



2023 Annual Report

FROM THE FOUNDER



We believe that trails can increase tourism, create more jobs and make a difference in Armenia. Trails For Change is still the only professional organization in Armenia that plans, designs and builds hiking, running, biking trails to promote tourism in Armenia partnering with various donors and organizations, individuals and experts, state institutions and private sector. As a professional trail builder, the owner of Los Angeles-based Bellfree Contractors company and Trails For Change NGO INC., I decided to make a contribution to my ancestral homeland by building trails and installing the trail building culture in Armenia.

Hans Keifer, Founder of Trails For Change NGO

ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



BACKGROUND



Trails for Change NGO (TFC) is a non-profit organization funded by grants and donations with the mission to develop the tourism and outdoor recreational infrastructure throughout Armenia, by designing, building, and maintaining a network of trails throughout the country. The TFC team came together when International expert Hans Keifer, a professional trail builder from California with decades of experience, was brought in to provide training and guidance for the Transcaucasian Trail (TCT) project in 2017. During the trail-building process, Hans saw huge gaps in Armenia's sports and recreation infrastructure and decided that the best way to improve these problems was to start TFC nongovernmental organization (NGO).

A Year's Overview

WHERE WE ARE NOW

Trails for Change NGO has made significant strides in the past year, achieving notable success in its mission to develop and enhance the tourism infrastructure. Through strategic partnerships and dedicated efforts, the organization successfully completed trail maintenance and trail marking projects in various regions of Armenia. These projects not only improved existing trails but also opened up new routes for visitors to explore, contributing to the overall promotion of hiking and ecotourism in the country. The NGO's commitment to stakeholder engagement, evidenced by collaborations with national parks and environmental foundations, has further solidified its impact on the conservation and sustainable development landscape. Additionally, this year's efforts saw a substantial increase in workforce, to 22 workers from 5 individuals last year, demonstrating the organization's expanding capacity and reach.



NUMBERS & STATISTICS

8

*international
exchange participants*

110

*young participants
from local
communities in our
conservation corps
programs*

22

staff members

49

*days of outdoor
educational camps*

5

bridges constructed

43

*cooperation with local
communities*

334km

*of built/maintained
trails*





CONSTRUCTION PROGRAMS

TRAIL MAINTENANCE AND MARKING



Region: Vayots Dzor Province, Armenia

Total distance: 123,33 km

Partner Organization: Hike Armenia

Results:

- Successfully maintained and marked multiple trails including Gomk to Artavan, Arch Trail, Berdakar Mountain Loop, Kapuyt Loop Trail, Hayeli Lake Loop, Smbataberd Trail and others.
- Implemented trail maintenance activities, including tread repair, fallen tree clearing, lopping, brushing, blazing, bridge reconstruction, and stone clearing.
- Improved accessibility and safety for visitors on the hiking trails in Vayots Dzor Province.

New Bridge construction on the Vernashen to Spitakavor trail.

DILIJAN NATIONAL PARK



Region: Tavush

Total distance: 31,8 km

Partner Organization: Hike Armenia, Dilijan National Park

Results:

- Successfully conducted trail maintenance and marking activities on various trails within Dilijan National Park, including Parz Lake to Dilijan Trail, Gosh Lake to Goshavank Trail, Goshavank to Parz Lake Trail+Bridge, Whispering Waterfall, and King of the Forest (Dilijan).
- Implemented specific trail works such as tread repair, fallen tree cutting, lopping, brushing, blazing, installing blaze poles, trail rerouting, and stakeholder engagement with Dilijan National Park management staff.
- Achieved alignment with stakeholders and obtained special permissions for significant activities, such as cutting large trees within the park.
- **New Bridge construction** on the Goshavank to Parz Lake Trail.



TRAIL MAINTENANCE AND MARKING



Region: Lori Region, Armenia

Total distance: 78,11 km

Results:

- Successful completion of trail maintenance and marking activities on multiple trails, including Giqor Trail, Dsegh Loop Trail, Odzun to Sanahin Trail, Sanahin to Haghpat Monasteries trail, Kobayr to Odzun Trail, Dsegh to Tumanyan Trail, COAF to Dsegh, Dsegh to Tsater via Dzoraget, and Tsater to Kurtan.
- Specific trail works carried out such as tread repair, widening, lopping, fallen tree cutting, brushing, blazing, trailhead kiosk re-installation, and trail improvement.
- Improved accessibility and usability of the hiking trails, making them open and available to visitors.

Region: Gegharkunik

Total distance: 16.7km

Results: Successfully conducted trail maintenance and marking activities on the Drakhtik - Kalavan trail.

Region: Syunik

Total distance: 6,7 km

Results:

- Successfully conducted trail maintenance and marking activities on the Tatev to Devil's Bridge trail.
- Implemented specific trail works such as tread repair, fallen tree cutting, lopping, brushing, blazing, and trailhead kiosk re-installation.
- A suggestion was made to change the Barev trail route to TCT.





TRAIL BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT IN LORI REGION

Akhtala to Neghots Trail

- **Region:** Lori, Armenia
- **Total distance:** 8.5 km



Results:

- Constructed, maintained, and marked trail.
- Installed directional signposts and blazing poles.
- Procured tools, equipment, and supplies.
- Collaborated with project stakeholders.
- Conducted trail work supervision and audit.



Neghots to Haghpat Trail

- **Total distance:** 12.9km

Results:

- Built, maintained, and marked Neghots - Haghpat trail.
- Installed directional signposts and blazing poles.
- Coordinated fieldwork, procured supplies, and supervised the crew.
- Improved trail safety, accessibility, and attractiveness.
- Completed a new 400m trail section with switchbacks and retaining walls.
- Implemented internal quality control and trail audit.



Vahagni to Yeghegnut Trail

- **Total distance:** 3.5km

Results:

- Completed trail maintenance, marking, and signage according to international standards.
- Directional signposts with Armenian and English information installed at key locations.
- Blaze poles strategically placed along the trail.





TRAIL BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT IN LORI REGION

Dsegh to Karinj Trail

- Total distance: 12.8km

Results: Successful completion of trail building, maintenance, and marking in Dsegh - Karinj trail.



Karinj to Marts Trail

- Total distance: 5.6km

Results: Completed construction, maintenance, and marking of Karinj - Marts trail in the Lori region. Notable works include widening trail sections, constructing a 120cm x 90cm wooden bridge, and using directional signposts and blazing poles for trail marking.

Marts to Lorut Trail

- Total distance: 13km

Results: Successfully completed the construction, maintenance, and marking of the Marts - Lorut trail in the Lori region. Key achievements include the construction of two beam bridges, building 1700 meters of new trail sections, and installing directional signposts and blazing poles along the 13km trail.



Alaverdi to Sanahin Trail

- Total distance: 3.7 km

Results:

- Blazing existing poles in Alaverdi streets.
- Installation of directional signposts.





KAYANBERD TRAIL BUILDING



Region: Lori

Total distance: 1,6 km

On the initiative of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Armenia and with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Armenia, "Trails for Change" NGO successfully completed the restoration and expansion of the hiking trail that leads to Kayanberd.

As part of this initiative, a new 400-meter trail section was constructed, complemented by a 2-meter unique retaining wall. The project involved installing 31 wooden steps and 13 stone steps along the trail leading to Akner, while challenging sections of the trail were enhanced with the addition of metal staircases.

A trailhead sign with the technical description and map was installed at the trailhead, and directional signs and markings along the entire trail. The total length of the trail from the primary starting point to Akner village spans 4.4 km, with a 1.6 km distance to Kayan Fortress in a single direction.

Partner Organization: During the project, significant support was also provided by the Kayanberd Resort recreation area and alongside our partner organization, HIKEArmenia.

Results:

- Successful completion of the restoration and expansion of the hiking trail leading to Kayanberd.
- Construction of a new 400-meter trail section with a unique 2-meter retaining wall.
- Installation of 31 wooden steps and 13 stone steps along the trail to Akner.
- Enhancement of challenging trail sections with the addition of metal staircases.
- Installation of a starting sign with technical description and map at the trailhead.
- Placement of directional signs and markings along the entire trail.
- Total trail length from the primary starting point to Akner village: 4.4 km.
- Distance to Kayan Fortress: 1.6 km in a single direction.



EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS



YOUTH FOR CHANGE CONSERVATION CORPS 2023

The Youth for Change program (YFC) is a collaborative initiative funded by the US Forest Service and implemented by Trails For Change NGO (TFC). The program aims to empower youth in Armenia's regions by offering education, training, and employment opportunities in nature conservation, trail building, and tourism.

The year featured the implementation of 4 Youth for Change projects with the involvement of 30 participants from different regions of Armenia. The projects and their schedules are presented below:

- YFC Arpa: April 25-May 1, 2023
- YFC Arevik: May 27-June 10, 2023
- YFC Artavan: June 17-25, 2023
- YFC Dilijan: August 11-20, 2023

These projects helped the participants gain valuable insights into environmental conservation, trail-building, sustainable tourism, camping lifestyle, and related experiences. As a result of the project, seven YFC participants transitioned into seasonal paid trail-building activities, and one took on the role of Camp Manager (4 females and 4 males).

Collaborations are the cornerstone of our program's success, with the project team fostering partnerships with local organizations, including the Arpa Environmental Fund, Arevik National Park, Artavan Campsite Initiative and Dilijan National Park. These partnerships significantly contributed to the success and overall impact of the Youth for Change Conservation Corps program.



YOUTH FOR CHANGE ARPA

The first YFC project in 2023 took place in Arpa, Vayots Dzor, from April 25th to May 1st. It employed a unique daily commute format, emphasizing local engagement. The project partnered with the Arpa Environmental Fund for regional environmental conservation.

After receiving about 60 applications, eligibility checks, and interviews were conducted, leading to the initial selection of 11 participants from 7 target communities in Vayots Dzor. Preference was given to applicants who had previously been involved in the Junior Rangers Program. The fieldwork included trail maintenance of 1.5 km of trail on the Noravank-Amaghu segment of the Transcaucasian trail in Gnishik Gorge, Areni Community.

The project featured both indoor and outdoor activities, focusing on five training areas: First aid and safety, Environmental protection, Wildlife observation, Trail building, and Speleology. Adverse weather shortened the training from 9 to 6 days, affecting outdoor activities. Nonetheless, participants were informed about the upcoming YFC project for potential involvement.



YOUTH FOR CHANGE AREVIK

Between May 27 and June 10, the second project of 2023 took place at Zangezur Biosphere Complex SNCO in Arevik National Park. With a focus on Syunik's youth, particularly in Meghri, 10 skilled participants worked on the TCT segment from Khustup to Meghri. The fieldwork included tread restoration of 4.2 km on old paths and building an additional 1 km trail.

The project aimed to establish a "hiking/trail building club" in southern Armenia, encouraging local ownership of trails.

The project led to the engagement of two female participants in TFC's paid seasonal activities, with one as a trail builder and the other as a camp manager.

Between June 2nd and 9th, as part of the YFC Arevik 2023 project implementation, CNF sponsored an extensive 8-day training program covering comprehensive first aid and safety courses. The training was provided to 26 participants, consisting of 22 rangers from the Arevik and Shikahogh branches of the Zangezur Biosphere Complex SNCO, and 4 villagers from Shikahogh. This initiative aimed to improve their emergency response capabilities and skills.



YOUTH FOR CHANGE ARTAVAN

The YFC Artavan 2023 project, held at Artavan campsite in the village of Artavan, Vayots Dzor, from June 17 to 25, received around 40 applications. Following the selection process, 10 participants were chosen, focusing on involving youth from Syunik and Vayots Dzor. Preference was given to YFC Arpa participants who missed outdoor activities due to bad weather. The camp covered various subjects, including First Aid, Environmental Protection, Trail Construction, Augmented Reality in Hiking Tourism, and Forest Fire Prevention. One notable success of the project has been the establishment of the Trail & Firefighters Club.

Additionally, 8 pupils from Artavan village also had the chance to participate in the First Aid training, enhancing collaboration between the community and the project. Trail maintenance on the segment of the Transcaucasian Trail (Artavan to Ugedzor and Artavan to Gomk, 5 km) was held. Trail assessment and scouting training was held on a newly designed trail (2km) which became a TCT trail branch. After the completion of the project, 2 male participants became engaged in TFC's trail-building activities on a paid basis.



YOUTH FOR CHANGE DILIJAN

The YFC Dilijan 2023 project, introduced on social media channels on July 12, 2023, attracted a record-breaking 185 applications. Eventually, 11 participants were selected for the project, held from August 11 to 20. During the project, participants were hosted at the Dilijan Tourism Center and Dilijan National Park office where they became acquainted with the services and activities of the organizations. Other than trail building, the project included vital Wilderness First Aid and Safety training led by Irina, TFC crew leader assistant and an alumna of the WFR program. Participants also gained valuable insights from Hans Keifer, TFC's Founder, on trail building, as well as engaged in Adventure Tourism training which included components related to tour packaging and management. Upon the camp's conclusion, participants further enriched their knowledge through online sessions focused on Environmental protection.

During the project, 1 km of trail building and restoration on the segment of TCT from Dilijan to Haghartsin monastery was held. Additionally, a new section of 400m of trail was restored to connect the existing trail segment of TCT to the trailhead. Post-program, 4 out of the 11 participants (2 females and 2 males) became involved in the seasonal trail-building activities on a paid basis.



CAUCASUS CONSERVATION CORPS PROGRAMS 2023



The Caucasus Conservation Corps (CCC) program is a multi-year effort to develop a regional Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) program in the South Caucasus. The CCC connects and inspires young conservation leaders through outdoor work and training, collaborating with communities and partners to build a more sustainable future for the Caucasus. This project was a partnership between Trails For Change NGO and The Transcaucasian Trail Association, supported by the U.S. Forest Service.

The CCC program is structured to function as a source of motivation and a targeted goal for both TFC crew members and YFC participants, marking the next stage in their conservation corps "careers."

In 2023, the CCC program served as a platform for TFC's crew leaders' professional development, featuring the Caucasus Wilderness First Aid Responders training program and Crew Leader exchanges between Armenia and Georgia. Additionally, 5 weekend educational camps were organized in 5 different regions of Armenia, engaging 84 participants from the regions.



WEEKEND CAMPS

In total, five Weekend Camps were organized across 5 regions of Armenia: Gegharkunik, Syunik, Shirak, Lori, and Tavush. The main goal of these short projects was to introduce trail-building, camping, adventure tourism, and related activities to primarily teenage and young participants. These CCC Weekend camps served as shorter, introductory versions of the longer Youth for Change camps. Enthusiastic participants from these camps were later invited to join the 10-day projects. In total, these Weekend camps hosted 84 participants.

Additionally, 1 more male participant from the Weekend camps was identified as a strong candidate and secured an internship with the TFC crew, later participating in paid seasonal trail-building activities.



CCC ALUMNI EVENT

On November 18-19, the final weekend gathering of this year brought together 30 participants, a mix of stand-out alumni from the 2023 Youth for Change (YFC) and Caucasus Conservation Corps (CCC) programs and TFC core staff. We also had the pleasure of hosting regional coordinator Jessie Hess from the US Forest Service. We celebrated the achievements of the alumni, summarized 2023 results, shared insights about 2024 plans and of course, had an amazing team - building activities altogether!



REGIONAL EXCHANGES

The Caucasus Wilderness First Aid Responders training program took place in Lagodekhi, Georgia, involving six Armenian crew leaders. In the summer of 2023, Crew Leader Exchange projects began, with six Armenian crew leaders participating in Zeskho, Georgia. In the autumn, Armenia hosted four Georgian crew leaders as part of this exchange program in the Lori region. These exchanges enhanced crew motivation, providing a knowledge refresh and new skills in first aid and camp safety management and facilitating connections among international young conservation leaders.



TRAININGS AND EVENTS

Capacity Building Training

The TFC has organized a training program on the topic of "Capacity building and training of crew leaders". The goal of the program was to train participants (who have shown the best results during the trail construction projects from 2017 to 2022) as crew leaders and camp or logistics managers.

The program included training in leadership and organizational skills, communication skills development, first aid and safety, trail design and construction, and other topics, with the involvement of the best professionals in the field.



Study Tour

The TFC staff members Ashot Davtyan and Meri Grigoryan had the incredible opportunity to attend a study tour in North Carolina and Washington, D.C. hosted by our partners at the U.S. Forest Service. The USFS is supporting the growing Caucasus Conservation Corps (CCC) program, which connects and inspires young conservation leaders through outdoor work and training. To help TFC in their planning stage for the program's expansion, they invited members of the core TCT team who are leading CCC development in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan for a visit to the U.S. to learn from similar programs. Meri and Ashot met with U.S. Forest Service staff, other conservation corps programs, and a range of community and economic initiatives linked to trails.



Meeting at the Faculty of Geography and Geology at Yerevan State University
During the meeting, Ashot Davtyan presented the organization and the "Youth for Change/Caucasus Conservation Corps" program, the opportunities for young students.



International Trails Summit

The Founder and Executive Director Hans Keifer, and the Programs Manager Ashot Davtyan, participated in the International Trails Summit in Reno, Nevada, USA. More than 900 participants from different countries around the world were representing trail industry brands, organizations and projects. Productive meetings and talks were conducted, as well as practical field visits on trail infrastructure development.



"Discover Armenia" Exhibition

The TFC team participated in the tourism exhibition "Discover Armenia," organized by the Tourism Committee of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Armenia.



Parz Lake Loop Trail Opening

In 2022, as part of the tourism component of the EU4Business ITTD project, the goal was set to support the development of better tourism offers leading to sustainable businesses and good jobs in the three northern regions of Armenia (Lori, Shirak, and Tavush). Accessible Armenia NGO received support from TFC NGO to enhance the infrastructure of the Parz Lake area and make it more accessible to people with disabilities and families with children using prams.

In June 2023, a section of the Parz Lake Loop Trail was reopened. The opening ceremony of the Parz Lake trail was attended by Antonis Tsamulis, cooperation officer at the EU delegation, representatives from the Tavush Province Administration, Dilijan National Park as well as representatives of the Tavush Destination Management organization. The implementation of the construction of the project was entrusted to the TFC team. As a result of the project, a section of the trail is accessible for people with disabilities and families with strollers.



CCC Program's Lunch Event

Representatives from various tourism and environmental organizations attended the event, where we presented our mission, and long-term goals, and discussed cooperation opportunities. We also highlighted the inspiring work of "Trails for Change" and the "Youth for Change" program.



Hiking Festival

TFC staff members participated in the "Hiking Festival" in Sevan. The festival was organized by the initiative of the French "AFRAT" association and the "Sevan" youth club. The festival aimed to engage young people in the development of hiking tourism, conduct hiking tourism-oriented training sessions, facilitate exchanges of experiences among participants, and provide network cooperation with the communities in the region. These efforts aimed to provide opportunities for participants to acquire skills related to hiking tourism and explore the region from this perspective.



Monitoring Visit

For program monitoring purposes TFC hosted the U.S. Forest Service representatives - Jessie Hess and Matt Wills (Program Managers), Steve Heil and Justin Dombrowski (Emergency Management Specialist), and Vardan Melikyan (Local Consultant).

One of the meetings took place at TFC's office, where TFC COO Ashot Davtyan, office manager Arpine Nikolyan, and project coordinator Yervand Markosyan presented a detailed presentation on the projects, their positive impacts, the changes implemented, and the challenges faced since the beginning. In addition, discussions were held related to the implementation phases of the program and new ideas.

As part of the visit to Armenia, a field trip was conducted in the Tavush and Lori regions. During this visit, Jessie Hess, accompanied by the organization's monitoring and evaluation lead, Meri Grigoryan, also had the opportunity to meet with the organization's crew members, which included the team visiting us from The Transcaucasian Trail NGO of Georgia.



TCT Trail Summit 2023

The TFC team had the opportunity to participate in the "TCT Trail Summit" – a week of strategy discussions, planning, and team-building activities in Tbilisi, alongside TCT teams from the Caucasus countries. We shared experiences, learned from each other, generated many new ideas, and discussed our plans for the next year. It was a great pleasure to spend a week immersed in knowledge, new plans, perfect hiking, and wonderful acquaintances.



Earth Corps Global Learning Summit

TFC was thrilled to be a part of Earth Corps Global Learning Summit 2023, which was held virtually from December 5-7. Our COO, Ashot Davtyan, spoke passionately about TFC, highlighting our projects and unveiling upcoming plans.



Team Building Events

TFC prioritizes team-building to foster trust, resolve conflicts, and improve communication among team members. In August, the team gathered at the Green Training Center in Tavush marz, Hovk, for a day filled with engaging games and activities. The presence of Hans, the founding director, added a special touch to the event, enhancing team spirit and collaboration.

Another memorable team-building event occurred in March when TFC team members explored Gyumri's historical center, visiting landmarks such as Vardanants Square, Saint Astvatsatsin Church, the Black Fortress monument, and Mother Armenia Memorial. The visit included museums, walks along historical streets, and other points of interest, providing an excellent opportunity for the TFC team to strengthen bonds and deepen connections.



New Year and Cultural Celebration in 2023

The TFC team gathered in Ejmiatsin to finish the year and celebrate the New Year. They met at the Machanents house, where they had a guided tour and joined in a cultural event.



CONCLUSION & CLOSING

In 2023, Trails For Change NGO made significant strides in trail maintenance, construction, and youth empowerment initiatives throughout Armenia. By improving accessibility on hiking trails and offering valuable training opportunities for youth, our organization has left a lasting imprint on nature conservation and sustainable tourism.

As we contemplate the accomplishments of 2023, we eagerly anticipate expanding upon this success in the future. Trails For Change remains steadfast in its dedication to conserving natural landscapes, empowering youth, and advancing sustainable development in Armenia.

Financial reports are available upon request.

