

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The North Country Trail Association (NCTA), founded in 1981 as the primary partner of the National Park Service (NPS) which administers the North Country Scenic National Trail (NCSNT). The NCTA with an annual budget approximately \$800,000 and nine employees, consists of approximately 3,000 members, 25 chapters and 13 affiliated organizations. In April 2013, North Country Trail Association (NCTA or Association) embarked on a strategic planning process using the Real-Time Strategic Planning (RTSP) model developed by La Piana Consulting, published in the book, *The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution*. The North Country Trail Association engaged Vista Global Consulting to support this process, with the final approval of the plan by the NCTA board of directors on August 21, 2014.

### VISION/MISSION/VALUES

Strategy begins with an understanding of an organization's core identity, seeking to leverage its unique strengths in effecting the change it seeks to make in the world. The NCTA vision, mission and values are presented below:

#### VISION

*Our vision for the North Country Scenic National Trail is that of the premier footpath of national significance, offering a superb experience for hikers and backpackers in a permanently protected corridor, traversing and interpreting the richly diverse environmental, cultural, and historic features of the northern United States.*

#### MISSION

*The mission of North Country Trail Association is to develop, maintain, protect and promote the North Country Scenic Trail as the premier hiking path across the northern tier of the United States through a trail-wide coalition of volunteers and partners.*

#### CORE VALUES

- Volunteerism
- Making a legacy contribution for the greater good to something larger than ourselves
- Stewardship
- Mutual respect, cooperation and partnership
- The importance of exercise, recreation and health
- Boot-strapping; a can-do attitude of 'git 'er done, and 'just do it!'

#### COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

After comparing itself with its 'competitors,' NCTA articulated its competitive advantages as follows:

- Longest national scenic trail in the United States
- Diverse trail (environmentally diverse and rich in cultural and natural history) allowing four-season access and opportunity for use
  - Strong volunteer loyalty with dedication to service and chapter and affiliate network that strengthens the volunteer base
  - National cachet through its partnership with National Park Service and by the designation of the NCNST as a national scenic trail.

## STRATEGY SCREEN

Through the process, NCTA developed a strategy screen – a tool for making ongoing strategic decisions for the organization. Criteria will depend on the organization's mission, identity and current market position. The current screen includes the following criteria:

1. **Mission:** To what extent does this strategy achieve our mission? Does it align with our vision and values?
2. To what extent does it leverage and/or support our Competitive Advantages?
3. **Money:** Does it provide enough value for the money? Does it pay for itself or generate revenue? What is the financial risk? Is it a reasonable risk?
4. How well does it respond to trends?
5. **Capacity:** Do we have the capacity to do it? Is this the best use of staff and volunteer time? Can current staff handle this? Do we have the in-house expertise?
6. What are the trade-offs if we pursue this opportunity?
7. Are we the best to deliver or should we partner?
8. **Enhanced Perception:** Does it maintain or increase the standing and public perception of NCTA and the trail? Does it enhance the image and promote visibility of the trail and NCTA?
9. To what extent does it enhance the scenic aspect of the trail and the environment?
10. To what extent does it increase participation and volunteers?
11. How well does it align with the NPS agenda?

## STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

The Real-Time Strategic Planning methodology identifies three levels of strategy to consider and plan for: 1) organizational, 2) programmatic and 3) operational. Organizational strategy comes first – it helps the organization clarify its core identity and articulate the change that it seeks to make in the world. With this capstone in place to set the organization's direction, NCTA can create strategies to ensure that its programs and resources are aligned to support its defining goals.

**Strategy 1:** Increase awareness of the NCNST and raise visibility of NCTA's work.

**Strategy 2:** Develop a larger and more diverse following and increase membership.

**Strategy 3:** Assure the sustainability of NCTA.

**Strategy 4:** Build, maintain and protect the NCNST.

**Strategy 5:** Build capacity of NCTA board of directors and align governance structure.

## BIG QUESTIONS

In the April 2013 and the December 2013 sessions, participants identified big questions facing the Association at the current time. After a process of voting the four big questions given the highest priority were the following:

1. HOW DO WE BECOME BETTER KNOWN?
2. HOW DO WE GENERATE SUSTAINABLE REVENUE?
3. HOW DO WE ATTRACT A MORE DIVERSE FOLLOWING?
4. HOW DO WE ATTRACT A MORE DIVERSE MEMBERSHIP (AGES 20-50)?

During the December session, small groups drafted strategic options to answer these four big questions. The SPWG refined the strategic options to final strategies for the strategy road map for the timeframe of 2015-2017. The final strategies are the following:

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY

### STRATEGY 1: INCREASE AWARENESS OF THE NCNST AND RAISE VISIBILITY OF NCTA'S WORK.

- Hire a Marketing staff person
- Implement the key elements of the 2013 marketing strategy
- Raise individuals' consciousness of the entire trail by increasing visibility
- Maintain adequate marketing and communications administrative support and monitor marketing messaging and website/social media
- Increase Chapter/affiliate engagement

### STRATEGY 2: DEVELOP A LARGER AND MORE DIVERSE FOLLOWING AND INCREASE MEMBERSHIP.

- Expand activities that target audiences under age 50 (Generation X, Millennials)
- Promote membership campaigns
- Develop chapter/volunteer/member capacity building activities in recruitment and retention

### STRATEGY 3: ASSURE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF NCTA.

- Continue the annual donor solicitation and utilize social media to generate new donors
- Promote long-term revenue streams
- Cultivate and solicit major donors and family foundations
- Identify and generate corporate relationships that yield major sponsorships
- Maintain a strong partnership with the National Park Service
- Enhance the fundraising culture and activities of the board of directors and chapters
- Hire a Development Associate
- Consider implementation of a capital campaign to fund increased annual expenses

### STRATEGY 4: BUILD, MAINTAIN AND PROTECT THE NCNST.

- Develop a strategic approach to trail building and maintenance
- Strengthen training and capacity building of volunteers: trail building, trail maintenance, safety, and trail protection (easements, working with land owners, public and private)
  - Establish and foster partnerships with other organizations (state, local agencies, land trusts) to strengthen and complement NCTA efforts
  - Improve and support existing relationships with state and federal agencies for the management of the trail (eg. MOUs, communication)
  - Increase organizational capacity to monitor state and federal policy that can impact the trail

## GOVERNANCE/LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

### STRATEGY 5: BUILD CAPACITY OF NCTA BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND ALIGN GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE.

- Create strategic dashboard to monitor strategic plan
- Review, refine and establish board committee structures and responsibilities
- Establish annual BoD performance goals
- Establish annual BoD self-evaluation process

## PROGRAMMATIC STRATEGY

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