

Article GBT in Tahoe

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October 31, 2002

## Going from one rim trail to another

[Melissa Vinitsky, Tahoe World](#)

Imagine a lake that holds more water than all the Great Lakes combined, is as long as the distance between Sacramento and Los Angeles, and fits Lake Tahoe into one of its bays.

Hard to picture?

For the four representatives from the Tahoe Rim Trail Association and the U.S. Forest Service who traveled to Siberia, Russia earlier this month, Lake Baikal is no less astounding in person than on paper.

The group was invited to Russia to give advice and insight on developing a trail around the lake. In return, they received an experience they will remember for a lifetime.

Lake Baikal is the world's oldest and deepest fresh water lake. At 395 miles long, 80 miles wide, and more than a mile deep, the crescent shaped lake holds one-fifth of the planet's fresh water. Lake Tahoe, by comparison, is 22 miles long, 12 miles across, and one-third of a mile deep.

"It's hard to conceptualize how immense the lake is," said Shannon Raborn, associate director for the Tahoe Rim Trail Association. "It looks like an ocean, but you can see across."

Lake Baikal, which is home to the only fresh water seal, the Nerpa, is revered by Russians. The comparison is often made to one of America's national treasures.

"Lake Baikal is to Russians like the Grand Canyon is to Americans," said Robert McDowell, planning staff officer for the USFS Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. Larry Randall, recreation officer for the USFS Carson Ranger District, also made the trip.

So big is the lake that Russians refer to it as the "Sacred Sea" or "Pearl of Siberia." In the winter, the lake freezes by more than three feet deep, thick enough for cars to drive on the surface or even, in 1904, for train tracks to be laid during the Russo-Japanese War.

Protecting Lake Baikal is important to the Russians, especially to those who live in the roughly 40 lakefront towns. In a time when free speech was unheard of, locals fought to keep a pulp and paper plant from being built on the south end of the lake. While the protest was unsuccessful, in 1987 the Soviet government banned logging anywhere close to the shore.

"The environment movement in Russia started because of Lake Baikal," said Raborn. "That they protested at that time is unbelievable."

Despite the cellulose plant, pollution at Lake Baikal remains relatively low. According to Raborn, you can see 100 feet down. Forty years ago, the clarity level at Lake Tahoe was the same, but since then it has been reduced to around 70 feet.

While the area is rich in beauty, it is poor compared to the U.S.

McDowell commented on the lack of building repair in the towns he visited.

"Things get broke and stay broken, they don't get repaired," he said. "I don't know if it was different during communism, if times would have been better."

Locals view Lake Baikal as a key to improving their economy. As part of their efforts to promote eco-tourism, they want to build a 1,000-mile trail around the lake to attract both foreign and Russian tourists, who until recently did not travel in their own country. As of now, only 200-miles have been constructed.

"They want to increase eco-tourism as a way to do low-impact activity, as a way to enjoy the lake and the area without building hotels," said Raborn.

Leading the charge is the Federation for Sports Tourism and Mountaineering at Baikal, a non-governmental organization composed of about 250 members associated with the eco-tourism industry. Similar to the Rim Trail Association, the federation must work with governmental entities to make the Great Baikal Trail a reality. These include three national parks, three wilderness reserves, and a number of states' tourism departments.

"The biggest reason we were invited is because the TRT is a successful example of a partnership between government and nonprofits," said Raborn.

The group of Americans literally offered a living example of a successful alliance. Lynda McDowell, TRTA executive director, and Robert McDowell of the USFS, married after meeting on the Tahoe Rim Trail 10 years ago. As Lynda said, "We take our partnership seriously."

The Russians used the TRT's Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the cooperation agreement between the Forest Service and the volunteer association, as a model for their own. This was one of the highlights of the trip for Lynda.

"To be part of the beginning of another trail, to have it happen two times in my life, it overwhelmed me," she said, "and to be able to help them not have to reinvent the wheel."

The Americans also gave the Russians, who are translating the TRT's construction guide, advice on trail building and design standards.

"Their trails are not up to TRT standards, but they are certainly passable," said Robert, who believes the creation of a continuous trail is a big endeavor. "The idea of a GBT is ambitious because the distances are so great."

Besides being professionally rewarding, all of the Americans' lives were touched by the hospitality and friendship they received from a people who don't have much in the way of material wealth.

"I was overwhelmed and impressed by their generosity," said Raborn. "I saw that people are people everywhere. They may speak a different language, but we are all really the same."