

A History of Hiker Advocacy

With dedication and a focused mission, American Hiking Society has established itself as the voice for America's hikers. Here's how the organization's advocacy efforts evolved over the last 30 years.

By Celina Montorfano

POLICY AND ADVOCACY work lies at the core of American Hiking Society in 2006, just as it did in 1976, when its founders realized an urgent need for a national trails organization and voice for America's hikers. The political and geographical landscapes have changed (in both negative and positive ways) in the last 30 years, and American Hiking's resolve to promote and protect foot trails and the hiking experience is stronger than ever.

The organization's early efforts largely revolved around the National Trails System, created by the 1968 National Trails System Act (NTSA), a landmark law for trails and hikers. Achievements in American Hiking's nascent years include the passage of several important NTSA amendments in the 1980s that designated new national scenic trails, encouraged volun-

teers and trail clubs to build and maintain trails, and established the concept of rail-banking, which launched the incredibly successful rails-to-trails movement. Along with passage of these bills, American Hiking advocated for funding for these trails along with trails staff positions in the headquarters of the USDA Forest Service and National Park Service (NPS).

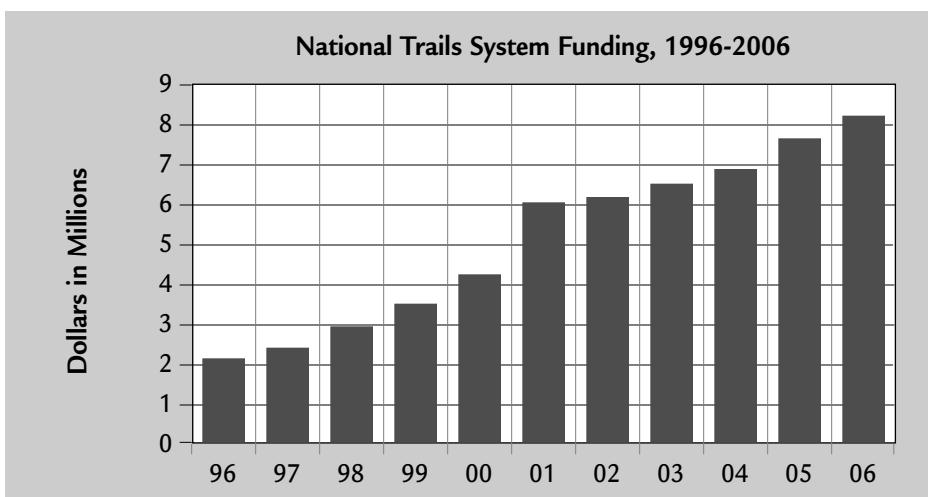
In the early 1990s, American Hiking built upon the success and attention generated by HikaNation, a 1980-81 coast-to-coast walk to increase awareness about hiking trails, by launching the American Discovery Trail with *Backpacker* magazine. This decade also marked the beginning of a new era for trail funding provided by federal surface transportation law, first through the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, enacted in 1992, which included two critical programs for trails—Transportation Enhance-

"The American Hiking Society is a valued partner to the National Park System. We particularly appreciate the succession of our joint cooperative agreements that have strengthened the National Trails System, American Hiking's outstanding support of volunteer programs, and National Trails Day. All have brought attention and help to Park Service trails. We wish you well at this 30th anniversary!"

— Fran Mainella, former National Park Service director

"The House Trails Caucus owes a great deal of thanks to American Hiking Society on its 30th anniversary for its unwavering efforts to promote, maintain, and preserve our nation's spectacular trails and hiking opportunities for future generations."

— Rep. Earl Blumenauer, (D-Ore.), chair of the House Trails Caucus



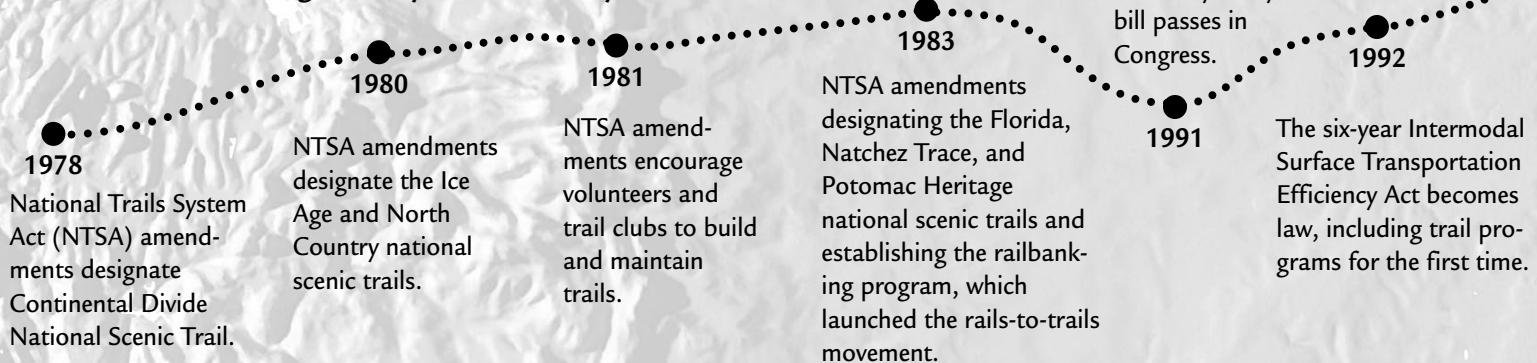
National Trails System funding (via the National Park Service budget) has steadily increased since American Hiking instituted Hike the Hill: Trails Advocacy Week.

Hiking FUN FACTS

The longest rail-trail in the United States is the Katy Trail in Missouri at 225 miles.

The longest national scenic trail in the country is the North Country Trail at 4,600 miles.

Actions that American Hiking Society spearheaded or contributed to significantly in the last 30 years include:



POLICY AND ADVOCACY MILEPOSTS

ments and the Recreational Trails Program. These programs continued and were expanded through subsequent legislation—the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (1998) and the Safe, Accountable, Flexible and Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (2005).

Starting in the late 1990s, American Hiking's policy and advocacy focus, as well as the organization's mission, expanded to explicitly encompass the hiking experience—i.e. the natural resources and values such as flora and fauna, expansive landscapes, and quiet natural sounds, that make hiking so rewarding—and not just the trail tread, corridors, or immediate environs. American Hiking banded with new and additional conservation, recreation, and trail organizations to advocate for full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, petition the Forest Service to undergo a rulemaking to address and improve off-road vehicle management (which later manifested in 2005), and urge then-President Clinton to promulgate the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (unfortunately repealed in 2005 and replaced with a voluntary state petition process).

Much of American Hiking's policy work is behind the scenes—participating in a wide variety of public comment periods on

agency regulations, plans, policies, and strategies. American Hiking directly and positively influenced documents such as the Forest Service's Recreation Agenda (2000) and the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) National Scenic and Historic Trails Strategy and Work Plan (2006), among others. Some of these efforts are more public, including recreation and conservation organizational sign-on letters to administration and agency officials or Congress on issues such as egregious proposals to sell off our parks, forests and public lands in 2005 and 2006 and threatened rollbacks to National Park Service Man-

agement Policies (at press time, new draft NPS policies had restored critical park protections, but the policies were not yet finalized).

Much of American Hiking's policy work in the nation's capital is similar to trail work on-the-ground in that our effectiveness increases greatly through partnerships and coalitions. Ever since the organization's inception, American Hiking has spearheaded several important coalitions and joined others whose focus closely aligns with our mission. In 1992, American Hiking helped form the "Committee of 17," the precursor to the Partnership for the National Trails System, which remains one of American Hiking's closest partners.

American Hiking added the hiker's voice to critical policy issues such as air quality through co-founding the Hikers for Clean Air Coalition and ORV management through the Natural Trails and Waters Coalition, which includes American Hiking on its steering committee.

The NPS's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program benefits greatly from the advocacy work of the Rivers and Trails Coalition, in which American Hiking plays a leading role. American Hiking also plays a critical role in a coalition committed to building a stronger National Landscape Con-



Theodore Roosevelt IV and Rep. James Moran (D-Va.) discuss the future of western public lands. Rep. Moran co-chairs the new National Landscape Conservation System Caucus.



servation System (NLCS) through increased funding, protection, and awareness of the BLM's 26-million-acre system and its remarkable natural, cultural, and recreational resources. Finally, American Hiking is a founding mem-

ber of the Outdoor Alliance, which includes five other national human-powered recreation organizations that support access to, and responsible stewardship of, the lands, waters, air, and habitat that are vital to a quality outdoor

recreation experience.

On Capitol Hill, American Hiking instigated the creation of the House Trails Caucus as a forum for Members of Congress to learn about and increase awareness of our nationwide

Why Your Support of American Hiking Society Matters

By Ed Malone

The trails landscape that greeted the formation of American Hiking Society in 1976 was vastly different from that of today. Backpacking was just coming into its own with the advent of lightweight gear, and people were headed for the woods in unprecedented numbers. Most national forests had hiking trails, but they were usually limited in length. The main exceptions were the Long Trail in Vermont, the Northville-Placid Trail in New York, and the well-known Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails.

Suddenly, beginning in about the mid-1970s, people began clamoring for long-distance trails in other parts of the country. Jim Wolf began a series of summer scouting trips in the West that resulted in the initial routing of the Continental Divide Trail. The North Country Trail arrived in 1980 to highlight the beauty of the Great Lakes region. The

Potomac Heritage Trail was conceived to follow early transportation routes (canals and railroads) between Washington, D.C., and Pittsburgh. The Ice Age Trail in Wisconsin would trace the advance of a glacier, while the Florida Trail (conceived in 1966 by American Hiking founder Jim Kern) was introducing hikers to the enchanting world of swamps and lowlands.

These trails formed the basis for a nationwide network. People started exploring near where they lived, spawning a number of state trail projects, including the Tahoe Rim Trail in Nevada, Palmetto Trail in South Carolina, Mountains to Sea Trail in North Carolina, Maah Hey Deh Trail in North Dakota, and the Ozark Highlands Trail in Arkansas. Two others, the Benton MacKaye Trail in Georgia and the Tuscarora Trail between Virginia and Pennsylvania, were initiated because of threats to the Appalachian Trail.

Even as these projects began to

grow, there was still another "trail revolution" at hand. In 1983, a process called "rail banking" came into being. This allowed rail corridors to be kept intact and used for recreation, resulting in more than 13,000 miles of trail nationwide—including many in towns far from hiking centers. This movement spawned "greenways" as people began to see value in preserving space for its own sake.

Your American Hiking Society has been at the forefront of all of this, supporting legislation, whether for natural areas, rail-trails, roadless initiatives, funding for forests and parks, or direct funding for trails. Thousands of volunteer workers have cleared and built trails, and National Trails Day has celebrated the sport of hiking in every corner of the land.

The "trails map" of 2006 is a crowded one, and that is a great problem to have! All those who have supported our efforts should be very proud.

system of trails. Currently chaired by trail champion Earl Blumenauer, (D-Ore.), the Caucus includes a bipartisan list of more than 50 members. In a similar fashion, American Hiking and NLCS Coalition partners spurred the formation of the recently announced NLCS Congressional Caucus, a group of Representatives dedicated to promoting and protecting the resources of the NLCS.

One of American Hiking's most notable congressional outreach efforts is its annual Hike the Hill: Trails Advocacy Week program, started in 1997. This event brings trail leaders and volunteers from across the country to Washington, D.C., to receive policy updates and training and lobby Congress for trail funding and related issues. The efforts of Advocacy Week participants over the years have contributed to notable funding increases for a number of the national scenic and historic trails and increased funding and awareness for trails and recreation programs across the nation. The trail organizations and advocates who participate year after year have also seen an increase in their credibility and capabilities through strengthened relationships with congressional and federal agency staff.

American Hiking took steps toward regionally focused advocacy in 1998 when it created the Southern Appalachians Initiative (SAI) and then in 2001 hosted the first Southeastern Foot Trails Conference and created the Southeastern Foot Trails Coalition. SAI seeks to promote and protect the long-distance foot trails of the Southeast and connecting trails and

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their natural trail corridors by building a 5,000-mile interconnected trail network and an active network of hiking organizations. American Hiking greatly boosted its capacity to implement SAI by opening its first regional office in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 2003.

American Hiking took another



In the late 1990s, American Hiking's mission extended beyond the trail tread to encompass the hiking experience.

major step in 2005, dispelling our misconception as an eastern-focused organization and expanding our efforts to promote and protect hiking and trails on western public lands, especially the gems of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System, which includes lands with special designations in 12 western states. Similar to the excitement with the American Discovery Trail in the early 1990s, American Hiking created another buzz in the trails community in early 2006 with the announcement of the Great Eastern Trail, a new trail system connecting more than 10,000 miles of trail.

American Hiking could not undertake its significant policy and advocacy work without the generous support of its individual members, Alliance of

Hiking Organizations, partner organizations, and foundation supporters. American Hiking's success—and the success of the hiking community at large—is also made possible by the many letters, phone calls, and outreach to Congress and federal agencies from our members, grassroots organizations, and trail activists around the country. American Hiking thanks its founders, members, and supporters for 30 years of stalwart hiker advocacy, expanding and protecting hiking opportunities nationwide, and ensuring natural, pristine hiking experiences for future generations.

To learn more about American Hiking's policy and advocacy work and how you can get involved, visit www.AmericanHiking.org/policy/index.html.