

The International Appalachian Trail: the ancient Appalachians as ambassador of the geosciences to modern societies

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Throughout human history, the geological foundation of our landscape has determined the location of settlements, trade routes, and human migratory paths, inextricably linking our culture to geology. The International Appalachian Trail (IAT) addresses our common geoheritage by establishing a long-distance walking trail that extends *beyond borders* to all geographic regions once connected by the “Appalachian Mountain” range, formed more than 300 million years ago on the super-continent Pangaea. In addition to connecting people and places, the goal of the IAT is to promote natural and cultural heritage, health and fitness, environmental stewardship, fellowship and understanding, cross-border cooperation, and rural economic development through eco-recreation.

The IAT was founded on “Earth Day” in Maine, USA, in 1994 and currently includes 21 Chapters representing an estimated 12,000 miles of trail along the ancient Appalachian terranes rimming the North Atlantic. A work in progress, the development of the IAT continues as individual Chapters: (1) construct a long-distance walking trail; (2) locate the IAT within areas that have been identified by geologists as having been part of the ancient Appalachian/Caledonian landscape; (3) locate the IAT so that it connects to bordering Chapters; (4) make available to the public map and trail descriptions of the IAT within its jurisdiction via the IAT web site; and (5) produce educational web site trail guides. In Europe, the IAT has been a natural fit, both in terms of mission and geography, with Geoparks. The IAT provides an excellent opportunity for earth scientists to participate in this unique recreational/educational project and to engage the public in a discussion of the geological foundations of modern society.