





### Our History

The dreams of so many travellers to Baikal finally began to be realized in the summer of 2002 through the foundation of the Great Baikal Trail Association (GBTA). Among these travellers were the Sibiryaki – proud Siberian woodsmen and adventurers - Oleg Gusev and Valentin Bryanskii, whose stories captivate Russian children to this day.

During that summer, the Federation of Sport Tourism and Mountaineering (Republic of Buryatia, Russia) and Baikal Watch (San Francisco, USA) received a joint grant from the Foundation for Russian–American Economic Cooperation to support the exchange of experience and knowledge, with the aim of building trails on Lake Baikal. In the autumn of 2002, trail building specialists from the Tahoe Rim Trail Association, the US Forest Service, and Earth Corps travelled to Baikal. They met with representatives from nature reserves, talked about trail building in America, and fell in love with the Siberian wilderness and our lake.

In January of 2003, a group of interested people from all around Baikal travelled to the American West Coast to discover what it takes to build a trail. In February, after observing American trail-building projects, Arkady Kalikhman, Andrei Suknev, Evgenii Mar'yasov, Vera Butorova, Vasillii Sutula, Sergei Baldanov, and Ariadna Reida gathered in the small, quiet town of Carlson City, Nevada to discuss the possibility of building the Great Baikal Trail. This meeting resulted in a consensus to go ahead with the GBT project. With the help of volunteers, international volunteer camps would be set up, where one could work, rest and get to know people from other countries and cultures, and all of this while building trails on the shores of our magnificent lake.

So it was decided, and so it was done!

During the summer of 2003, the first six volunteer groups set out around Baikal, with the support of six independent organizations - the Baikal Reserve, the Zabaikalskii National Park, the community organisation "Ust'e" from Bolshoe Goloustnoe, the club "Laboratory of Active Tourism" from Ulan-Ude, the NGO "GRIN," and the Severobaikalsk School of Tourism and Ecological Education - to begin building the trail. In the first season of GBTA's existence, 136 volunteers took part in our projects. Of the Russian volunteers, the majority were students who had the unique opportunity to visit different corners of Baikal and to do something productive with their own hands. In the autumn, after many requests from the students, a GBT Club was established. Foreign and local volunteers came to the club meetings each week, and together prepared for the coming trail-building season.

In February of 2004, three Russian volunteers (potential crew leaders) were sent on a placement with Earth Corps in Seattle, USA to gain skills in trail building and leadership. They returned from their travels just in time for the beginning of the 2004 season. A pair of trail specialists from Earth Corps accompanied them back to Irkutsk, and helped with the work for 3 whole months on 14 different projects. These were not our only international volunteers. We also had: Josh Hartshorn, Alan Meyer, Alastair Locke and John Green, who all left their hearts with new friends around Baikal, to be sure that they would return to the shores of Baikal the next year. The year of 2004 was a significant year, as Rotary International "adopted" 100km of trail and sent along their wonderful project leader, Dave Brann, to oversee the project. This was not all, as Baikal Plan in Germany joined up with the GBT, offering to send 100 Germans (many of whom we simply did not have spaces for) to help build the trail. GBT was also established as a non-profit organization during this year.

During the winter of 2004-2005, the GBT club began to involve itself in more serious activities. They travelled to local schools to give presentations to children about ecology, prepared for exhibitions, and, most importantly, our volunteers developed the desire to become leaders and interpreters themselves. To achieve this goal, they organised brigadier (crew leader) courses, which kept them occupied every weekend in the spring.

In the spring of 2005, a group of Russian national park employees and GBT staff toured the American West Coast on a program, sponsored by the Trust for Mutual

Understanding and conducted by the Earth Island Institute. While there, they were exposed to many trail-building organizations, and observed how they operate in the United States.

The 2005 summer season flew by. There were 30 projects, in many of which we expanded our activities beyond trail building. Some projects included repair work on a datsan (Buryat Buddhist Monastery), helping local farmers bring in the harvest, clearing abandoned buildings, and making information signs. Alongside these projects, GBT also organized its first ecotour. With the support of Earth Island Institute and Boyd Norton, we led a group of twenty tourists to the most breathtaking places in the Baikal region. The travellers learned about Russian, Buryat, and Old Believer cultures, while experiencing the unique wilderness of Lake Baikal. The tour was highly successful, both for the participants, and also for GBT. The group members had a great time, and appreciated getting to know our area from the perspective of local environmentalists. The tour also constituted important financial support for local small businesses associated with ecotourism and provided GBT with funds to help us continue working throughout the year.

In September, we hosted a group of Australian volunteers from Rotary clubs in the Sydney area. They came on a good-will tour of the area, and spent a week with GBT. We took them to Bolshoe Goloustnoe to start building a trail to Sacred Mountain, and they worked magnificently with local kids, teaching them crafts, such as painting and knitting, and English. The kids had a wonderful time, and our Australian volunteers provided much needed revenue for the villagers by staying in several local bed and breakfasts.

In March and April of 2006, three GBT staff members travelled to the USA to learn about non-profit organization management. They had the opportunity to observe many non-profits in the United States, and spent most of their time learning about how these programs cooperate with for-profit and governmental organizations in their fields.

In April and May, GBT continued with the city project that was started in 2005. We partnered with the Irkutsk City Administration to restore the old Pushkin Grove. We collected trash, trimmed trees, and constructed trails. The idea was that, if GBT cleaned up, people would actually use the park, learn to appreciate it, and then take care of it themselves.

An interpretive trail seminar took place in Ulan-Ude in May of 2006. GBT collaborated

with the Republic of Buryatia Center of Biology and Ecology to start building an interpretive trail in Ulan-Ude with the goal of teaching new crew leaders how to organize trail-building camps. Later in September two trail interpretation specialists from the United States Forest Service visited the ongoing trail-building project at Sacred Mountain in Bolshoe Goloustnoe and designed a new route for this trail. They also went to the Republic of Buryatia Center of Biology and Ecology and designed the interpretive education trail there. A month before this was happening, the International Building Organization from Belgium built a trail in cooperation with GBT, and later became an official partner organization.

Spring of 2007 began with the preparation for GBT's first winter project, which was centered around exposing local kids to active volunteerism by making trail signs with them in Severobaikalsk. This project was a great success, and we will increase our winter project participation in the future. At this time, RUSAL, a Russian aluminium company, awarded GBT a grant for developing the volunteer movement in the Baikal region. We used this grant to recruit new volunteers and further develop our leadership training program. With the help of this grant, we began taking our crew leader and interpreter responsibilities more seriously, and effective training became much more important for those wanting to become GBT leaders. We also implemented the concept of assistant leaders to help crew leaders on projects. Also in 2007, GBT was invited to participate in the Russian-German Forum, an annual event that alternates in location between Russia and Germany. This year, the theme was leadership skills.

In the spring of 2007, GBT conducted another city park project, in which we cleaned up the Paris Commune Park in the city of Irkutsk. This increased local awareness of GBT, due to television coverage, and made the park a much nicer place. We also held our annual Spring Seminar for new crew leaders, which was organized at the Youth Educational Center in Irkutsk.

Before the summer projects started, two GBT staff members travelled to Australia with the support of Australian Rotary clubs to learn about trail building in the National Parks and Wildlife Service areas of New South Wales. Another of GBT's members also went to Australia later in the summer with Oxfam International Youth Partnerships (OIYP) and the Rotary club to attend a conference and learn about children's environmental programs.

John Shoubert, a trail building specialist from the Oregon Forest Service, joined us in the summer of 2007 to go to Holy Nose and the Pribaikalskii National Park, where he scouted new trail routes and inspected our existing trails. He also shared his knowledge

about trail classification and trail building techniques. Also at this time, three GBT staff members went to the American West Coast on our ongoing international learning program with the Earth Island Institute.

In addition to our usual projects in the summer of 2007, we also added a new program with the Drug Rehabilitation Center in Angarsk (an industrial center located 60 km from Irkutsk). A group of Belgian volunteers from IBO joined GBT crew leaders in working at the center for one week. After the first week, the group took three Drug Rehabilitation Center residents to the field, where they helped to build trails for another week.

In the spring of 2008, GBT was awarded a grant from IREX to develop an environmental awareness and volunteerism program for children at four different schools in villages around Baikal. Our volunteers go to a different school each weekend to lead projects with students. The schools consist of an art school in Miget, elementary schools in Tankhoi and Bolshoe Goloustnoe, and a rehabilitation center for children with unstable families in Irkutsk.

Another winter project in Severobaikalsk is scheduled for mid-March 2008. On this project, children from area schools will help to build trails and enjoy the lake with an environmentally conscious attitude. This opportunity is made possible through private and corporate donations.

In 5 summer seasons, some 2300 volunteers have taken part in GBT projects, more than 500 km of trail have been built, and steps, gutters, bridges of all shapes and sizes have been added to existing trails. Many paths have crossed, many stories have been told, and all this is just the beginning.

[contact us](#)