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Meet the Other “Appalachian Trail” That Could Become Our Next National Scenic Trail

The Benton MacKaye Trail Starts at the AT's southern terminus and runs nearly 300 miles through the hills—and a bipartisan bill is set to name it our next National Scenic Trail.

JUNE 5, 2023

[MARY BETH “MOUSE” SKYLIS](#)

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A bipartisan bill led by congressman Steve Cohen seeks to re-designate the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) as the nation’s 12th National Scenic Trail, a move that would add federal protection and funding to the path.

The [Benton MacKaye Scenic Trail Act](#) marks congress's third attempt to add the BMT to the National Scenic Trails system. Previous attempts to name it a National Scenic Trail in 2021 and 2022 failed.

The representatives behind the measure have put forth different reasons for designating the Benton MacKaye Trail to the program. Congressman Chuck Fleischmann of Tennessee pointed to the trail's recreational opportunities for locals in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia. Cohen has focused on the need to protect the trail's natural beauty, stating: "The Benton MacKaye Trail provides serious hikers and leisurely day-trippers a natural wonderland of bucolic hills, valleys, trees, wildlife and natural beauty."

Previous re-designation attempts also highlighted the economic benefits of trails like the Pacific Northwest and Arizona Trails, which attract visitors from around the nation to lesser-known parts of the country.

Named after forest scientist and trail enthusiast Benton MacKaye, who most historians credit with first introducing the idea of the Appalachian Trail, the 287.6-mile Benton MacKaye Trail travels from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Big Creek, Tennessee, overlapping with some portions of the Appalachian Trail along the way. It also crosses some of the most biodiverse temperate forests in the world, protecting dozens of tree and wildflower species. Thanks to a 93-section of trail in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Benton MacKaye Trail is also the longest contiguous trail within the national park.

Want to hike the Benton MacKaye Trail for yourself? Get a sample on [this short shuttle hike](#).

In order to be designated as a National Scenic Trail, prospective routes need to be 100 miles or longer [and feature](#): "significant physical characteristics of U.S. regions." This standard has historically been harder to meet than the one for National Recreation Trails (NRT), which aim to provide urban areas with outdoor access. Since national scenic trail designations began, the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture have designated over 1,000 NRTs. In contrast, the entire National Scenic Trail system currently contains just 11 trails. The U.S. government hasn't added to that list since 2009, when the Obama administration re-categorized the Arizona Trail, the New England Trail, and the Pacific Northwest Trails.

Ken Cissna, president of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, has been a long-time proponent of the trail's re-designation. He says that making the BMT a National Scenic Trail would give its scenery much-needed protection.

"The Benton MacKaye Trail provides an exceptional opportunity for tens of thousands of people to get outdoors every year and experience the stunning beauty of the Southern Appalachian Mountains," Cissna says. "Designating this trail as our country's 12th National Scenic Trail will help protect our outdoor heritage for future generations, support local economies, and provide needed recreation opportunities for long-distance hikers and families. It would accomplish all this with no added cost to taxpayers." According to Cissna, the new trail classification could boost recreational travel while protecting the trail's history, with relatively few drawbacks.

In addition to expanding trail access in Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, advocates for the re-designation of the Benton MacKaye Trail say it could help to alleviate some of the traffic on more popular trails like the Appalachian Trail, reducing erosion and overuse issues.

"I think Benton MacKaye would have been pleased with the trail today," Cissna says. "The striking vistas, rushing waterfalls, the iconic Swinging Bridge and the pleasantly secluded forest pathways that wind through six wilderness areas as well as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (which is managed as wilderness) make the Benton MacKaye Trail a perfect candidate for designation as a National Scenic Trail."

The bill is currently with the House Committee for Natural Resources.

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