

Transcaucasian Trail Association Annual Report 2021

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.

Since 2016, we have been working to carry out this mission through direct support to the Transcaucasian Trail NGOs of Georgia and Armenia and TCT-affiliated partners in Azerbaijan, 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.

2021 was not an easy year, given the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and related border closures and travel restrictions, as well as the aftermath of the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Yet despite these challenges, thanks to the generosity of our supporters and tenacity of our local teams, it was also a landmark year for the TCT.

In 2021, the TCTA and local partners reached several new milestones towards our goals, most notably the launch of the border-to-border national TCT route across Armenia and the formal launch of activities in Azerbaijan.

The TCTA and local partners in each country found ways to expand the local volunteer base, make progress on the trail's physical infrastructure, create new resources for hikers that increased the information on and accessibility of the TCT, and develop new partnerships with governments and organizations working in outdoor recreation and tourism development.



View from a trail work site in Zeskho, Georgia.

In 2021, the TCTA's activities included:

In-kind capacity support for local organizations

The TCTA provided in-kind support to trail development efforts and local organization development in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

Significant in-kind support was dedicated to grant writing. These contributions resulted in new grants from the U.S. Embassy Democracy Commission in Georgia, USAID's EDGE program (along with partner People In Need) in Georgia, and the Azerbaijani Tourism Board in Azerbaijan.

The TCTA also provided grant management support related to reporting and evaluation of ongoing projects, which contributed to building an expanded relationship with our supporting partner the U.S. Forest Service.

The TCTA also dedicated significant time to supporting strategy and partnership development in Azerbaijan, where the TCT's operations began for the first year.

For more on the outcomes of these projects, see the relevant country sections below.

International promotion and outreach

The TCTA manages all international TCT communication channels, including the TCT's social media, website, blog, newsletter, and online events. In 2021, the TCTA increased outreach to showcase new trail sections, to promote trekking and volunteer opportunities, and to increase the amount of publicly accessible information on how to hike the TCT.

Notable outreach activities included participation in the "Thru-Hike Armenia" expedition and coordinating the related social media campaign, hosting a series of "virtual campfires" on Zoom with guest speakers and members of the TCT team to promote different trail sections, and organizing and promoting TCT supporters' treks in Georgia to raise funds to support local trail projects.



The end of the Thru-Hike Armenia expedition at the southern terminus of the TCT in Meghri.

Resource development

The TCTA supported the development of several key resources on the TCT website, such the "Thru-Hike Armenia" webpage and information and the new trail section through Syunik, Armenia. The TCTA also designed and created the resources for the new Trailblazers program, a membership program to help long-distance hikers prepare for the trail, which launched at the end of 2021.

The TCTA also lent in-kind support to scouting efforts in Georgia in several locations in Racha and Samtskhe-Javakheti.

International fundraising

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic continued to impact activities and revenue sources for the TCT. While the international borders of Armenia and Georgia did open and the TCTA and local NGOs were able to host several sessions of its international volunteer program and a few fundraising treks, the summer spike in Covid-19 cases resulted in many last-minute cancellations.

To help bridge the gap in expected and actual revenue, the TCTA held two online fundraising campaigns to support trail projects and core needs, raising \$28,579.

Direct grants to local NGOs

The TCTA granted \$6,050 to the TCT NGO of Armenia and \$6,000 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.

Organizational development

In January 2021, the TCTA welcomed a new board member, Maggie Osdoby Katz, who brings to the board experience in strategy development, NGO organizational development in both Georgia and Armenia, and partnership building with the public and private sectors.

In May 2021, Meagan Neal became Co-Executive Director of the TCTA, sharing responsibilities with founding Executive Director Paul Stephens.

International media

The TCT continued to receive significant media attention, including a feature piece on BBC Travel. See below for a list of notable media highlights.

- Going the Whole Hogg, September 2021: Hiking Mestia to Ushguli | 4 Day Svaneti
 Transcaucasian Trail, Georgia (film + guide)
 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqmxDSK9CCY
- Going the Whole Hogg, August 2021: Hiking Nakra to Mestia | 5 Day Svaneti Transcaucasian Trail, Georgia (film + guide) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-nlg2d1Ohw
- The Sunday Times, August 2021: Trail blazers: Hiking through the Caucasus mountains in Georgia
 https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/trail-blazers-hiking-through-the-caucasus-mountains-georgia-fjnqb2ljf (paywall)
- Explorers Web, August 2021: Transcaucasian Trail Nears Completion https://explorersweb.com/2021/08/03/transcaucasian-trail-nears-completion/

- Outside France, August 2021: Rando: et si vous tentiez le TCT, Transcaucasian Trail, fabuleux sentier de 3000 km? https://www.outside.fr/rando-et-si-vous-tentiez-le-tct-transcaucasian-trail-fabuleux-sentier-de-3000-km/ (paywall)
- BBC Travel, July 2021: A new hiking route between Europe and Asia https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210714-transcaucasian-trail-a-new-route-between-europe-and-asia
- The Points Guy, July 2021: You'll soon be able to hike a new trail connecting Europe with Asia https://thepointsguy.com/news/new-transcaucasian-trail/
- Time Out, July 2021: Hikers: you need to check out this epic new trail connecting Europe and Asia
 - https://www.timeout.com/news/transcaucasian-hiking-trail-072121
- Public Radio of Armenia, June 2021: Transcaucasian Trail: Thru-hiking route across Armenia launched https://en.armradio.am/2021/06/16/transcaucasian-trail-thru-hiking-route-across-armenia-launched/
- Wander-Lush, May 2021: Responsible Travel in Georgia: Social Enterprises & Ecotourism Projects https://wander-lush.org/responsible-travel-georgia-country/



Trail crew members in Zeskho, Georgia.

Developments in Armenia in 2021

Overview

After a successful completion of TCT Armenia's 3-year roadmap (for 2018–2020, published in 2017 and entitled "Building a hiking trail the length of Armenia by 2020") five key hiking destinations (Lori, Tavush, Vayots Dzor and Syunik regions) on the proposed route of the TCT had been developed to international standards and were being promoted on a variety of platforms. 2021 became the year of publishing the TCT route in the whole length of Armenia as the first national hiking trail section.

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, the proportion of the route now fully signposted, way-marked, and regularly maintained stands at 284 km from 827 km, or 34% of the total length; a number that increases every year.



The TCT Armenia route, publicly launched in December 2021.

Strategy & Operations

Based on the TCT Armenia 2021 Program, our strategy acknowledged many new realities of tourism and trail use in a post-war, post-pandemic Armenia, which included: the Transcaucasian Trail in Armenia also representing the country's first border-to-border trail; the potential role of the Armenian diaspora as a stable source of trail users and long-term support; the role of local hikers and 'neighborhood' visitors as another underexploited source

of trail users; and that the cross-border project will depend on international support to protect its vision at this low point in neighborhood relations.

We also acknowledged the desire to steer trail management activities towards financial selfsufficiency, and that this will depend on leveraging a 'critical mass' of trail users for revenue generation.

Our focus in 2021 was to promote the Transcaucasian Trail in Armenia by carrying out the first official thru-hike and empowering others to follow suit.

TCT supported an expedition to capture and communicate the essence of a journey on foot the length of Armenia. A targeted media strategy played a key role, as did publishing route resources at the end of the narrative. Done well, the project not only proved the concept of the trail but inspired fresh engagement with our mission, as well as activating a long-term flow of trail users. This in turn will help to safeguard the trail's future as part of the international Transcaucasian Trail.

Supporting goals for 2021 were developing proposed trail sections to the same standard as the rest, helping to cultivate civil society groups as future trail stewards and creating a new long-term roadmap for the TCT mission in Armenia.

TCT worked on several trail development programs via cooperation with ongoing and new partners, covering some new sections as well as maintaining previously developed sections. A trail club initiative started with a collaborative initiative as a pilot version in Yerevan, involving youth from different fields. In 2022, more attention will be given to the new long-term road map.

Tom Allen continued to hold the voluntary position of President for 2021 after the Council meeting (General Assembly). Executive Director Ashot Davtyan continued his role on a permanent part-time basis (20 hours/wk) to oversee the NGO's day-to-day operations and programmes. The Executive Director also holds the official role of Vice-President and thus chairs all Council meetings in accordance with RA law.

A new website in Armenian and English languages was launched to represent the NGO, making available information about our goals. Later there will be added also info about our past achievements and current projects. Through this website, there is the availability to collect direct donations and payments for business activities (including fundraising treks), publish annual reports, protocols, and other documents that are in the public domain, and communicate directly with stakeholders in Armenia and the diaspora on behalf of the wider TCT community.

Project activities:

1. Yerevan Trail Club

Project partners: HIKEArmenia, Trails For Change NGO

Expected outcome: The establishment of a "trail club" community group in Yerevan, based on the principle of developing a culture of local stewardship for trail networks, as well as of volunteer service and nationwide collaboration to cultivate and protect a shared asset.

Timeline: March-November 2021

The Yerevan Trail Club, which aims to introduce youth groups in Armenia's main urban center to the culture of trail stewardship through volunteer service, was established successfully and was in an active phase during the year including several day-hikes with different educational sessions. HikeArmenia took the role of coordinating the on-boarding of new participants. The activities were published using the official Facebook Group. HikeArmenia also covered the expenses for hiking (Transfers and meals).

Starting in 2022, we and our partners will assess the program's effectiveness in terms of return on investment and the likelihood of participants to continue engaging in or initiating trail stewardship activities. After this, we will discuss expanding the program to establish a second trail club out of Yerevan.



Yerevan Trail Club participants in Lori Province. Photo by HikeArmenia.

2. Additional scouting activities

Project supervisor: Tom Allen

Expected outcome: Trail design and supporting data for future project development

Timeline: March-October, 2021

Additional scouting weeks were organized in the Vayots Dzor and Syunik regions. A team in spring and autumn revisited Arevik National Park in the far south of Armenia to complete the design of the prototype route begun in 2016 and further developed in April 2019 and April 2020. All the results and data have been summarized and discussed with technical crew members and a final program budget with a development plan was made for funding applications. An Armenian language final report was made and sent to Arevik NP management team, Zangezur Biosphere Complex and CNF. The trail development project, if implemented, would result in the park's first formal trail network and a key section of the TCT.

Another team of hikers scouted the extension of Artavan-Andrnaik's fortress trail in Vayots Dzor region to the direction of Gndevaz and Jermuk. Results were satisfying and more scouting and development will be needed later for identification of the final route.



Arevik National Park.

3. Trail Maintenance

Project partners: HIKEArmenia, Trails For Change NGO

Expected outcome: Maintained trails in Lori, Tavush, Vayots Dzor and Syunik regions

Timeline: April-July, 2021

TCT took a supervision and quality control role in several maintenance projects. Funding was provided by HIKEArmenia and the technical work was carried out by Trails For Change NGO in Lori, Tavush and Vayots Dzor regions on the existing trails including the TCT segments. Some sections were maintained by volunteers under the "Yerevan Trail Club" programme. In the first half of the year the project of the Legends Trail (by People in Need NGO) was finally completed (after an interruption due to the war in 2020). This made the TCT section from Tatev to Kapan, Khustup mountain, be available to hikers fully developed and mapped.

Under another trail development program funded by USAID and implemented by Trails For Change NGO, some sections of TCT were marked and maintained by the new standards.



A blaze along the Legends Trail in Syunik.

4. Border-to-border promotional thru-hike

Project supervisor: Tom Allen

Expected outcome: Successful completion of a thru-hike of proposed TCT route across Armenia, and the collection of media assets and trail data to support the development and

publication of route resources. **Timeline:** June–July 2021

TCT Armenia provided logistical, media and communications support for an expedition to thruhike the entire length of the TCT route through Armenia from Lake Arpi to Meghri. The expedition was led by co-founder Tom Allen and provided a platform for key stakeholders to experience the trail first-hand and leverage the storytelling and outreach opportunities to meet their goals. The expedition team included the route developers, Tom Allen (co-founder of the Transcaucasian Trail), Meagan Neal (Director of the TCTA), and the leading character of the 'Janaparh' TV series Roffi Petrosian (who joined for the first 3 weeks). Other team members and hikers also joined in several portions of the journey.

After 40 days (including rest days), Tom and Meagan successfully completed the route and dubbed it ready to hike. Following the expedition, the route was made available to the public to allow others to experience this unforgettable journey in their own way. The story of this groundbreaking 'thru-hike' was shared in real time through the TCT Facebook and Instagram channels and was easily found with the following hashtags: #transcaucasiantrail #armeniathruhike. In the end of the 2021 an article was published on the TCT official website and social media platforms. Press releases were made before and after the expedition and were sent to Armenian media platforms for publishing.



The Thru-Hike Armenia team in Yerevan at the start of the journey.

5. Partnerships and coordination

TFC participated in the **Youth For Change project**, run by Trails For Change NGO and funded by the US Forest Service and provided the preliminary trail design, facilitated local approvals, and supplied trail building tools and equipment from our inventory. The project resulted in the construction of part of a new section of the TCT in Dilijan National Park connecting Dilijan to Haghartsin Monastery, which when done, will replace the previous 26km route. From the 45 participants, 10-15 were selected for the next generation of trailbuilders and crew leaders.

We continued to support **Dilijan Hikers Hostel** through its first year of operations with publicity through TCT channels and by coordinating with other regional projects, including the use of the facility as a headquarters for the above-mentioned Youth For Change programme. The hostel was funded and managed as an independent business, with an MoU developed to establish its role in furthering the TCT Armenia mission locally, thus justifying our investment in 2020. Unfortunately at the end of 2021 the managing person canceled the agreement and the hostel management will be transferred to another party in 2022. A report is available for the 2021 Hostel management received by the managing person.

Ashot Davtyan started a new initiative developing an educational program which will focus on making trail building education available to more locals who don't know foreign languages and need educational materials in Armenian. This project is synchronized with the Youth For Change Program developed and implemented by TFC. The actual translating work will start in January 2022. Trail building educational and technical books from international literature have already been chosen and prepared for translations. Also TCT Georgia will provide some materials for this project.

Cartisan.org has published maps for Vorotan Canyon and the first printed handbook for the

Legends Trail. Tom Allen has a huge participatory role in the content development for the later one. The maps and guidebook are now available on Cartisan's website for online purchase, also in the Impact Hub office. TCT has also started to be the exclusive distribution partner for Cartisan.org. From 2022 all products will be distributed to the info centers, book stores, and other relevant shops all over Armenia for selling them. A percentage from the income will come to TCT for trail maintenance programs.

TCT was invited to participate at the **Open Air Tourism Expo** organised by the State Tourism Committee in Yerevan in May, where the project was presented to the public along with other partner organizations working in the extreme tourism industry. Another invitation was made by COAF smart centre to participate in a panel discussion in the framework of the **#EuropeDay2021** organizes in Lori at the COAF smart center in May.



A Youth For Change crew working on a new trail section in Dilijan National Park.

Developments in Georgia in 2021

1. Caucasus Conservation Corps crew leader training

Project partners: U.S. Forest Service, Caucasus Nature Fund, MAC Georgia, Lagodekhi

Protected Areas

Expected outcome: The training of 6-8 trail crew leaders to serve as crew leaders for the 2022 field season in trail building techniques, trail maintenance, crew management, and backcountry best practices.

Timeline: March-May 2021

Under the leadership of technical manager Giorgi Jmukhadze and crew leader Vakhtang Chkhitauri, the second phase of the Caucasus Conservation Corps crew leader training program was held in Lagodekhi Protected Areas. The first phase was a one-month program in Lagodekhi in October 2020, which aimed to introduce volunteers to trail building and expose them to the pathways for further development and training as a crew leader. The second phase was a two-month training program in Lagodekhi, which focused more specifically on the technical and management skills needed to lead trail crews, with the aim of adding 6-8 new trail crew leaders who would be available to work in the summer.



Constructing a new switchback in Lagodekhi National Park.

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%.

Seven participants graduated from the program, from which five worked for the TCT in the summer (four as crew leaders and one as house manager at the volunteer base). Throughout the summer, while working in Zeskho, Georgia, these crew leaders trained 42 volunteers.



CCC graduates with TCT staff and the director of Lagodekhi Protected Areas.

2. Svaneti-Racha trail building project

Project supervisor: Paul Stephens and Giorgi Jmukhadze

Expected outcome: Successful extension of the new trail being built connecting Svaneti and

Racha via Zeskho and Brili, Georgia **Timeline**: July-September 2021

The TCT Georgia NGO continued its focus project 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.

In 2021, both international and Georgian crews worked on the trail. 19 Georgian volunteers were joined by 22 international volunteers. The crews completed 10 weeks of work and extended the trail by several kilometers. The crews were led by new graduates Guga Begashvili, Ivane Nizharadze, Giorgi Ansiani, Khatia Marukashvili; crew trainer Vakhtang Chkhitauri; and former TCT volunteers Salome Pkhaladze, Giorgi Kazaishvili, and Ia Iakobashvili.



A crew working on the Svaneti-Racha connection.

3. Scouting and route development

Project supervisor: Paul Stephens and Giorgi Jmukhadze

Expected outcome: Successful identification of possible routes and priorities for future trail

work in three new areas

Timeline: June-November 2021

The Georgia team successfully scouted trail connections between Imereti and Racha, between the Armenian border to Lake Tabatskuri, and between Tabatskuri to Nedzvi Reserve. The result of these scouting projects is a full "beta" version of the Georgia thru-hiking route, which will be shared with registered thru-hikers in 2022. While there are still several sections that need further improvement, enough of the route is now mapped and improved that we can start sharing it with hikers and get feedback on the route.



Part of the new TCT section connecting Imereti and Racha.

4. Svaneti business association

Project partners: U.S. Embassy Democracy Commission

Expected outcome: Establishment of the first TCT business association, comprising hiking and mountain tourism-related businesses in Mestia municipality that will help increase sustainable tourism in villages where it is needed and address related issues and impacts of tourism in areas where hiking-based tourism is already developed.

Timeline: September 2021 - September 2022

The TCT NGO of Georgia received a grant from the U.S. Embassy Democracy Commission for a pilot project of creating the first business association along the TCT. Outreach to local businesses began in October 2021 and continued throughout the winter, with plans to solidify the association structure and open an office in spring 2022.

In the first year of the project, we will focus on creating the association, building a membership base of local businesses, and creating a sustainable revenue stream for the association's operations through a discount card program and the sale of Transcaucasian Trail merchandise and hiking maps. Once we have established the association and a funding mechanism to continue the association's operations, the association will serve to address issues related to hiking-based tourism in the region through, for example, trail infrastructure maintenance, litter removal from mountain trails, and the creation of new marketing platforms for small businesses.

The Svaneti pilot project will serve as a test of the business association model. If successful, using the lessons learned from Svaneti, the TCT Georgia NGO aims to expand the model to other mountain regions of Georgia.



Traditional defense towers in Svaneti, Georgia.

5. Local partnership development

In terms of funding partnerships, the Georgia NGO continued building its relationship with the

U.S. Forest Service, who supported the Caucasus Conservation Corps program and built a new relationship with the U.S. Embassy Democracy Commission.

In implementation partnerships, the NGO continued its relationship with Lagodekhi Protected Areas and began conversations with Borjomi Protected Areas and the National Forestry Agency about future work in Nedzvi Reserve.

In terms of local partnerships, the NGO began building relationships with locals in new focus areas of Racha and Samtskhe-Javakheti, and took steps to begin formalizing relationships with local businesses along the trail in Svaneti that we have been building for over 6 years.



Scouting in Nedzvi Reserve, Georgia.

Developments in Azerbaijan in 2021

In 2021, we took a major step towards our cross-border vision with the launch of the first TCT project in Azerbaijan. This marks a major milestone towards completing the trail network.

We welcomed a new team member, Nazrin Garibova, who led our partnership development and scouting efforts in Azerbaijan.

1. Scouting potential TCT routes through Azerbaijan

Project partners: Azerbaijan Tourism Board

Expected outcome: Mapping existing trails, gaps, and future priorities for establishing the TCT

route through Azerbaijan. Result: Two 100km sections added to the trail network.

Timeline: June 2021 - December 2021

In summer 2021, with the support of the Azerbaijan Tourism Board, we undertook our first scouting and assessment project too begin laying the groundwork for the TCT in Azerbaijan. The goal was to work with local partners to get an understanding of the current trail networks and conditions, identify gaps in the network, and assess priorities for future trail projects. Ultimately, the Azerbaijan section of the TCT will stretch 600-700 kilometers across the country, starting at the Georgian border and following the Greater Caucasus to the Caspian Sea.

Over the summer, Azerbaijan project manager Nazrin hit the ground running in June. Working together with a local guide, Şaiq, she hiked over 500 kilometers in 10 different regions over the summer, ranging from the full forests of Zaqatala, to the deep canyons of Quba, to the high passes around Khinaliq.



A shepherd in the high mountains of Guba, Azerbaijan.

2. Trail guide development

Project partners: Azerbaijan Tourism Board

Expected outcome: Publishing trail notes for new sections of the TCT, based on scouting and

trail assessments

Timeline: November 2021 - March 2022

Based on the 2021 scouting expedition, two sections were determined ready for inclusion in the Transcaucasian Trail network, which were written in the winter of 2021 and planned to be published in early 2022.

Sheki-Zagatala: A 97 kilometer section through the forested mountains of Northwest Azerbaijan. The trek takes hikers from one of the oldest cities in Azerbaijan, Sheki (also the capital of the district Sheki), and the historic church in the charming village of nearby Kish; through the mountains of Gakh district and its smaller settlements; into the town of Ilisu, where you embark on a multi-day journey along the top of a mountain of magnificent panoramic views of mountain layers and forested villages; all the way into the Zagatala district.



The Sheki-Zagatala section of the TCT.

Guba-Gusar: A 102km section of the Transcaucasian Trail that weaves through the high mountains and deep canyons of the Guba and Gusar regions of Northern Azerbaijan. The route weaves between some of the highest-elevation villages of the country— several of which have their own ethnolinguistic groups— and their holy sites, mosques, shepherd settlements, and ancient fortresses, as well as cliffs, waterfalls, and alpine meadows.



Canyons along the Guba-Gusar section of the TCT.

In 2022, we plan to formally launch these sections as well as continue scouting work to connect these two trails. We also aim to start building up a volunteer network, invest in local training, and host a first trail improvement project in Azerbaijan.

2021 Financial Statement

Income:

Donations: \$ 67,052.34

Grants: \$ 4,915.00

Total income: \$71,967.34

Expenses:

Operations: \$21,784.63

Grants to Armenia NGO: \$ 6,050.00

In-kind grants to Armenia NGO: \$4,210.00

Grants to Georgia NGO: \$ 6,000.00

In-kind grants to Georgia NGO: \$ 15,724.85

In-kind grants to Azerbaijan programs: \$8,633.50

Refund of Volunteer and Tour Fees: \$ 2,490.62

Total Expenses: \$ 64,893.60