

Conservation and tourism go hand in hand on long trails

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Brasília, DF – Born in Bahia and from Brasília by heart, Orlando Barros (52) has been hiking trails in natural environments for over two decades. His traveling curriculum includes crossings in Chapada Diamantina plateau, in the state of Bahia, Marins-Itaguapé and Serra Fina, between the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro and hiking almost 100 miles in the central Brazilian savanna.

Such inspiration may come from his youngish studies in biology and geology, but also from his child's escapades in the middle of preserved forests - disappearances of the precocious walker who always left parents and grandparents on alert.

"Since I was little I was interested in trails, on knowing places that were different and suitable for outdoor walks, such as the Chapada Diamantina plateau which I first went when I was young and that at every step of the way offered beautiful landscapes and waterfalls. This contact with the natural environment has fueled my current desire for hiking", says Barros, who in the coming months will be travelling to the Mont Blanc mountain range between France, Italy and Switzerland.

Last year, he hiked 243,4 miles of the Appalachian Trail, marked hiking trail, with shelters and camping sites crossing fourteen states in the eastern United States. Therefore, Barros joined the growing group of adventurers that travels sections or even through all 2,200 miles of the route, helping to maintain one of the biggest ecological corridors of the planet.

Historical steps

The Appalachian Trail began to be design in the 1920s when Benton MacKaye, forestry engineer and landscape designer, projected that a long trail would attract tourists from neighboring towns helping to save beautiful landscapes. Almost a century later, the idea is alive thanks to the work of thousands of volunteers, the support of the North American Government and educational and research institutions.

"The trail supports natural environments for over 2,000 species of animals and plants that are sensitive, rare or threatened. It is also an important corridor for migratory species, especially birds", says Laura Belleville, vice president of the Conservation and Trail Programs at Appalachian Trail Conservancy, an association dedicated to the trail's management, promotion and conservation.

Placed between the cities of Springer Mountains (Georgia) and Katahdin (Maine), the Appalachian

Trail connects 14 protected areas, such as National Parks and Forests, in addition to states' and privates' lands (see map). It also connect trails from the south and north of the United States, forming a route of nearly 5,593 miles that enters neighboring Canada.

"Appalachian has created a contiguous linear ecological network that, over time, has expanded not only in length but also in width. As much of the eastern part of the United States is densely populated, the trail is the only preserved area on a continental scale in that region", said Gary Tabor, executive director of the Center for Large Landscape Conservation, an organization dedicated to the study of ecology in large landscape.

It was no coincidence, then, that the Brazilian Orlando Barros sighted squirrels, birds, wild pigs, deer and even bears on his journey. After all, that trail is a great wildlife refuge, maintained by its touristic appeal for hiking in natural environments. "All the sections I've crossed were well preserved, with lots of vegetation, where animals were easily seen by hikers", he said.

Studies are showing similar results for nature conservation related to tourism on the Pacific Crest Trail, with over 2,485 miles between Mexico and Canada, on the west coast of the United States, and in other components of the North America National Trail System, which in 2018 is celebrating half a century of its legal recognition.

Its 59,030 miles of marked trails compose an immense web that connects almost 200 National Parks and other protected areas where nature conservation has stricter rules, in addition to numerous other green areas.

From the World to Brazil

The North American experience is also found in several other countries, all dedicated to establishing and maintaining networks of long distance trails to foster internal and international tourism and, as these paths invariably interconnect preserved areas, to promote the maintenance of areas for wildlife.

In Chile, 745 miles are marked from the north to the south of the country, while in Lebanon a winding trail extents to 273 miles. In Europe, twelve large routes cross dozens of countries. Last year, Canada marked its 150th independence anniversary by taking the first steps to consolidate a mega trail with 14,913 miles. In Japan, it is possible to walk almost 1,054 miles through little-known areas of the country on the Tokai Nature Trail.

The World Trails Network lists about 200 long distance trails scattered across all regions of the planet. One of them is *Transcarioca*, with more than 112 miles of marked trail in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Its consolidation, after two decades of planning and implementing by volunteers

and Park professionals work, is part of a growing movement for creating and signaling trails in Brazil, inside and outside National Parks and other protected areas.

Brazilian Federal Government goals involves implementing 7,456 miles of trails in the country, such as *Rota do Descobrimento* (Discovery Route), the *Corredor Costeiro* (coastal corridor) and the *Peabiru*, *Goyases* and *Araucaria* trails. Nearly 745 miles are already marked. The Atlantic Forest trail will connect the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul through 1,864 miles of trails. It's a task supported by governments, non-governmental organizations and the population.

"Establishing trails advances more effectively and with higher quality when supported by state and local governments, communities, organizations and volunteers of each region. Without this support, it would be impossible to reach the results recorded today in Brazil", says Pedro Menezes, coordinator of Public Use and Business Coordination of ICMBio - Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation, agency responsible for federal strategies and actions linked to protected areas and wildlife conservation.

Ecological corridors and long trails are tools recognized by Brazilian legislation for increasing connectivity between preserved areas and the maintenance of wildlife. It is through these green areas that animals move through the different territories, helping to keep forests and other natural formations alive.

According to Menezes, long trails can also reduce territorial isolation of National Parks and other protected areas in the country. This isolation is often triggered by a model of economic development still based on complete removal of native vegetation outside protected areas.

"To make it happen, the trails need to be attractive in natural, historical and social ways, as well as good for business. This is the only way that will make it possible to compete with other economic uses in the different regions", he considers.

Economic impulse

The city of Damascus, in Virginia, is close to the Appalachian Trail and hosts so many backpackers, cyclists, water sports enthusiasts and other types of tourists that was nicknamed Trail Town USA.

For Jordan Bowman, Public Relations and Social Media Manager at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, this is a great example of how local communities, outdoor recreation, and environmental conservation can mutually benefit each other.

"Thousands of people visit Damascus to have a closer experience of nature and this helps boosting the economy and local businesses. The story is similar to many other communities near the Appalachian Trail, who understood the importance of protecting natural areas", he says.

Analyses have shown that tourists spend from U\$220 to U\$2,400, depending especially on how many days they stay on that North American long-distance trail. The money is mainly spent on restaurants, equipment stores, hotels, lodging and camping, gas and protected areas entry fees. This way, the 3 million people who step each year on the Appalachian Trail inject in the economy of the country almost U\$4 billion on average.

A study published by Edith Cowan University in Australia focused on the economy associated with long distance trails in countries such as New Zealand, United Kingdom, South Africa, Germany, the United States and South Korea. The study concludes that trails always increases regional economy where they are inserted and that the most financially sustainable model to the governance of trails involves partnerships between governments and non-profit organizations.

"This model extends the income stream options and reduces overheads through the use of volunteers for maintenance and other tasks. In addition, tourism strategies, such as marketing, promotion, and product and destination development, further extend the trail's financial sustainability by maximizing user numbers and partnering with businesses", brings the signed analysis of Kerstin Stender Trails Coordinator, from Department of Parks and Wildlife, in Western Australia.

In Brazil, tourism associated with nature is expanding considerably. Thanks to better recording of visitors' numbers and investments in infrastructure and promotion, the number of people entering National Parks and other Federal protected areas jumped from 3 million to almost 11 million in a decade. This tourist flow generates over U\$ 1,1 billion per year, maintains 43,000 jobs and already adds U\$ 412 million to Brazil's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Meanwhile, government investments want to increase the visibility of the country as foreign travel destination and attract an additional 40 million Brazilians to the domestic tourism market. After all, in the report of World Economic Forum Brazil appears first in travel and tourism competitiveness among countries when considering the diversity of its natural heritage.

It is all as promising as exploring a long trail in the middle of nature.