
Mapping the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail

SUMMARY

The lack of an authoritative and “approved” map of the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) is causing sustainability issues for land managers and confusion among outdoor enthusiasts. In several areas, the information printed in guidebooks, on websites, or in other forms of media are misguiding hikers or not providing up-to-date information on the CDT. One solution is an online guide, complete with trail details, permit information, Leave No Trace ethics, and an interactive map of the CDT. This erases the concerns of “where the CDT goes” and also allows land managers and other partners to keep a real time update of the trail and an approved resource to share with recreationists who demand more information.

BACKGROUND

In January 2007, BACKPACKER magazine announced plans to work with both the Continental Divide Trail Alliance and BACKPACKER readers to map and document the ever-shifting CDT. In the February issue of BACKPACKER, Editor-in-Chief Jonathan Dorn called for reader support in hopes of selecting roughly 200 to 300 volunteers to help us map the trail in 2007. The response thus far has been overwhelming, and to date some 2,300 have submitted in-depth applications (see: www.backpacker.com/cdtmap). The resulting volunteer pool has created a diverse mix of highly-qualified outdoor and CDT enthusiasts who want to help document and preserve this national treasure.

We fully understand in order to pull off this project, those who know it best must be involved too. As a result, an open relationship with land managers is paramount to completing the task effectively.

PROJECT OUTLINE

Project Organization: BACKPACKER has designated staff to work on this project, to help coordinate volunteers, to work closely with partners and land managers, to educate and train the final group of volunteers.

Volunteers: Each volunteer will go through a selection process and be assigned to a team. Each team will have a team leader who is provided with detailed information on the trail, any permits or regulations, any field training, and a list of Leave No Trace ethics for the specific area. Note: BACKPACKER is a partner with LNT and has LNT masters on its staff.

Data Collection: Between 200 and 300 volunteers, broken into groups of six or less, will participate in the on-the-ground map and data collection for a small section of the trail. Each team will be responsible for collecting GPS data, trail descriptions, photos and short video clips on the trail.

Teams will be made aware of the requirements of Public Law 106-206 (2000) regarding filming on public lands. All video clips will be short (under 3 minutes), utilizing small digital cameras, and will only serve to promote wilderness and trail features. This project's aim is to create an interactive map and online guidebook for the trail, not a for-profit documentary about the trail.

All photographs, video clips, trail descriptions and GPS data will be used in a manner that promotes the trail and its proper use. The gain to BACKPACKER this project offers is good data for its readers; the gain for trail managers and the CDT itself is a broader awareness and appreciation of its physical condition and eventual completion.

Each team will be responsible for mapping a small section of trail that can be covered in roughly one week. Land managers are encouraged to participate at any level, from serving as team leaders to giving the teams in their region a simple 15-minute chat before the group starts on the trail.

It is hoped, and encouraged, that land managers will also benefit from the collected data. For example, mappers can collect the physical condition of trail along the route. Teams will note the functional condition of segments, from A (fully functional) to E (new construction needed), with the end result being an updated assessment of the CDT as a whole.

It is our intention to vet this project with every land manager affected by offering them an opportunity to participate in a short survey which captures their questions and concerns with regard to the project (ie. travel and camping restrictions, Wilderness regulations, etc), as well as, their "wish list" of items they would like us to capture while on-the-ground (ie. trail condition, water resources, appropriate camp locations, etc.). The responses to the survey will have a direct impact on what data the team will collect. The team will be given ID sheets (created, in part, from the information gleaned from each survey) that identify what data needs to be collected and how to report it back to us. The survey will accompany an introduction letter similar to this white paper and will be distributed by the end of March.

We understand that some areas are sensitive, like archaeological and historical sites. That's why we've created an internal policy not to publish the exact GPS coordinates of archaeological sites not widely known. Any GPS data collected on these sensitive spots will be broad in nature.

What about incomplete sections of the CDT?

We may agree to disagree on some areas. But it is important that we share a current view on where the trail goes at the current time. Remember: The data we collect is not set in stone, and can be changed as the trail changes. BACKPACKER will work closely with the CDTA and respective land managers in defining what lengths of trail will be mapped. Official sections will be labeled as such on the base map. It would be possible to add additional (approved) layers outlining alternative or proposed routes.

Popular road walks may be labeled, but noted as discouraged and unofficial. In particularly sensitive areas where private land issues are under ongoing debate, gaps in trail data are inevitable; such areas can be updated as routes are resolved.

PUBLISHING THE DATA

The initial collected data will be compiled in an online form during fall 2007, and will provide a base resource for hikers, trail planners and land managers. This interactive map can evolve as the trail itself grows and shifts, with the potential for multiple additional layers showcasing everything from reroutes and proposed sections to, for example, the local flavor of trail towns.

THE ONGOING PROJECT

The interest in this project has been monumental, and we want to capture the enthusiasm of all those people interested in volunteering. In addition to the 200 volunteers we select for this year, we hope to convert all the interested parties into trail ambassadors. They'll be encouraged to be trail angels or trail building volunteers, or ongoing scouts for future map projects on the CDT. Our biggest asset is the ongoing excitement and the time people are willing to give to help preserve the trail and the land it crosses.

Again, land managers will have a direct way to update trail data as it changes, and will be free use to that data to educate and inform future hikers and enthusiasts. If someone asks them where do I go, and how, they can send them directly to the CDT Project website.

CONCLUSION

As the specifics for the project develop, it is hoped that all questions, concerns and suggestions on the part of land managers will be clearly voiced and addressed by BACKPACKER and the CDTA. This project is an exciting prospect for all of us.

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