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# Polk County News

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35



A ribbon cutting was held Saturday morning for the first Tennessee section of the Benton MacKaye Trail, which will eventually form a loop off the Appalachian Trail.

## Polk is linked to Appalachian Trail

by Gale Johnson

Polk County now has a connection to the Appalachian Trail.

Members of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, along with members of both the Cherokee and Hiwassee Hiking Clubs and officials of the Cherokee National Forest, were on hand Saturday morning at the ribbon cutting ceremony opening the first Tennessee section of the Benton MacKaye Trail. The crowd of over 30 enjoyed an open-air Continental Breakfast as some speculated on the remainder of the trail to be blazed and others hiked the trail for some distance.

The new 11.2 mile section takes off from the previous northern point of Benton MacKaye Trail at Double

Springs Gap on the Georgia/Tennessee state line; also the Cohutta and Big Frog Wilderness area boundaries. Elevations on this section range from 4220 feet on Big Frog Mountain to 1120 feet along the Ocoee River. Over 6 miles of this diverse, remote section lay within the Wilderness.

Supporters feel that the Tennessee section is a crowning gem atop 90-plus miles of the completed Trail, which actually has its beginning at Springer Mountain in Amicalola Falls State Park where it shares its southernmost point with the Appalachian Trail.

The Benton MacKaye Trail was conceived in 1979 as a 250-mile footpath that provides an alternative in the southeast to the highly used Appalachian Trail. The concept was to place the trail along

the western ridge to the Blue Ridge Mountains, where forester Benton MacKaye had initially envisioned the Appalachian Trail more than 60 years ago. MacKaye conceived the Appalachian Trail, which now stretches 2,050 miles from north central Maine to Springer Mountain. Completed in 1937, it goes through 14 states.

When completed, the Benton MacKaye Trail will intersect the Appalachian Trail at three points, forming a huge figure eight trail system in the mountains of Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

Numerous opportunities for camping abound along this new section, although there are no shelters, and due to Wilderness policy, no campsites are designated. To maintain a pristine character

(Please turn to page 14)

## Trail --

(Continued from page 1)

for the wilderness, the maintenance policy for all hikers and backpackers is to destroy and scatter visible remnants.

The trail is marked with white diamond-shaped blazes. Trails to water and some side trails are blue-blazed. Turns in the trail are marked with double blazes. The hiker should always be able to see a blaze up ahead.

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) was established

in 1980 to make the dream of a completed Benton MacKaye Trail a reality. Since then the BMTA, in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, has worked toward this goal, as the opening of this new 11.2 mile section indicates. These hardworking volunteers are continuously building and maintaining the trail. Members have noted that in the organization's 14 years of existence, the BMTA volunteers have canceled only two monthly construction and

maintenance outings, the last cancellation being the Blizzard of '93. The BMTA sponsors a variety of fun hikes, social events, and trail related environmental causes.

For more information on how you can become involved in the BMTA, contact Clayton Pannell at 615/263-9730 (Etowah) or Bill Porter, BMTA President, at 404/233-9778 (Atlanta, GA) or write the BMTA at P.O. Box 53271, Atlanta, GA 30355-1271.