



Transcaucasian Trail Association  
Annual Report  
2020

# Introduction

The mission of the Transcaucasian Trail Association (TCTA) is 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. We carry out this mission through direct support to the Transcaucasian Trail NGOs of Georgia and Armenia, as well as through our own activities to develop the capacity of these local organizations and to support and coordinate their work and the work of our other partners.

In 2020, the TCTA-- along with the rest of the world-- faced a challenging year. The border closures, travel restrictions, and safety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic required us to cancel many of our programs for the year and work with our NGO partners to redesign others. The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan affected the region as a whole and was devastating for many of our colleagues and friends.

Despite these challenges, thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we were able to make major strides towards the development of the Transcaucasian Trail across the region. We refocused our energy on supporting local programs, stitching together gaps in the route, and finding creative ways to connect the TCT to the global community.



*Wildflowers along the TCT in Svaneti, Georgia.*

In 2020, the TCTA's activities included:

### **International fundraising**

Canceling the TCT supporters' treks meant a substantial loss of planned income that would have been used to support trail projects. To help bridge this gap, the TCTA coordinated two crowdfunding campaigns to support trail projects in Armenia and Georgia, which raised \$25,000 in donations. We also worked to improve the TCTA donor tracking system and donor communications.

### **International outreach**

Inspired by global lockdowns, the TCTA began hosting a series of "virtual campfires" for people interested in the TCT around the world. These included introductions to the region and project, trail updates, virtual mapping tutorials and volunteer opportunities, and trip reports and stories from hikes through the region. We also began hosting members-only events for TCTA donors.

### **Direct grants to local NGOs**

The TCTA granted \$21,500 to the TCT NGO of Armenia and \$16,650 to the TCT NGO of Georgia to improve the capacity of the organizations, continue trail development, and support core organizational needs as they pursued other projects, partnerships, and funding opportunities.

### **In-kind support to local NGOs**

The TCTA provided in-kind support to local NGOs in the form of grant writing, outreach, event coordination, and local fundraising events.

### **Partnership outreach in Azerbaijan**

In 2020 the TCTA began a coordinated effort to discuss potential collaborations with Azerbaijani partners.

### **International media**

The TCT continued to receive significant media attention, including being mentioned in National Geographic's "best of the world" list of destinations on the rise to visit in 2021.

### **COVID-19 Response**

The TCTA worked with local NGOs to coordinate a strategy for safely managing local trail work in the context of the pandemic. The TCTA also worked to cancel and/or develop alternative arrangements to the supporters' treks, international volunteer program, wilderness medicine training for crew leaders, and EarthCorps international exchange.



*Crew members working on the trail in Zeskho, Georgia.*

# Developments in Georgia in 2020

## Trail development and local programs

In 2020, trail crews worked in two regions: Zeskho, Lower Svaneti and Lagodekhi National Park, Kakheti.

Summer work was held in Zeskho with a small local crew, working on the new connection to the neighboring region of Racha. Fall work was held in Lagodekhi as part of our ongoing relationship with the national park. The Georgia NGO also launched the Caucasus Conservation Corps program in Lagodekhi to provide introductions to trail work for Georgian youth and train new trail crew leaders.

### Spring

The planned spring weekend volunteer program in Lagodekhi National Park was cancelled due to the pandemic and lockdown in Georgia.

### Summer: Trailwork in Zeskho

Since we were not able to host international volunteers due to the pandemic, we focused entirely on local crews. Crew sizes were kept small and stays in the field were longer (3 weeks instead the usual 10 days at a time) to minimize exposure to COVID-19.

In July and August 2020, two small crews resumed work that was begun in 2018 on a new trail connecting the regions of Svaneti and Racha. This region has some of the steepest, most technical terrain to work and is extremely labor-intensive, but will make a major improvement in safety and access in the region. The final trail will be a 3-day backcountry section traversing one of the most spectacular and wild parts of Georgia.



*Trail crew members building a new trail in Zeskho.*



The crews completed 8 weeks of work. They cleaned and improved the trail sections built in 2018 and extended the trail by several kilometers. The crews also scouted routes to plan for the continuation of the trail. The crews were led by Giorgi Jmukhadze and Vakhtang Chikhtauri, two experienced crew leaders who the TCTA previously supported to participate in EarthCorps in Seattle.

This summer, due to the longer time in the field and challenging economic situation in the country, we also switched from offering a volunteer program for local participants to providing participants with stipends. We aim to continue this in the future.



*Summer 2020 trail crew members.*

### **Autumn: Caucasus Conservation Corps in Lagodekhi**

In October, with support from the U.S. Forest Service International Programs, the Caucasus Nature Fund, MAC Georgia and in partnership with Lagodekhi Protected Areas, we launched a new youth conservation corps.

The Caucasus Conservation Corps (CCC) will be an integral part of our mission to introduce youth to conservation work and to expand the workforce able to build and maintain sustainable hiking trails. The first year of the CCC will bring together youth from different regions to work on trail construction and maintenance projects in Lagodekhi National Park and to be trained as crew leaders. Eventually, we aim for the Caucasus Conservation Corps (CCC) to become a region-wide mechanism that supports each country's protected areas through job training, environmental education, and development of trail infrastructure.

We held an open application for the program and received 55 applications for 16 spots. We held two sessions of the program, one in October and one in November. The crews worked on building a new trail through the forests of the managed reserve connecting Matsimi Ranger Station to the ruins of Lagodekhi Monastery and Lagodekhi Park Headquarters.



*CCC participants with crew leaders Giorgi and Vakho.*

The CCC program was a combination of leadership modeling and experiencing the work in the field. The program began with a safety orientation and an introduction to camp life and trail work. This orientation was followed by seminars on the history of the protected areas, trail design and maintenance, brushing and scouting, and tread and drainage. The crews were also introduced to camp management practices and divided up into teams to manage chores and camp life. Crew members also received training in basic life support, outdoor leadership, and risk management.

CCC crew members received instruction in sustainable trail design based on materials created by the Pacific Crest Trail Association, and we have now translated this curriculum into Georgian (available on request). Brush clearing was done using best practices to ensure that trails remain passable and hikers do not stray from the trail, creating alternate paths and potentially damaging plant life. 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%.





CCC crew members working in Lagodekhi National Park.

During their time on the crew, participants showed great improvements in safe working practices and managing risk. They demonstrated a solid grasp of the principles of sustainable trail design and construction. Most importantly, they learned the importance of teamwork and communication when managing a crew in the mountains. For several participants, the experience was their first time spending significant time in a protected area in Georgia.

The program will continue in spring 2021 with a 2-month intensive crew leader training program for a subset of interested participants.



*A CCC crew member demonstrating her brushing skills.*



## Trail scouting and route development

The Georgia team scouted trail connections in Racha (which will extend south and west from the Zeskho trail), Samegrelo (which connects to the south and east of the Svaneti trail), and Tbilisi National Park (which will form part of the East-West route).

There are now only a few significant gaps remaining to determine the track of the North-South route which will connect to Armenia through southern Georgia and into Borjomi, Imereti, Racha, Svaneti, and Samegrelo.



*Scouting in Racha.*

## Local partnership development

In 2020, the Georgia NGO began funding and programmatic relationships with several new partners.

Autumn marked the start of formal cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service International Program, who provided the core funding for the first year of the pilot program of the Caucasus Conservation Corps. This includes the fall training in Lagodekhi as well as a planned continuation in spring 2021.

Building on the CCC program with the U.S. Forest Service, the Caucasus Nature Fund and MAC Georgia provided additional funding to support the purchase of tools and camping equipment.

Two local businesses also sponsored the Georgia NGO in local outreach efforts: Bagelin.ge, a small socially-minded bakery, and LOKAL Tbilisi, a co-working space that donated space for a fundraising event.



*Crew leader Vakho volunteering at a fundraising event in Tbilisi.*

# Developments in Armenia in 2020

## Trail development

By the end of 2020, five key hiking destinations on the proposed route of the TCT had been developed to international standards and were being promoted on a variety of platforms:

- Dilijan National Park and its nearby villages,
- the Debed Canyon and its interconnected gorges,
- southern Vayots Dzor between Areni/Noravank and Martiros, Gomk and Artavan
- southern Syunik, from Goris to Kapan, including Mount Khustup
- the Vorotan Canyon around Tatev

TCT Armenia has also developed proposals for connecting routes between these destinations, as well as a variety of approach routes, alternatives and excursions from the main trail.

In total, **1,305km (811 miles) of trail** have now been explored, mapped, audited and included for consideration as part of a complete border-to-border route. Of this, exactly 50% of the route is already waymarked and signposted and is undergoing regular maintenance via a variety of partnerships.

## Strategy & Operations

The primary goal for 2020 was to **waymark all connecting routes** for the launch of Armenia's national stage of the Transcaucasian Trail. There were three secondary goals for the year:

1. To **cultivate local community groups** to carry out future maintenance and development work on the network,
2. To establish **cross-border participation** as a fundamental principle of trail development on the TCT, and
3. To create a detailed **5-year roadmap** for the further realisation of the TCT vision and mission in Armenia.

Due to difficulties caused by COVID-19 from March onwards, and the Karabakh war between September and November, we and our partner organizations found ways to operate some projects, but these overall goals were only partially met.

Tom Allen continued to hold the voluntary position of President for 2020. Executive Director Ashot Davtyan was appointed and employed on a permanent part-time basis (20 hours/wk) to oversee the NGO's day-to-day operations and programmes. The Executive Director also held the official role of Vice-President and thus chairs all Council meetings in accordance with RA law.



To support the Executive Director, an assistant was planned to be employed from the end of February on a part-time basis, but this was cancelled because of financial uncertainty due to COVID-19.

We successfully completed the fellowship from the Izmirlyan Foundation in partnership with Impact Hub Yerevan, which included office space for administrative work until June 2020. During this time staff also received training and mentorship to develop organisational competencies. Future collaboration opportunities with the Izmirlyan Foundation have been received which can be used for the southern sections of TCT development.

The sponsorship arrangement with Jaguar Land Rover came to its end in 2020, and the 4x4 vehicle 'Georgina' was returned to the UK. We withdrew the decision to purchase a replacement vehicle and in the meantime used personal vehicles for NGO operations and project tasks.

2020's international travel plans were all cancelled, including a team visit to Georgia for participating in the CCC (Caucasus Conservation Corps) program, and one representative visiting Nepal in September for the biannual World Trails Conference. One visit to Georgia in January was successfully carried out, with the goal of meeting TCTA representatives and TCT Georgia members to discuss and decide on future collaborations.

### **COVID and War impacts**

The changes resulting from the negative impact of COVID-19 affected most of TCT Armenia's 2020 plans, including the Regional Trail Club project, Dilijan Hikers' Hostel project and Supporters' Treks.

Though several initial events were organized for the Regional Trail Club project, we couldn't proceed to starting the group hikes because of restrictions on travel and interaction. Travel restrictions also reduced visitor numbers from abroad effectively to zero, which in turn led to cancelling the hostel opening and Syunik fundraising trek. Participants received the option to have their deposits refunded or carried over to 2021.

Together with our partners (Hike Armenia and TFC), and under strict supervision, we were nevertheless able to complete some fieldwork projects involving small group sizes, including parts of the National Trail Blazing project, Dilijan National Park trail maintenance, the Legends Trail work coordination, several scouting missions and trail audits, and a Dilijan National Park trail design project.

The projects in the Syunik region were interrupted by the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan that broke out on the 27th of September.

### **TCTA partnership**

In 2020 we continued our cooperation with TCTA based on the Memorandum of Understanding signed on January 17th 2019, by representatives of TCT Armenia and the Transcaucasian Trail

Association, in order to clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of each party as they relate to grants, communications, trail building and volunteer activities, the mapping and planning of the Transcaucasian Trail in Armenia, fundraising tours, training and international exchange, and general strategy and cooperation.

In the financial year of 2020, TCT Armenia NGO received two grants from TCTA which enabled us to continue the operations of the NGO, including funds for the National Trail Blazing project and deposits for Syunik trek.

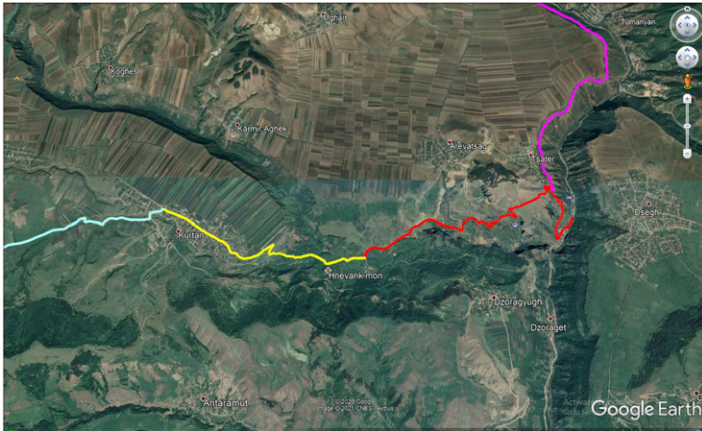
Because of the COVID restrictions, face to face meetings and offline events were canceled in 2020, but instead TCTA organized several online meetings with TCT Armenia NGO members and a new format of virtual meeting called “Virtual campfires” inviting hikers and TCT fans to participate and make donations for TCT, which were later sent to the NGOs in Armenia and Georgia.

## Projects

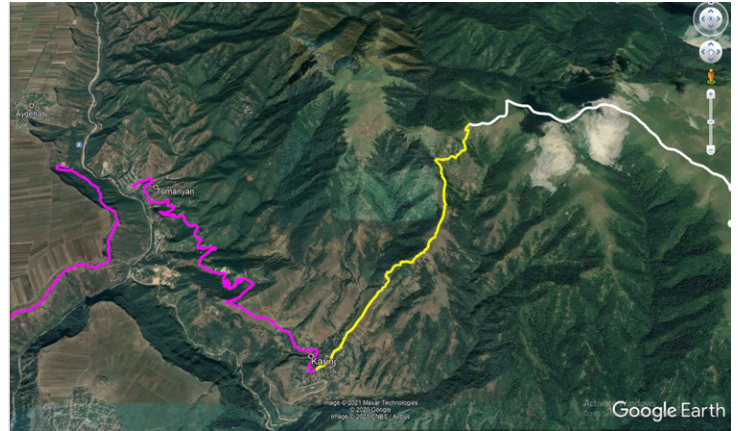
### National Trail Blazing

This project was one of the year’s successful projects despite the COVID lockdowns. A team consisting of 2 persons (1 crew leader and 1 trail builder) installed blazes on remote sections of the TCT that connect established trail networks. The budget for this was raised by the Bikepacking Armenia fundraising expedition in September 2019. The team had been 4x4-supported, camping overnight, The blazing process has been carried out in accordance with RA State Tourism Committee guidelines. Below are presented the completed blazed trail sections with maps (yellow lines are the newly blazed segments):

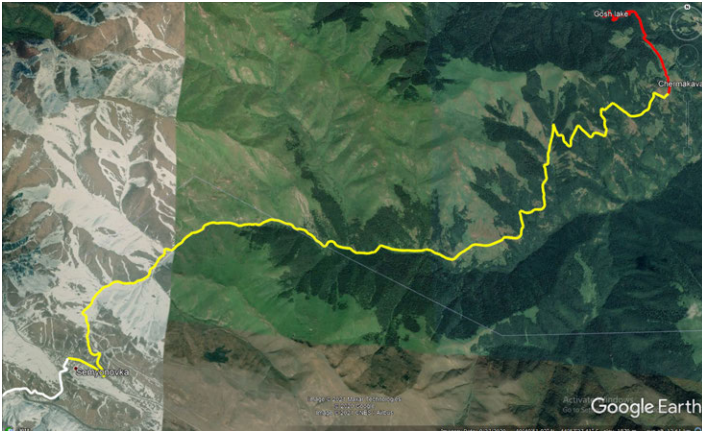
- Lori region: Kurtan-Hnevank trail (4.5 km ), Karinj-Mrdzkar trail (5.8 km)
- Vayots Dzor region: Noravank gorge-Gnishik-Horadis trail (23 km)
- Tavush region: Semyonovka-Chermakavan trail (18 km)
- Syunik region: Part of Goris-Karahunj trail (0.8 km)



Map #1: Kurtan-Hnevank trail, Lori region



Map #2: Karinj to Mrdzakar trail, Lori region



Map #3: Semyonovka to Chermakavan trail, Tavush region.



Map #4: Noravank-Gnishik-Horadis trail, Vayots Dzor region.

### **Dilijan Hikers Hostel**

Funds were allocated to support the furnishing of a property in Dilijan to become the TCT's first official hiker's hostel and community hub, offering 10 beds in self-catering accommodation in the heart of Dilijan, one of the main focal points of the TCT in Armenia. The use of the property was donated in-kind by Tom Allen for this purpose for a minimum term of 2 years. Q1 of 2020 saw the procurement of furniture, equipment and renovation materials, and the hiring of a construction manager to implement the work.

Due to rising concerns regarding COVID-19, the project was postponed indefinitely in Q2 until more favourable conditions returned, and all further spending was halted. The viability of the hostel project will be the subject of review in Q1 2021. In the meantime, all purchased equipment



and furniture with an expected lifespan of more than one year will remain the property of TCT Armenia.

## Scouting

### **Syunik Mountains scouting**

One trail designer from TCT Armenia, one representative of HIKEArmenia and one volunteer spent seven days over the course of two trips exploring potential backcountry routes through the Syunik range, with the goal of identifying a viable route between the cities of Jermuk (Vayots Dzor) and Goris (Syunik), thereby improving on the existing route which lacks cultural interest and involves several sections of off-trail hiking.

During the project, access routes to the range from each city were identified and the plateau itself assessed broadly by 4x4. While excellent (if seasonally limited) hiking potential was found, the outbreak of fighting on September 27th made the completion of the project impossible, due to the close proximity of the *de jure* Armenia/Azerbaijan border to the range's main divide (which in some cases it follows directly).

The subsequent handover of territory and the shifting of the *de facto* border casts doubt on the future viability of this route in general. While the remoteness and elevation of the range suggests that it will become an enlarged 'buffer zone' rather than a clearly delineated physical border, access restrictions are likely due to military sensitivities. We do not expect a clear understanding of the implications to emerge until at least Q3 2021 when the range is free of snow and access is (theoretically) possible again. At that time we will revisit the area to establish the access situation.

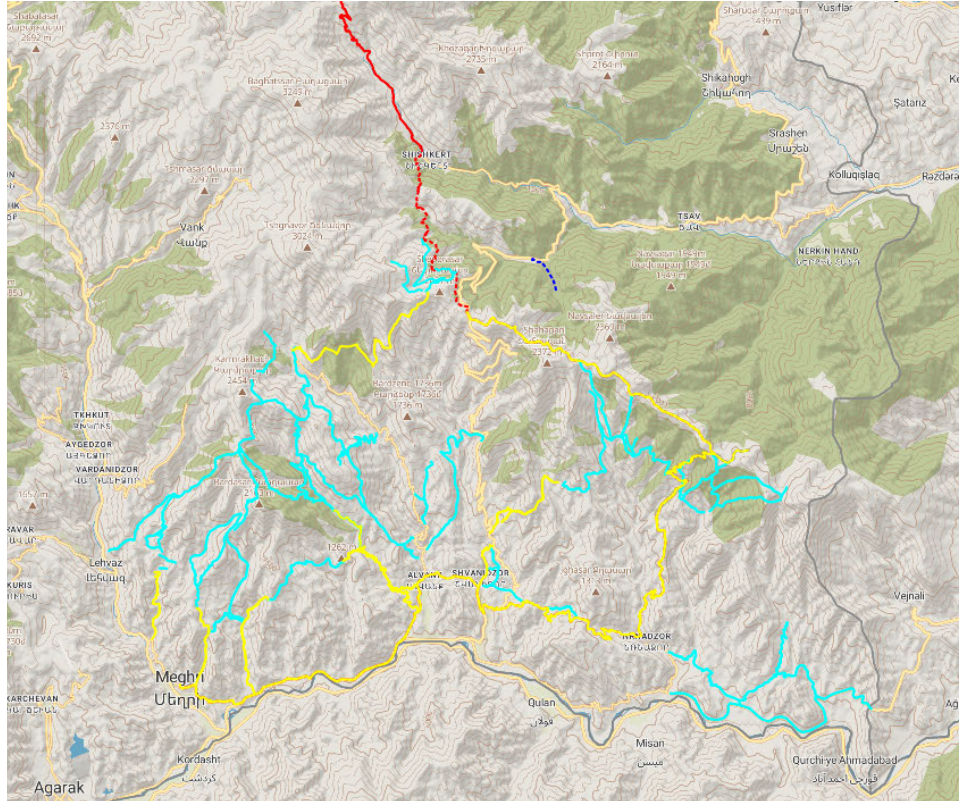
In the meantime, alternative route scouting plans will be devised for a range of likely scenarios. In order to conserve resources, the GPS data from this project has not yet been processed or incorporated into our trail mapping database.

### **Arevik National Park scouting**

Two staff members from TCT Armenia spent five days in April exploring potential routes in Arevik National Park to connect the village of Shishkert with the city of Meghri. This route will extend the existing blazed TCT route in Syunik by more than 100km and complete the connection to the southern border of Armenia.

During the scouting project, a network of historic trails was discovered, connecting several medieval settlements and cultural heritage sites via areas of unspoiled nature in a geographically distinct and little-visited region of Armenia. Many of these trails require significant restoration (brushing out, tread widening, retaining wall rebuilding) in order to be serviceable, while others are already in fair condition and require only blazing and signposting. While the route remains fragmented, the theoretical locations of connecting trails and additional side routes to points of interest were identified for future exploration.

Our results suggest the need for a larger-scale exploration and mapping exercise to fully understand the potential of the area for the development of trail tourism, as well as to finalise the proposed route of the TCT through this area.



*Map of the scouted routes in Arevik National Park.*

## Trail Audits

### **Goris–Khustup trail audit**

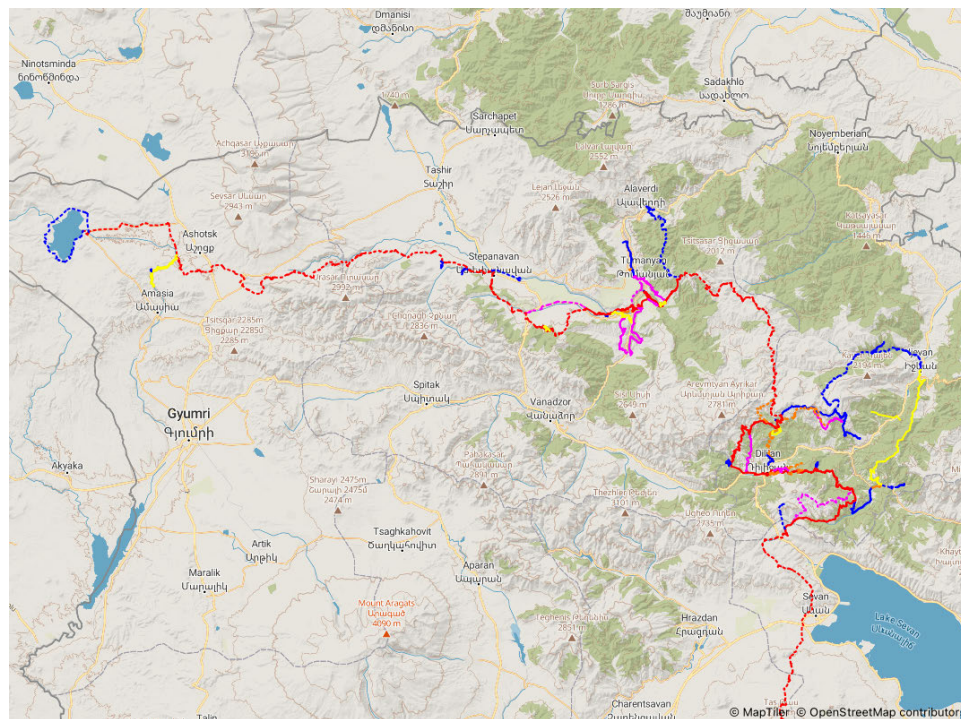
This project's goal was to collect the information and media assets to publish a newly developed, ~150km stage of the TCT on the TCT website. Originally scheduled for October, it was not implemented as planned due to the outbreak of fighting in September and consequent security concerns regarding travel in the Syunik region (bordering Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding Armenia-controlled territory). The finalisation of the route's alignment by our partner and lead implementer of this trail stage, People In Need, was also delayed for the same reason.

An internal audit of the trail and supporting services is due to be carried out by People In Need in Q1 2021, the results of which will be shared with TCT Armenia. At this point we will review the available information and assess any additional needs in order to publish this stage of the TCT. The funds allocated to this project were reallocated to support additional trail scouting and auditing work in Vayots Dzor and Lori provinces.

## Lake Arpi–Dilijan trail audit

One staff member of TCT Armenia spent a total of two weeks auditing the entire proposed route of the TCT between Lake Arpi and Dilijan, with the goal of verifying the viability of a trans-regional stage of the TCT across the three provinces of northern Armenia, also connecting two already-developed trail networks in Lori province and Dilijan National Park. Many parts of the proposed route were derived from previous years' exploring and mapping of potential routes, dating back to 2016's Land Rover-supported expedition.

The audit was tackled in several stages, some vehicle-supported and others self-supported, with all GPS data and georeferenced photos incorporated into our internal trail database. As well as confirming the overall viability of the route, the audit also marked the completion of the information collection exercise needed to develop projects for the opening of remaining trail sections, which will be incorporated into 2021's Master Plan development. Additionally, an approach route from the provincial capital of Tavush, Ijevan, was explored and mapped, representing a direct connection from this urban centre to the main route of the TCT.



## Dilijan National Park Assessment

Based on several observations, a year-long trail scouting and assessment mission has been carried out to identify new potential trails, design improvements to existing trails and infrastructure, and gather detailed information on the resources required to implement separate projects in Dilijan National Park in 2021. Follow-up trail development projects have been planned, including newly developed trails such as Dilijan to Haghartsin mon. trail, Haghartsin mon. Loop trail, Khachardzan to Aghavnavan trail and redesigned trails such as Red Deer trail, sections on Dilijan to Parz lake trail.



The implementation of the above recommendations would extend and improve the trail network in Dilijan National Park by creating four additional days of hiking in high-potential regions of the park; ensure the existing trail network continues to meet the standards of safety, accessibility and enjoyment expected by international hikers; bring the remainder of the waymarking, signage and trailhead information in line with national standards; and ultimately provide the best possible experience for visitors in 2021 and beyond at this important moment in Dilijan National Park's development as a destination for hiking and ecotourism.

The Project [Report](#) is available.

### **Vorotan Canyon Hiking Map**

Since 2017, our partner Cartisan has been creating maps following the development of various trail networks across Armenia, and especially of the Transcaucasian Trail network. Paper maps are essential tools for hikers to plan their trip, navigate on the field, and in general to facilitate safe access to any area that has potential for outdoor activities. By highlighting all the hiking routes and points of interest in an area, paper maps are showcasing and therefore promoting the best destinations for outdoor enthusiasts.

With a grant of USD 2,500, Cartisan planned the production of the first 200 copies of the “Tatev (planned) National Park / Vorotan Canyon” hiking map. This is the newest hiking hotspot in the Syunik region, where a hiking trail network had been recently developed by various organisations, both by blazing new trails as well as restoring ancient paths across the area of the planned Tatev National Park and Vorotan Canyon.

The grant had been set to co-finance the development & printing of the first 200 maps which will become commercially available starting in 2021, both online and in physical stores in Armenia and across Europe. The project will be finalised and the maps printed in 2021 after the route of the Legends Trail is confirmed.

## **Collaboration results**

### **Dilijan National Park marking and maintenance**

The project was implemented under the collaboration with HikeArmenia, Cartisan and Trails For Change NGO in the frames of yearly maintenance plan. The main goal was to re-blaze TCT routes by the new system of trail signage developed by the State Tourism Committee of RA. Trail maintenance works had been carried out on some segments of the route. The project resulted in a completion of 15 km of trail maintenance, installation of directional signposts in 7 locations with a number of 17 new signboards, installation of trailhead kiosks in 4 locations including 4 info boards with a new map developed by Cartisan, and blazing activity on 98km of trail.

The Project [Report](#) is available.

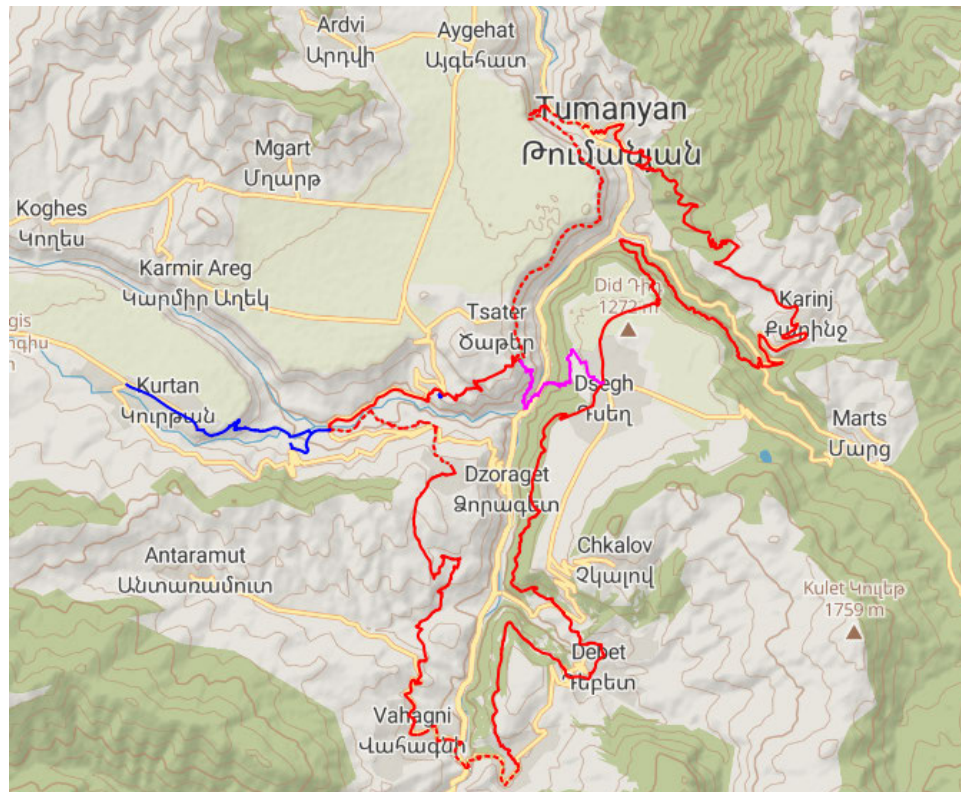


*A newly installed signboard near Goshavank Monastery.*

## **Debed canyon trail network**

A scouting and assessment project had been completed in spring 2020 by the “Trails for Change” NGO specialists based on the documented data received from TCT, designing the main project of Debed Canyon trail network development. The Project was funded by HikeArmenia including usage of technical resources from TFC and TCT. The project resulted in a completion of 30km of trail maintenance, installation of directional signpost in 12 locations with a number of 27 new signboards, identification of locations for 5 trailhead kiosks, which will be installed in 2021 and trailblazing on 28 km of trails which connect Dsegh, Karinj, Dzoraget, Tsater, Tumanyan, Debet, Dzoragyugh and Vahagni villages. In 2021 another project funded by USAID will add the Tumanyan-Tsater trail to the existing network.

The Project [Report](#) is available.



*The Debed Canyon trail network.*

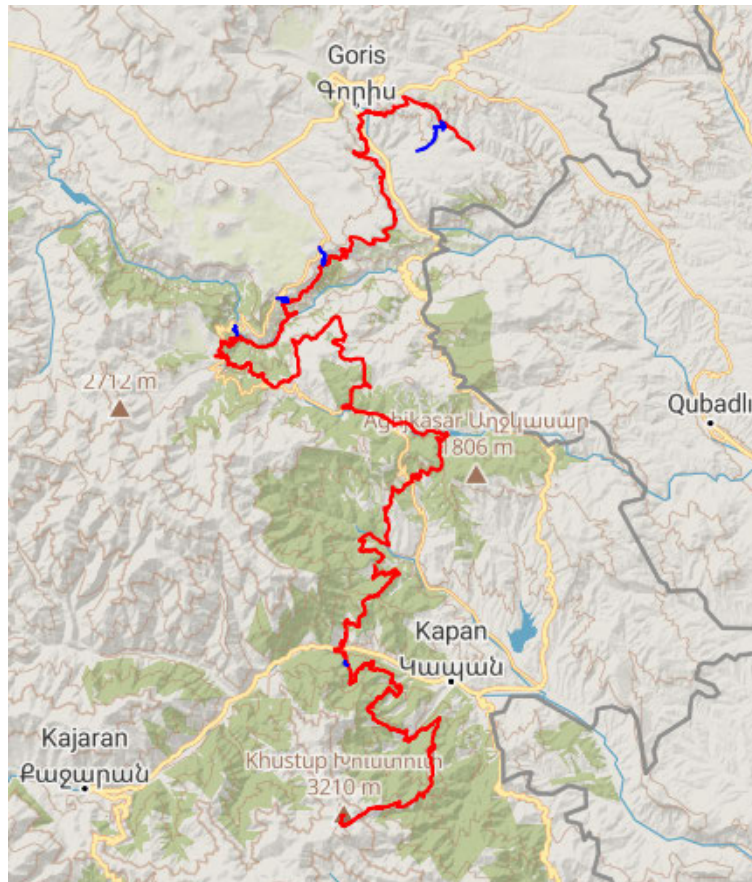
### **Legends Trail improvements**

This project was implemented by Trails For Change NGO under the early collaboration of People In Need NGO and TCT Armenia NGO. Most of the trails involved in the Legends Trail project, a new regional trail through Syunik, comprise part of the TCT main route through Syunik region. In the past years, many trail development projects had been completed by both organizations (TCT and TFC), resulting in an establishment of high quality trail network which now is connected to the Legends Trail. So the coordination of the project by TFC helped to bring the rest of the Legends Trail trail network to the same level.

The main part of the project was completed, but the project was interrupted because of the war in 2020 fall and then postponed due to the onset of the winter season. It is planned to complete the works by the end of spring in 2021.

The Project Interim [Report](#) is available.





*The Legends Trail route through Syunik.*

### **Vayots Dzor Hiking Map launch campaign**

In Q3, one TCT Armenia staff member accompanied Cartisan co-founder Alessandro Mambelli, one volunteer photographer and one volunteer blogger on a one-week promotional trek through the territory covered by the newly-published Vayots Dzor Hiking Map, which included trails designed and built by TCT Armenia and partners in 2017–2019. The goal was to draw attention to the new map product and to reach a target of 100 pre-orders of the map.

The trek was communicated in real time using TCT's social media channels in the form of video 'stories', as well as on the trek participants' personal channels. A total of 56 maps were ordered during the course of the campaign.

### **Local NGO website**

A new website ([transcaucasiantrail.am](http://transcaucasiantrail.am)) is under development to represent our goals and achievements as an Armenia-registered NGO, and to support local fundraising efforts. An online card payment function has been added to the site, through which there is the opportunity to collect direct donations worldwide via Visa/MasterCard payments. The website will also allow the publication of reports and other public documents of the NGO, and communicate directly with stakeholders in Armenia and the diaspora on behalf of the TCT. The website will be available in

English and Armenian and is hosted on the Amazon AWS platform provided free of charge via the TCTA's nonprofit status in the US.

# **TCTA 2020 Financial Statement**

## **Income:**

Donations: \$ 52,920.62

Other income: \$ 503.94

Total income: \$ 53,424.56

## **Expenses:**

Operations: \$ 18,836.84

Grants to Armenia NGO: \$ 21,500.00

In-kind grants to Armenia NGO: \$ 7,875.00

Grants to Georgia NGO: \$ 16,650.00

In-kind grants to Georgia NGO: \$ 13,020.68

Refund of Volunteer and Tour Fees: \$ 10,176.82

Total Expenses: \$ 88,059.34