
The role of geology in the development of the International Appalachian Trail

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The International Appalachian Trail (IAT) was founded on “Earth Day” in the State of Maine in 1994 and currently includes 19 Chapters representing an estimated 12 000 miles of trail along the ancient Appalachian terranes rimming the North Atlantic basin including Maine, Canadian Maritime Provinces, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Greenland, Iceland, Ireland, British Isles, Scandinavia, Netherlands, France, and Spain. The IAT mission seeks to advance recreation, tourism, education, health and fitness, and support rural economic development.

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. With advances in communications over the past several decades, an ever-widening international audience has benefited from instantaneous information on geological events and discoveries. Examples include: geologically related disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and landslides; the quest for fossil energy resources and the consequences of their development and use; climate change; significant paleontological discoveries; the quest for fresh water resources; and modern society’s dependence on rare mineral resources. Geological literacy among non-scientists has probably never been greater. From its inception, the founders recognized the geological underpinnings of the IAT and have engaged a cadre of dedicated international earth scientists to help develop the framework of and the advocate for the advancement of this unique recreational, cultural and educational resource.

The development of the IAT continues to be a work in progress 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 the 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. 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.