

Arizona Trail Association

Celebrates 20 years of building trail and partnerships

**Article and photographs by
Matthew J. Nelson**

Arizona — the very word evokes images of breathtaking landscapes, exotic animals, star-filled skies, and dramatic sunsets. From rolling grasslands and lush Sonoran Desert to alpine peaks and one of the world's deepest canyons, it is a land of biodiversity unlike anywhere else on Earth.

And through its wild heart runs a single trail— an 800-mile path from Mexico to Utah that connects mountains, deserts, forests, canyons, rivers, communities, and people. This is the Arizona National Scenic Trail (AZT).

Over the past 30 years, outdoor enthusiasts have worked with land managers throughout the state to connect existing trails and build fresh tread to create the continuous path that has become one of the premier long-distance trails in America.

What started as the dream of one man— an elementary school teacher from Flagstaff named Dale Shewalter— has evolved into the Arizona Trail Association (ATA), a successful non-profit organization whose mission is “to build, maintain, promote, protect, and sustain the Arizona Trail as a unique encounter with the land.”

In 2013 alone, ATA volunteers logged over 17,000 hours of service to the trail. It's a labor of love. Through an active stewardship program, the ATA engages volunteers, families, schools, businesses, clubs, and organizations to take responsibility for small segments of the trail through well-organized work events. Rare is a hike on the AZT where you don't see fresh signs of trail work.

The ATA also hires professional trail crews and youth corps to conduct major projects, including rebuilding

poorly designed tread in some of the more remote portions of the state. All of these projects are overseen by a Trail Director and five Regional Stewards, all of whom are volunteers.

When the ATA celebrated its 20th anniversary in February, American Trails' Executive Director Pam Gluck was there to give the keynote speech. When she asked who in the room had participated in helping build the trail, hundreds of hands were thrust into the air.

She acknowledged them by saying, “Your work yields happiness, enriches us, and supplies us with memories that will last a lifetime. Thank you for bringing health and happiness to our world!”

Building a trail through incredibly rugged terrain and gaining National Scenic Trail status in only 30 years has been described as an incredible feat,



and anyone who has ever built trail knows that the process is a slow one. The success of the Arizona Trail can be attributed to the energy and passion put forth by founding father Dale Shewalter, but it's the ATA's strong partnerships that has kept the momentum moving forward.



Mountain bikers share the trail with hikers, equestrians, and other nonmotorized users



The Arizona National Scenic Trail includes 21 breathtaking miles through the heart of Grand Canyon National Park

Early on, the ATA reached out to all non-motorized outdoor recreation groups and invited them to participate in the project. Hikers, runners, backpackers, mountain bikers, equestrians, goat, mule and llama packers, cross-country skiers, and snowshoers all played a role in the development of the trail. And they still use it today. The biodiversity of Arizona's climates is matched by its diversity of trail users.

With the completion of the AZT in 2011, the ATA has dedicated more resources to developing its youth outreach and education program – the Seeds of Stewardship.

By engaging youth from schools located near the trail, the ATA leads outdoor experiences to help young people appreciate the natural wonders in their own backyard, works with teachers to integrate existing curriculum into on-the-trail activities and lessons, and organizes trail work events to help inspire the next generation of trail users to be responsible stewards of the land.

In 2013, the ATA led 28 outings for 283 youth and they expect to double that number this year.

The ATA also works closely with the towns located near the trail to boost ecotourism opportunities, encourage

economic development, and build healthy communities through its Gateway Community program.

A part-time Gateway Community Liaison, Sirena Dufault, gives talks to community groups to get local people excited about the trail, works with local

businesses to creatively market their goods and services to the trail community, and develops maps, signs, and information to attract more outdoor recreationalists to some of Arizona's lesser known towns.

Beginning March 14, Sirena started hiking the entire length of the AZT and has organized dozens of day hikes, short backpacking segments, and gatherings near gateway communities to promote the AZT. The trek can be followed through the ATA website and Facebook. Sirena plans to reach the Utah border by May 31.

With the recent completion of *Your Complete Guide to the Arizona National Scenic Trail*, a comprehensive guidebook available through Wilderness Press, more thru-hikers than ever before are beginning their crossing of the state this spring. The ATA is looking forward to a busy year ahead.

Visit www.aztrail.org for free maps and information to guide your upcoming adventures on the AZT. And don't forget to bring water!

Matthew J. Nelson is Executive Director of the Arizona Trail Association. He tries to spend equal time on foot, horseback, and mountain bike while exploring and protecting the trail he loves.



Over 1,200 volunteer stewards help maintain the Arizona Trail every year