastructure including information boards, signposts and public toilets. Trails For Change employed a number of Armenian former volunteers from our 2017 trail building program for the construction and maintenance work, while TCT Armenia provided technical expertise and supervision. The project was co-funded by the European Union in Armenia as part of the broader Dilijan Development Project implemented by IDeA Foundation. As a result, the park now features more than 200km of interlinked hiking routes with a unified signage and blazing system, including the 80km section of the Transcaucasian Trail built in 2017, which features on six trailhead information boards throughout the park and on free printed literature available from the newly opened tourist information centre.

These results were possible thanks to deliberate cooperation efforts by our team members throughout 2016 and 2017 to place the goal of a unified trail network at the heart of both our and IDeA Foundation's projects in Dilijan National Park.

Improvement of the Dilijan National Park stage of the TCT

The State Tourism Committee of the Republic of Armenia drafted a national trail signage and marking guidelines for Armenia. In accordance with this guidance and in order to synchronise with the system introduced by IDeA Foundation, TCT Armenia returned to Dilijan National Park and re-blazed the TCT route using red & white painted blazes similar to those in widespread use in Europe. At the same time, rerouting and maintenance work was carried out to improve the quality of the hiking experience yet further.

Opening of a 30km section of the TCT in southern Vayots Dzor

Based on our Hovnanian Foundation-funded design in 2017 of a 90km section of the Transcaucasian Trail through southern Vayots Dzor, the construction of an 11km subsection of this, between the villages of Gomk and Martiros, was funded by the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) as part of its 'Bridge For Civil Society Organisations' program. The newly established HIKEArmenia Foundation was the recipient of this grant, for which TCT Armenia was contracted to provide project management, GIS and mapping, and content-writing services, and Trails For Change again contracted for trail construction and training. The project was completed in November.

In parallel, HIKEArmenia expanded the remainder of the original trail design and directly funded the construction (again by Trails For Change) of 50+ km of additional interconnected trails in the region, training two local community members in trail construction and maintenance skills and forming a 30km marked & signposted section of the Transcaucasian Trail in the process. It is

planned in 2019 for trailhead information boards to be installed in the communities along the trail and for new maps to be published, both of which will incorporate information about the TCT as well as individual local routes. HIKEArmenia plans in 2019 to coordinate the joint publicity of this region as a new trail destination in its own right.

Group fundraising trek in Dilijan National Park

June 2018 saw eight international hikers joining two local guides to hike the complete 85 km TCT loop in Dilijan National Park from Khachardzan to Hovk. Each participant raised and contributed USD\$1,200 as a donation towards our ongoing work in Armenia.

Publication of the Gegham Mountains stage of the TCT

Following successful beta-hikes this summer by three separate groups of volunteers, we have now published detailed trail notes and interactive maps on the TCT website for a 114 km backcountry section of the Transcaucasian Trail across the Gegham Mountains in central Armenia. This connects to the extended Dilijan National Park stage at the town of Sevan to create 203 km of continuous thru-hiking.

<https://transcaucasiantrail.org/en/hike/geghama-mountains-armenia/>

Additional scouting and mapping work resulted in a 39km connecting route between the Gegham Mountains and Vayots Dzor stages, connecting Selim caravanserai to Areni village. Taken together with the trails developed elsewhere in the province, this means that a continuous 121 km viable route has now been identified across Vayots Dzor province. When connected to the Dilijan National Park and Gegham Mountain stages, this represents a total of 344 km of continuous thru-hiking which is considered viable for publication in its current condition.

Crowdfunding Armenia's first detailed topographic hiking map

In October, a TCT-supported crowdfunding campaign by Cartisan.org, a startup founded by former Transcaucasian Expedition team member Alessandro Mambelli, with the goal of producing a 1:25,000-scale topographic hiking map of Dilijan National Park, including the marked and proposed routes of the TCT in the region. TCT Armenia provided extensive mapping data and contacts with partner organisations in support of this project, as well as with publicity and outreach supported by the TCTA. The campaign was successful with 120% of the fundraising goal reached, allowing Cartisan to move forward with map production. The finished product is expected to be available in Armenia and worldwide for the start of the 2019 hiking season. Of the revenue from sales of the finished map, 5% will be donated back to us in support of ongoing trail maintenance in the Dilijan National Park region.

<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/maps-for-hikers-dilijan-national-park-armenia/>

Partner development of the Syunik stage of the TCT

Based in part on our previous scouting and mapping work, the Kapan-based ARK Armenia NGO has incorporated into a 3-year EU-funded development programme the marking and signage of a 140km section of the proposed TCT route across Syunik Province. The first phase of the project saw additional scouting and mapping work by ARK volunteers, with signage and marking work planned for the second phase in 2019. Our visit with HIKEArmenia in November 2018 assessed part of the proposed route for additional maintenance and construction needs, with a view to supporting ARK with a volunteer trail building program in 2019.

Governance & Board Formation

A priority for the Armenia NGO in 2018 was to establish a structure to ensure proper oversight of funds, to clarify roles and responsibilities for our operation and activities, and to help guide the our direction and purpose. We also sought to formalise the relationship between the TCTA and the local NGO. A Memorandum Of Understanding outlining the relationship was signed by both organizations, and as a result of the addition of three new volunteer council members, the governance structure of the organisation is now as follows:

Council members (under Armenian NGO law, the equivalent to a board of directors or trustees):

- Ashot Davtyan, *Vice President since June 2017 & council chairperson*;
- Tom Allen, *President since August 2017 & council member*;
- Paul Stephens, *Council member & Executive Director of the Transcaucasian Trail Association*; Hans Keifer, *Council member, President of Trails For Change NGO, President of Bellfree Contactors (USA)*;
- Raffi Kojian, *Council member & founder of the Janapar Trail*

Developments in Georgia in 2018

Trail building connecting Svaneti and Racha

Construction of the trail connecting the regions of Svaneti and Racha started in summer 2018 and will continue in summer 2019. Crews completed important trail work near Zeskho, a remote village east of Ushguli. They completed an important section of trail rerouting a steep and dangerous route to access Lapari Pass onto a forested ridge.

Not only was the old “trail” dangerous and potentially deadly, it was also located on a landslide area that would be impossible to improve or maintain because snow slides move the rock and gravel on the pass each year. The new trail will cross the pass at a slightly higher point, but provide a safe hiking experience on a trail built at a sustainable grade that can be maintained. Trail expert Bob Birkby (<http://www.robertbirkby.com/>) visited the trail in Zeskho in October 2018 with representatives from the US Forest Service (see below). He was very impressed with the work and also gave some advice on future trail work.

The new tread was created on a sustainable grade that will resist erosion and provide a safe and enjoyable hiking experience for trail users. The new trail was built according to sustainable

trail design standards created by the US Forest Service, with a trail width of 50 cm or more and a prevailing grade of less than 20%. Trail work included clearing brush to make old trail passable, digging new trail bed and creating switchback turns, removing obstacles, and creating drainage to ensure the trail does not erode. The total amount of trail created, cleared or improved was approximately 5 km located in extremely challenging terrain.

TCT Youth Leadership Corps Georgia

With support from the Austrian Development Agency and the TCTA, the TCT NGO of Georgia, ran a pilot project to develop future conservation leaders in Georgia and potential crew leaders for the TCT.

During July and August, 2018 the Transcaucasian Trail NGO of Georgia trained 20 young adults (ages 18-25) in outdoor leadership, sustainable trail design and maintenance, crew management and basic first aid for the outdoors. The trail building phase of the project was based out of a backcountry camp in Zeskho. Two groups of 10 young adults spent four weeks each in the Zeskho Valley participating on trail crews. The crews worked on building new trail through the forests of the upper Zeskho Valley toward Lapari Pass. The crews worked for two ten-day periods with a four day break in between. During the break, the participants were trained in first aid and leadership models.

Living and working in remote areas while working on conservation projects is a well-established way to develop leadership skills in young adults while instilling in them the value of conservation and service. In the U.S., working on a conservation corps is an important life experience for many people, because of the opportunities it provides for personal growth, learning, and working as a team in challenging conditions. While the leadership development provided by such conservation corps is valuable in itself, there are other important benefits to training young people in trail building and conservation work. As Georgia's system of protected areas and national parks grows, it will need a growing cadre of workers with experience in land management, trail building, and crew management. In addition, the Transcaucasian Trail project will be expanding the number of trail crews working to build and maintain what will eventually become a 3,000 km+ trail network connecting the protected areas of the Caucasus.

The program provided leadership modeling and experiential learning, which were reinforced through workshops and instruction. Participants also contributed 3,200 hours of volunteer labor to help build the TCT. Through the program, we identified and developed individuals who will become crew leaders for the summer 2019 work season.

International Volunteer Program

Twenty-two volunteers from eight different countries (including Georgia and Azerbaijan) participated in our international volunteer program in July and August 2018, contributing over 1,700 hours of volunteer labor to help build the TCT in Svaneti. The international volunteer

program crews were based out of Zeskho and worked alongside the Youth Leadership Corps participants.

Partnership with Earth Corps for leadership development

The TCTA supported Giorgi Jmukhadze in his participation in Earth Corps from June to December, 2018. Earth Corps is an outdoor leadership program in Seattle that brings together US and international volunteers to learn about environmental issues, trail building, and land management while working on conservation corps crews in parks throughout the Puget Sound region of Washington.

Giorgi is from Nikortsminda, Georgia, a small town in the mountainous region of Racha. He volunteered with the TCT in Svaneti in the summer of 2017, where he displayed a great aptitude for trail work, leadership potential, and a passion to learn more about conservation. Knowing that the Earth Corps would offer an important opportunity for him to develop his interests, the TCTA supported Giorgi's participation in the program, with the understanding that he would bring what he learned back to Georgia to help build the TCT and develop more conservation leaders in the Caucasus.

Giorgi will serve as Leadership Development Coordinator and crew leader for the TCT's Youth Leadership Corps in Georgia in 2019.

Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour in Tbilisi

In September, TCT Georgia hosted the Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour in Tbilisi, with the support of the TCTA and a dedicated crew of volunteers. Banff is the world's premiere film festival about mountain ecosystems, sports, cultures, and this was the first time the festival has come to the Caucasus. More than 200 people attended the event, and local sponsors donated a variety of raffle prizes to give away. The local NGO raised more than \$800 to support trail building efforts in Georgia, and the event also created an important opportunity to gather and connect with the community of mountain lovers in Tbilisi.

U.S. Forest Service technical assistance workshop and site visit

In October, the US Forest Service delivered a workshop on trail infrastructure design in Tbilisi for a variety of stakeholders in government and NGOs. This was followed by a site visit to the TCT in Svaneti to look at the work that we have done over the past three years.

US Forest Service team members Robert Birkby and Bella Gordon, were joined by Gela Bokhashvili, landscape architect for Georgia's Agency for Protected Areas, to visit trails developed by the TCT in Kichkhuldashi, Tvebishi, and Zeskho. Robert Birkby is the author of "Lightly on the Land," the Student Conservation Association's guide to trail building. Birkby said in his report that the TCT's trail skills were the best they had seen in Georgia. "I was impressed by the dedication of the folks we met with the Transcaucasian Trail, and by the audacity of what

they are setting out to do,” he wrote. “They have fielded crews for two seasons now and are learning a great deal as they go, both about how to run a complicated program and how to design and build trails in challenging terrain.”

Transboundary cooperation in 2018

Pilot Armenia–Georgia volunteer exchange program

In July, a group of Armenian volunteers came to join the Youth Leadership Corps crews in Zeskho. The Armenian volunteers worked alongside YLC participants for 7 days, representing the first TCT volunteer exchange between Georgia and Armenia, an initiative we plan to continue in future years.

TCT 2018 Summit weekend in Dilijan

TCT Armenia Vice President Ashot Davtyan initiated and organised a Transcaucasian Trail summit event in Dilijan, Armenia in October. Volunteers and officials from both the Georgia and Armenia NGOs came together for a weekend of presentations, open-format discussions, and of course hikes on the TCT route in Dilijan National Park. The purpose of the event was to establish closer cooperation between the two local organizations through relationship-building activities such as debating, teamwork and shared experiences. It is hoped that the event will become an annual fixture in the region, showcasing each time a different destination along the developing route of the TCT.

Continuation of our partnership with Jaguar Land Rover (JLR)

It is with pleasure that we share the news of JLR's commitment to supporting the Transcaucasian Trail mission with the loan of a specially modified Land Rover Defender for a further three years (ie: until the end of 2020). The Land Rover rejoined the effort in July, having been driven to Armenia from the UK after servicing and repairs. This ongoing partnership is largely thanks to individuals within the company who have developed a personal interest in our mission. The car has proven its worth in a huge range of fieldwork tasks, from exploration and mapping to logistical support for volunteer programmes, educational tours, trail design and trail construction. The partnership will remain invaluable as we continue to push these aspects forward in both Georgia and Armenia.

Second solo thru-hiking attempt of the TCT 'southern route' a success

This summer saw the second solo completion of the prototype southern route of the TCT by German hiker Lea Geibel, who hiked over 1,500 km from the southern border of Armenia to the Black Sea. Lea collected valuable data on unmapped sections of the route in the process, in particular the border connection in northwest Armenia, and on the final leg in Adjara, Georgia.

Local and International Press Coverage and Exposure

Coverage in the Bradt Travel Guide to Armenia

A personal side project for Tom this year has been co-authorship of the new 5th edition of Armenia: The Bradt Travel Guide . Published in the UK, USA and worldwide by mail order, this book remains the only dedicated English-language guide to Armenia currently in print, and is noted for its detail and thoroughness. While updating the text, he has been able to highlight how the Transcaucasian Trail intersects with other nationwide touristic opportunities, including displaying sections of the route on maps where appropriate, as well as expanding the book's content on hiking and trails in general. The Transcaucasian Trail is also mentioned by name on the back cover of the book, in several photographs in the colour section, and in the promotional material accompanying the book's publication.

<https://www.bradtguides.com/shop/europe/armenia/armenia-pb-3401.html>

International exposure at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale

In 2017, TCT Armenia supported a visit by British-Armenian architect Philip Gumuchdjian to Dilijan National Park to assess potential for a project based around the idea of architectural interventions along the trail. The project, detailing five such concepts for bridges, shelters and other infrastructure, was accepted for exhibition at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale, where it remained on display for 6 months and attracted a range of media interest from across the industry.

<https://www.labiennale.org/it/architettura/2018/partecipanti/gumuchdjian-architects>

Developing a 'bikepacking' variant of the TCT route in Armenia

Over the last two years, Tom has been providing data to Bikepacking.com founder Logan Watts for the development of a bikepacking route across Armenia . This was partly motivated by repeated demands for a mountain bike friendly version of the Transcaucasian Trail, and partly by personal interest. Logan visited Armenia this summer to test the route, and the 'Caucasus Crossing: Armenia' route was published in October. The popularity of the Bikepacking.com platform (over 1 million pageviews per month) indicates that we might expect a noticeable uptick in bikepacking visitors to Armenia in 2019.

<http://www.bikepacking.com/routes/caucasus-crossing-armenia>

Media Coverage

International media attention this year has again been broad. Here are some of the published pieces we are aware of, in descending order of date:

- Travel + Leisure, 12th December 2018: The 50 Best Places To Travel In 2019

<https://www.travelandleisure.com/trip-ideas/best-places-to-travel-in-2019#mount-ararat-armenia>

- Los Angeles Times, 14th October 2018: Armenia is emerging as a hiking destination. It's not quite there, but oh, the views

<http://www.latimes.com/travel/la-tr-armenia-hiking-20181014-htmstory.html>

- ITV1 (UK TV channel), 19th September 2018: Joanna Lumley's Silk Road Adventure (segment, episode 2)

<https://www.itv.com/hub/joanna-lumleys-silk-road-adventure/2a5513a0002>

- PanArmenian.net, August 2018: Land Rover supporting development of major hiking trail in Armenia

http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/259501/Land_Rover_supporting_development_of_major_hiking_trail_in_Armenia

- New York Times, August 2018: My Armenia

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/travel/armenia-peter-balakian.html>

- Adventure.com, July 2018: Breaking new ground: When does a path become a hiking trail?

<https://adventure.com/designing-hiking-trail-caucasus-armenia/>

- Domus, June 2018: Five projects for a "linear festival" in the Caucasus

<https://www.domusweb.it/en/speciali/biennale/2018/five-projects-for-a-linear-festival-in-the-caucasus.html>

- The Travel Show, BBC News/BBC World News, April 2018: "one man's incredible solo journey across the Caucasus" (segment)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09zqcq65>

- CNN Travel, April 2018: Transcaucasian Trail: Mapping Eurasia's forgotten hiking routes

<https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/transcaucasian-trail-hiking/index.html>

An up-to-date list is available at <https://transcaucasiantrail.org/en/press-media/> .