BRIDGING THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE

A representative of the world-famous Appalachian Trail is summoned to the breathtaking landscape of Tajikistan to discuss the benefits a trail system has on local communities.

TAJIKISTAN. THE WORD ITSELF invites mystery and adventure, much like our favorite two words: Appalachian Trail. The Republic of Tajikistan is climbing its way out of recent struggles from a civil war, which ended in 1997. Given the mountainous terrain and regional complications in Central Asia, rebuilding their country after war is certainly a steeper hike and greater challenge than the mighty climb up Mount Katahdin.

Now, as the Tajik people untangle themselves from unrest, they are looking ahead at a view with more options for economic recovery. Tourism is a growing priority, and the country's high mountains, breathtaking scenery, and rich historical and cultural heritage form a perfect combination for adventure travel and long-distance hiking. With this in mind, a representative of the world-famous Appalachian Trail was summoned to discuss the benefits a trail system has on local communities, such as economic impact and natural resource protection.

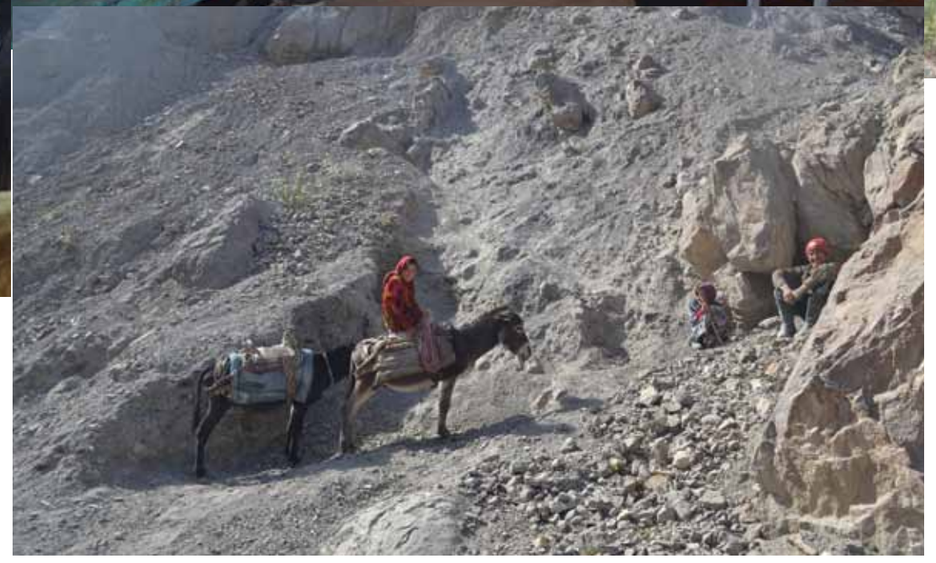
TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JULIE JUDKINS

To most hikers and A.T. lovers, the Trail isn't thought of as an economic driver and tourist attraction, but its iconic appeal, cultural lure, and the fact that it is a backyard asset to its Trailside communities makes the A.T. an important part of these rural towns' livelihoods. There is a delicate balance between protecting the A.T. experience and spreading awareness to assure it is appreciated and protected for future generations to love and cherish. With the popularity of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's (ATC) new A.T. Community program, outreach and the Trail's recognition are growing, and new partnerships are blooming, even internationally.

The State Department got wind of the ATC's efforts to achieve balance between economics and conservation, and supported my travel to Tajikistan for a week of cultural exchange. The U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe, the capital, arranged eight days of travel and speaking engagements venturing through the valleys, and Seven Lakes to the "little" Fann Mountains (15,000-foot peaks). The "big" mountains, the Pamirs, form the western borders of Afghanistan, China and Kyrgyzstan, and are one of the bigger tourist destinations for hikers with peaks reaching 24,000 feet.

My first formal introduction was with the department chair for Youth Affairs, Sports, and Tourism, who told me of Tajikistan's three pillars of tourism — their cultural heritage, including World Heritage Sites and the famous Silk Road, the beauty of its landscape,

Previous page: Lake Norak features a 984-foot earth-filled dam — to make it resistant to earthquakes. Clockwise from above: Hiking the path along the Seven Lakes in the Fann Mountains; Heading south from Dushanbe toward Norak; English students show off their beautiful landscape in Shahriston; The country's dramatic terrain; Julie discusses Leave No Trace principles from atop an ancient settlement; Dried fruits and nuts at the Green Bazaar in Dushanbe.



Clockwise from above: Mahmud was Julie's translator and guide; Passing locals on the trek between the Sixth and Seventh Lakes; A short side trip, with the students, outside of Shahristan; Julie tells students about the A.T.

Julie Judkins is the ATC's community program manager.

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and most importantly, its hospitality. I was fortunate to experience all of these virtues first hand, and had the authentic experiences to gain better understanding of the poetic, Persian culture. Staying at a guest house with limited facilities may not be as intimate as a tent pitched in the Appalachians, but sipping tea with Tajik families on a tapchan (a platform, often outside, used for relaxing, eating and/or sleeping) lets you experience their culture in a way that no hotel ever could.

Yes, the three pillars were plainly evident, but I wasn't there just to sip tea, hike in the mountains, and visit historic sites like Sarazm, which took me 5,500 years back into history. With the help of a translator (navigator, scheduler, cultural teacher, and provider for any question asked) named Mahmud, I presented speeches and workshops about the A.T. to many different audiences and told the powerful story of volunteers who built, protect, and maintain it. The success of a simple footpath through the wilderness bringing together thousands of volunteers and millions of visitors was astounding to many. Volunteerism is a new concept for the former Soviet country, and many were interested in trails as a tourism strategy. Place-based education and service learning were two speaking points that were received enthusiastically as ways for students and community residents to improve infrastructure for new visitors.

In Shahriston, a remote village near the Uzbekistan border, I was able to give a presentation of Leave No Trace principles. Standing on top of an ancient settlement and temple, the seven principles took on a different relevance, as I explained them to a group of English students who described the story and significance of the ancient site. Other stops included a workshop given to tour operators about their existing assets and trail system, discussing the need for visitors' services, presentations to tourism faculty and university students about A.T. history and the importance of volunteerism to Trail management, and visits with local organizations and English-speaking groups.

The trip culminated with a National Tourism Conference, organized by the Tajik Association of Tourism Operators, celebrating World Tourism Day. I was asked to give a keynote address to a diverse audience of international participants including government officials, tour operators, NGO's (non-profit organizations), and several Ambassadors including the newly arrived U.S. Ambassador Susan Elliott. I spoke of the power of partnerships and networking needed to accomplish a model for success — it could not have been done by one organization, one local community, one group of volunteers, one state or even the government itself. The Trail's success lies in the hands of many working together to assure that the spirit of the experience remains true to its roots, and that the resource itself remains an asset for all — creating a good quality of life for all our communities.

As I flew out of Dushanbe and looked down at snow covered peaks and glaciers illuminated by the full moon, I held my hand over my heart in a much practiced salute of respect for the Tajik people who treated me as family during my brief visit. This simple gesture speaks volumes about their culture, their values, and the respect needed for a mountainous landscape where severe earthquakes, landslides, and avalanches are commonplace. If you are interested in an adventure of a lifetime, let me know as I've many new friends and contacts to share with you.