



PCTA Regional Representative Brings Trail Know-How to Siberia

Approximately 5,400 miles around the globe from the PCT, in south central Russia near the Mongolian border, sits magnificent and ancient Lake Baikal. Known as the Blue Eye of Siberia, the Pearl of Siberia, and the Galápagos of Russia, Lake Baikal is the oldest and deepest freshwater lake in the world. Although remote (with only a handful of towns and villages nearby) and somewhat protected by a scarcity of roads and rugged, mountainous terrain, this unique natural resource (see sidebar for details) is increasingly threatened by pollution, industrial development, proposed nuclear plants and oil pipelines, habitat destruction, wildlife poaching, gold and uranium mining, and the effects of regional economic hardship.

In an effort to protect Lake Baikal and its biodiversity, a number of international and Siberian organizations, including the **Great Baikal Trail Association (GBTA)**, are hoping to develop an eco-tourism economy for this otherwise isolated and depressed region of Siberia. Critical to their work is the construction of Russia's first system of recreational trails and eventual connection of these trails into a single **Great Baikal Trail (GBT)**, a 1,200-mile continuous path around the massive crescent-shaped lake. The GBT

would include beach walks (one as long as 30 miles), views of the surrounding mountains that rival those of the Grand Tetons, vast treeless steppe land, taiga mountain forests (moist subarctic forests dominated by conifers), riparian watersheds and wetlands, and chances to view rare wildlife such as the only freshwater seals in the world (known as the nerpa or Baikal seals), sable (members of the weasel family), elk, and bear.

There are currently only about 250 miles of trails along Lake Baikal. Many of these include sections that are extremely dangerous by U.S. standards, spoiled by litter and unauthorized structures, and poorly marked (if they are marked at all). The work to be done is daunting – especially considering that there are no systems in place in Russia to fund or organize such a task. The GBTA and its supporters have made tremendous progress and improvements to the trail system but, ultimately, they have few tools, materials, and experienced trail builders at their disposal.

For assistance in trail planning and design, the GBTA recently called upon the expertise of the **Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA)**, the **U.S. Forest Service**, the **Student Conservation**



Corps (SCA), and the **California Conservation Corps (CCC)**. Funded by a grant from the **Earth Island Institute**, GBTA brought representatives from each of these organizations to Siberia to hike and work on existing trails along Lake Baikal. **Suzanne Wilson**, Regional Representative for the PCTA, **John Griffith**, Conservation Crew Supervisor with the CCC, **Bob Birkby**, author of the trail-building book *Lightly on the Land* and SCA representative, and **John Schubert**, with the Deschutes National Forest each took three weeks out of their busy schedules to travel to Lake Baikal and help GBTA build Russia's first trail system. They performed hands-on trail work and provided advice on how to plan for, administer, and execute the mammoth task of constructing a system of environmentally friendly trails that are safe and enjoyable for hikers of all ages and levels of experience.

Says Suzanne Wilson, "GBTA asked us to come and help them plan for projects for the next few years because they recognize that we have been doing this for a long time, and have proven theories, systems, and methods for building trails that are heavily used but still sustainable for generations." In addition to providing suggestions for correcting problems along difficult sections of trail, Wilson and her CCC, SCA, and Forest Service compatriots taught GBTA staff and volunteers how to approach trail design, how to use clinometers, and

how to build certain trail structures. "We were also able to provide insight into GBTA's overall growth as an organization and to discuss future exchange programs," says Wilson. "There's a great opportunity here for adventurous trail volunteers!"

So what happens next? The GBTA has a difficult but invaluable job ahead of it; learning trail-building techniques, volunteer program development, and other skills that we at the PCTA take for granted will be critical to its success. "Ultimately," says Wilson, "we all agreed that the crew leaders, who are primarily college students studying linguistics in nearby Irkutsk, should go through an intensive trail skills workshop before their 2009 season, if possible. This workshop should include technical trail building, restoration, design, and planning techniques. The crew leaders could then, in turn, host their own workshops in subsequent years to pass along that information. This would eliminate the need for 'specialists' to travel to Siberia each year. It's the old 'Give a man a fish, or teach a man to fish' concept."

Although Wilson, Griffith, Birkby, and Schubert were primarily in Siberia to provide professional advice, they also enjoyed an amazing cultural experience in the process. "When we were not camping," says Wilson, "we stayed in the local villages at people's homes. Siberians are incredible hosts. This portion of Russia is nothing

Photos (left – right): View of the Sayan Mountains in *Tunkinskii National Park* as seen on the approach to the town of Arshan, Siberia, near the southern tip of Lake Baikal. While in Siberia, PCTA Southern California Regional Representative, Suzanne Wilson, provided GBTA volunteers with hands-on trail building and maintenance training. Here we see Wilson (front) working on the GBT with GBTA volunteers in Arshan.



like the U.S. and offers its own outstanding food, traditions, and heritage. Regular amenities we are accustomed to at home are not readily available in the villages of Siberia. For example, houses in the villages have no running water and Internet access is only available in cities (which we visited on just three occasions.) For a long-time backpacker and trail worker, however, perhaps one of the most unusual things was the custom of breaking for hot tea each morning and afternoon on the trail. Potential future Great Baikal Trail thru-hikers beware: in the company of the very generous and hospitable Siberians, high-mileage days may have to take a backseat to cultural exchanges.”

The goals and ambition of the GBTA are to be admired. Lake Baikal is a natural wonder deserving of protection, and, as PCT-lovers know, there is nothing like observing environmental treasures from the tread of a trail. Of her trip to Lake Baikal, Wilson says “I am incredibly grateful to have gotten this opportunity; I took away just as much, both culturally and professionally, as I gave. The GBTA has made tremendous progress for an organization that is just six years old. They are the pioneers of building sustainable trails for recreation purposes in Russia. I hope we can continue to strengthen our partnership and I encourage PCTA volunteers to join the growing international movement for sustainable trails.” 🍵



Photos (Clockwise from top left): GBTA volunteers take a traditional tea break on the trail. Trail users, including children, in Arshan navigate a dangerous but popular section of the GBT that is covered in roots and rocks. Suzanne Wilson, PCTA Regional Representative, among GBTA trailside sculptors. Trash is a big problem around Lake Baikal and litter-control was a topic that the U.S. trail specialists discussed with GBTA volunteers. Bob Birkby of the SCA, GBTA crew leader Natasha Luzhkova, and PCTA's Wilson completing the construction of rock steps and a retaining wall in Arshan.



THE GREAT BAIKAL TRAIL

The planned Great Baikal Trail in south central Russia, near the Mongolian border, will lead hikers and other outdoor recreationists 1,200 miles around the oldest, deepest lake in the world. At 5,371-feet deep, Lake Baikal is the earth's largest freshwater lake, containing about one fifth of the world's reserves of fresh surface-water and over 80% of the fresh water in the former Soviet Union. Known as the “Galápagos of Russia,” the lake's age (25 million years) and isolation have produced some of the world's richest and most unusual freshwater fauna, which are of exceptional value to evolutionary science.

The unique Lake Baikal ecosystem is home to more than 1,085 species of plants and 1,550 species and varieties of animals, two thirds of which can be found nowhere else in the world. In recognition of its biodiversity and ecological value, Lake Baikal was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996.

Perhaps the most intriguing inhabitants of the lake are a species of small seals, called the Baikal seals or nerpa – the only seals to live exclusively in fresh water. Other local wildlife include sable, elk, bear, and wild horses.

Surrounding the lake are magnificent mountains, through which as many as 330 rivers flow into the lake, but only one, the Angara River, flows out.

While it will be many years before the dream of a continuous trail around Lake Baikal is realized; trail volunteers and tourists can already experience the mountain lake's treasures. Volunteer and eco-tourism trips to the area promise to be both cultural and outdoor adventures. The trail experience itself includes cliff and beach walks, steppe-land and rolling taiga mountain forests, riparian watersheds, wetlands, old railroad tunnels, the opportunity to visit the large island of Olkhon, (the purported birthplace of Genghis Khan), and bird watching in the Selenga River Delta, one of the great bird-flyways in eastern Russia. Off trail, in villages, visitors usually stay in homes or bed and breakfasts, thus getting the chance to experience Siberian life firsthand – from its food and friendly people to the popular banya bathing houses.

If you're interested in taking your love of trails and trail work experience to Lake Baikal to help build the GBT, contact **Suzanne Wilson** at swilson@pcta.org or visit the GBTA's Web site at www.greatbaikaltrail.org.

