





The dream becomes a reality

The Great Baikal Trail concept began with a simple yet daunting idea - to build a trail circumventing one of the oldest and most beautiful lakes on Earth, our “pearl of Siberia,” Lake Baikal. The trail would stretch over 2000 kilometers, connecting seven national parks and reserves and providing easy access to Baikal’s breath-taking views and panoramas. While a single trail around the entire lake is still a far off dream, volunteers with the Great Baikal Trail Association have been working diligently for the past five years to create Russia’s first system of trails that provide access to some of the most magical places in the Baikal Region. Eventually, these trails will be connected and the vision of a complete system of trails around Lake Baikal will become reality.

GBT Work:

GBT is an international non-profit organization, with a mission to promote local sustainable development of Lake Baikal and surrounding areas through low-impact ecotourism. This mission is grounded in building a system of environmentally friendly trails that are safe and enjoyable for hikers of all ages and levels of experience. GBT is carrying out trail-building projects around Baikal in two-week summer camps composed of international volunteer crews. GBT projects concentrate on environmental education, restoration, social responsibility and leadership, improving the health and well-being of local people, preserving indigenous peoples, their cultures and traditions, and also promoting intercultural interaction.

In addition to building Russia's first system of trails that comply with international trail-building standards, GBT is creating an infrastructure that will support sustainable development in the entire Baikal region. By providing new economic incentives for local populations to preserve their environment, GBT is offering a viable alternative to industrial development, while raising the local standard of living (the Baikal region is an economically depressed area of Russia with a high rate of unemployment). GBT is trying to create new work places and promote local, environmentally-friendly business initiatives by ensuring a steady influx of ecologically-minded tourists. For example, GBT trail-building projects give local youth and adults the opportunity to work as trail-building crew leaders and interpreters, and support local villagers in their efforts to develop private bed and breakfast lodges.

GBT is also a conservation effort aimed at raising awareness of the value of unpolluted wilderness among the local populations. GBT projects introduced a type of tourism that, while familiar in the West, is practically unknown in Russia –volunteer vacations. More often than not, the idea that Russians and foreigners are willing to come to Baikal and work for free, to donate their time and money to preserve the Lake, to spend two weeks of vacation time building a trail in the middle of Siberia, is absolutely mind-boggling to the local people. After getting over the initial surprise and disbelief, they have a new point of reference for seeing – and respecting – the beauty of Baikal.

Results:

Over the past five summers, hundreds of volunteers contributed hundreds of hours to build recreational trails that are clear, safe, well-marked, and well-monitored.

2005

2006

2007

Total for 5 years

Number of projects

6

14

28

22

24

94

Total number of volunteers:

136

345

604

402

832

2319

international

49

120

163

125

185

642

russian (including local people)

87

225

441

277

647

1677

Kilometers of trails built

70

145

170

90

65

540

These numbers are more than kilometers of trail or hours of spent time. There are things you cannot see or sum up in statistics and charts, like the day-to-day enthusiasm and laughter, the satisfaction of finishing a section of the trail, or the taste of a well-prepared meal after a hard day's work. There is the joy of unzipping your tent to see the first rays of the sun light up pure mountain peaks with exotic names like Khamar-Daban or Barguzin; conversing, sharing jokes, and forging close friendships with people who do not speak your language; figuring out how to make a meal for fifteen hungry trail-builders in a bucket hanging over an open fire; and realizing, upon returning home, that you cannot picture a better vacation.

GBT has already succeeded at gathering broad support from the local population, local and regional governmental structures, including administrations of national parks and wildlife reserves, international non-profit organizations, and the tourism industry. Among the most important partnerships is the Rotary-GBT project, started in 2004 by GBT and Hommer –Kochemak Bay Rotary Club (Alaska) in dedication to the centennial anniversary of Rotary International, in which RI adopted 100-kilometer section of GBT trail. Rotary clubs in Oregon, USA, and Sydney, Australia, also joined the Rotary-GBT project in 2005, hiking the trail, working on trail construction, and deciding to sponsor the project during the next year.

GBT has already begun sharing its experience with other regions. In the summer of 2005, GBT and local Kamchatka partners organized two trail-building projects on the Kamchatka peninsula.

GBT's future plans:

While over 540 kilometers of trail have been built, improved, or restored, many more kilometers remain. But the dream does not stop there – GBT plans to add specialized wheelchair-access, biking, horse-riding, and cross-country skiing trails to the network. GBT organizers foresee multifaceted educational and social projects powered by partnerships between the community, businesses and administration. Such projects will include the creation of barrier, or “obstacle-free,” city and recreational environments for physically challenged people, leadership programs for local youth, certification programs teaching new or additional work skills to the unemployed or homeless, and programs addressing the needs of at-risk youth, inmates at low-security prisons, orphans and teenagers from broken or problematic homes, and populations of economically depressed rural areas. There are also plans of international exchange programs dedicated to environmental education, protection, and sustainable development.

Baikal's unique place among the most important ecosystems of our planet cannot be overestimated. Its beauty is timeless, its value - immeasurable. GBT is not just a trail; it is a path to an economically and environmentally sound future for the region, and a strong, well-connected network of people dedicated to protecting Baikal's pristine ecosystems and preserving them for future generations. Let's make this world a bit better together!

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