

Finding the International Appalachian Trail in the Atlantic Provinces, Canada: the Last Spike

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The Appalachian Mountains have a meaning to geologists that may not be as readily known by the public who hike the Appalachian Trail, or dream of doing so one day. To geologists, the Appalachians are inextricably tied to plate tectonics and the assembly of Pangea. The Atlantic Ocean intervening between North America, north Africa, and western Europe is an inconvenient distraction in reconstructing that world. But to those less fortunate than those who have studied Earth Science, the concept of retracing a world united by tectonic movement and later ripped asunder, to actually trace that connection on foot, is a revelation. It was the idea of visionary scientists in Maine, championed by their Governor, to extend the famed hiking trail northward from Mt. Katahdin to eastern Québec. In so doing, the trail became both a gesture of international goodwill and an exercise in geological education. Today, eighteen countries on both sides of the Atlantic as well as Greenland and Iceland have joined hands in the International Appalachian Trail. Tracing a route through the Maritime Provinces has posed challenges, due to the complex geological terranes and also to the lack of lengthy trail systems. The push to complete the Trans Canada Trail for Canada's 150th birth year is helping to bridge this gap, but its route in some cases avoids the ancient highlands more than guiding the hiker along them. This year, a route will be proposed, if not completed, that will connect the Appalachians in New Brunswick with western Newfoundland, and Pangea will be reunited, if only to intrepid through-hikers and geoscientists. The opportunity to engage the public along portions of this grand route however, has deep potential for learning and for exceptional outdoor experiences. Perhaps most of all, the completion of this idea to join hands comes at a time in human history when nations can afford to be inspired by the ancient ties that bind.