

The Berkshires



Majestic mountains, scenic wildlands, working landscapes, and an intricate network of five river systems have for years brought tourists from New England and beyond to the Berkshires to enjoy its natural beauty and recreational opportunities. The state's highest peak, Mt. Greylock, along with a number of other summits in the Berkshire Mountain range, attracts hikers and outdoor enthusiasts year-round. The Appalachian National Scenic Trail, that traverses Massachusetts along the ridgeline of the Berkshire and Taconic mountains, is only one of three major long-distance trails in this region. Though somewhat lesser known, the Taconic Trails system and the historically noteworthy Mahican-Mohawk Trail are also invaluable resources for the region and for the state.

The region's river corridors and unfragmented forestland provide important wildlife habitat and have helped to define the character and economies of many communities throughout the Berkshires. Winding through hundreds of acres of public and private property, these long-distance trails and river corridors enable people to experience some of the most spectacular natural areas in the Commonwealth. Protecting these greenway resources, creating new corridors to link forest and park lands, and establishing a bike path system from Vermont to Connecticut are all essential to efforts in this region. Specifically, advocates want to see the following steps taken:

Permanently protect, secure and buffer the region's major long-distance trails.

Of the three major long-distance trails in this region, only the Appalachian National Scenic Trail is fully protected.

Approximately 50 percent of the 72-mile Taconic Trail system, and 15 percent of the 100-mile Mahican-Mohawk Trail are permanently protected. These trails provide recreation and health

benefits, and create vital connections to surrounding forests, parks and open lands. They also offer extraordinary views and encompass fragile native habitats. Workshop participants felt it critical to permanently protect and buffer these trail corridors as the spines of a regional trail network. The main goals are to protect the critical ridgelines these trails traverse, and to ensure continuous public access and long-term preservation of scenic views.

Create links between the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and the Taconic Trail System.

Trail links in the north, south and central parts of the region will create unparalleled recreational and scenic viewing opportunities by establishing loop trails and increasing access to the Taconic and Berkshire mountain ranges.



View from Mt. Greylock. The Appalachian Trail passes over this well-known mountain, the highest peak in Massachusetts. (Marny Ashburne)



The Great Barrington Riverwalk. (Jennifer Howard)



Learning to bike on the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail. (Allison Lasso)

Create greenway corridors that strategically link protected open spaces.

The proposed Berkshire Forest Belt, roughly following the Appalachian Trail Corridor, would link East Mountain, Beartown, and October Mountain State Forests, and reach eastward, connecting with Peru State Forest and the Westfield River Greenway system. The Northern Berkshire Green Mountain Greenway is envisioned as a corridor that would connect several large state land holdings, protect the Hoosac Mountain Range and ultimately link with the Green Mountain National Forest in Vermont. Creating these and other priority corridors would benefit wildlife and expand recreational opportunities for the public year round. It will require a significant amount of research and outreach to determine the most appropriate and feasible routes. Like most “big picture” greenways, they will be implemented one step at a time, through partnerships between land trusts, and municipal, state, and federal governments.

Create and protect the Housatonic River Greenway.

Twelve years ago, communities along the Housatonic River launched an effort to clean up one of the state’s most polluted waterways and raise public awareness of the river as a community asset. It is critical to continue support of these community-based efforts that include plans for riverside trails, protection of riparian lands, creation of canoe and kayak access points, and restoration of the river system.

Complete the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail and support efforts to create a north-south bikeway from Vermont to Connecticut.

The Ashuwillticook Rail Trail is the first and only bikeway in this region. When complete it will extend 11 miles from the Pittsfield/Lanesborough town line to Adams. The southern five miles opened in the summer of 2001. State and local advocates including DEM, the Executive Office of Transportation and Construction (EOTC), MassHighway and the Berkshire Bike Path Council are committed to completing the trail, and are working to secure funding and support to extend it as part of a long-distance bike trail network envisioned for the county.

Create a protected greenway corridor along the Westfield River.

The Westfield River is one of two federally designated Wild and Scenic Rivers in Massachusetts. It is a priority to protect this gem of a river through land acquisition, forest stewardship and zoning, as well as through landowner outreach and education. In addition, local advocates have called for greater coordination, support and public awareness among river communities. They are also working to identify trails within the greenway corridor, with the goal of connecting existing trails and potentially linking the three branches of the river.



Young hiker at Pine Cobble on the Appalachian Trail in Williamstown. (William C. Madden)

Appalachian National Scenic Trail

As the state's only fully protected, long-distance hiking trail, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT) in many ways represents the pinnacle of greenway and trail protection. Yet, even here, there is more work to be done to secure this public treasure.

After decades of acquisition of land adjacent to the existing trail corridor or of lands connected to nearby state forests and parks, the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) has now shifted its efforts to protecting the trail's imperiled viewshed. As in other southern New England and Mid-Atlantic States, heightened development pressures in the Berkshires have had a detrimental effect on the trail experience for day and through hikers. The construction of cell towers along the ridgeline and other activities that are fragmenting the surrounding landscape are of particular concern. The land trust unit of the ATC is working with the industry to suggest alternatives to cell tower development that will help reduce impacts on the viewshed. Another challenge facing AT advocates is the need to raise public awareness of the importance of buffer zones as a means for protecting the natural and scenic values surrounding the trail that hikers often take for granted.