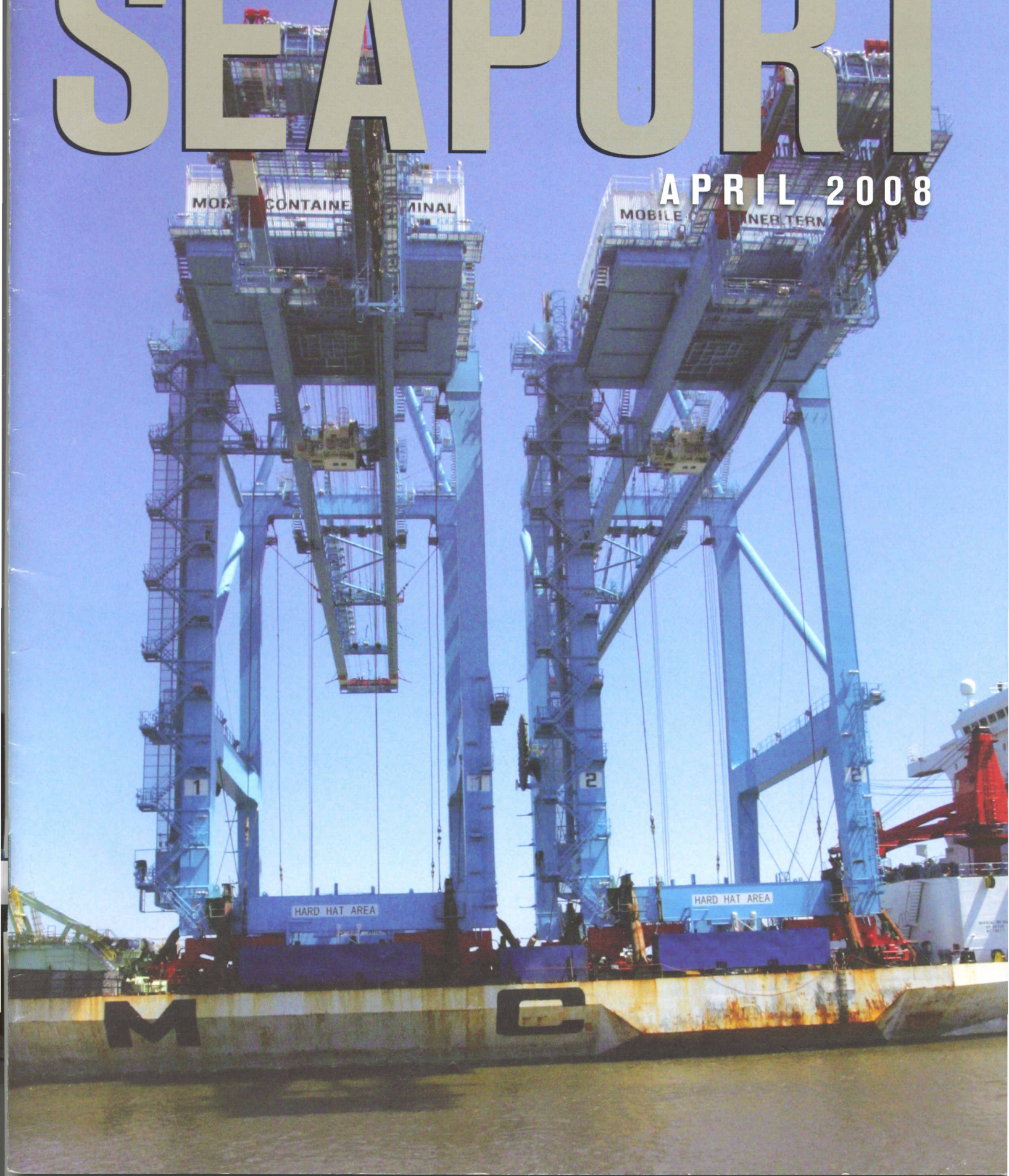


# ALABAMA SEAPORT

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# ALABAMA ECOTOURISM IS EXPANDING... ALL THE WAY TO MAINE



**Like many locals, these groups from Birmingham and Atlanta met at the Stateline Gateway, enjoying the new connection between Alabama's Chief Ladiga Trail and Georgia's Silver Comet. The two will be officially connected this fall, making it the longest Rail-to-Trails conversion in the Southeast.**

*Photo by Pete Conroy.*

The path from Alabama to Maine just got a little more direct as Alabama's Pinhoti Trail was connected to the Appalachian Trail on Cheaha Ridge in March. Even though the Appalachian Ridge begins in central Alabama, the trail stopped short of that, ending at Springer Mountain in Georgia. It was a longtime goal of Benton MacKaye, who developed the concept of the Appalachian Trail, that the path would range from Alabama to Maine.

"After years of planning and fundraising, we've now connected the AT to Georgia's Benton MacKaye Trail and that to

Alabama's Pinhoti. Finally the trail connects from Maine to Cheaha making a simple walking path that's 2,504 miles long," explained Pete Conroy, director of Jacksonville State University's Environmental Policy and Information Center.

Along with many Alabama newspapers, National Public Radio covered the story and the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel has been taking advantage of the trail's notoriety, running ads in national magazines proclaiming 'The 300 million year wait is over. Hike the Appalachian Mountains.'





"This is a real big deal," said Conroy.

Officially, the Appalachian Trail stops at Springer Mountain in Georgia, even though the newly connected trail continues into Alabama. Conroy hopes the Pinhoti may eventually be called "a section" of the Appalachian Trail, but for now it will still be known as the Pinhoti.

"We've entered into some discussions about the name change, but in any case, we're just glad to be connected," said Conroy.

Trail advocates applaud U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby for his support and appropriations to complete the trail connection.

"Connecting Alabama's Pinhoti Trail to the world-famous Appalachian Trail is great news for the many outdoor enthusiasts who have been waiting for the entire Appalachian range to be joined together," said Shelby. "I believe we must protect and preserve our natural resources for future generations to enjoy and I am proud to have played a part in ensuring that the Appalachian Trail connects to our great state."

By linking to the Pinhoti Trail, those enjoying the Appalachian Trail can now experience some of Alabama's significant wilderness areas, including the Cheaha State Park and the Dugger Mountain Wilderness Area, which are connected by the developing Appalachian Highlands Scenic Byway.

"It's a system of roads that connect the deepest canyon to the highest mountain," said Conroy. "From a marketing point of view, Alabama has both canyons and mountains. We're biologically and geographically one of the most diverse states in the nation. The tourism potential is economic development, which will benefit all areas of the state, including the Port of Mobile."

While the Pinhoti Trail runs north and south, running east to west is the Chief Ladiga Trail, a Rail-to-Trails conversion project where former railroad tracks are converted into bike paths.

**Now that the Appalachian Trail is linked to Alabama's Pinhoti Trail, visitors can experience the Dugger Mountain Wilderness Area (shown) and Cheaha State Park, connected by the developing Appalachian Highlands Scenic Byway.**

*Photo by Greg Morrow.*

Last December, Alabama officially had 33 miles of former railroad track paved as a long bike path from Anniston to the State of Georgia, wandering through Calhoun and Cleburne counties. "On a pretty day, you can see 50 people an hour, biking, rollerblading, in wheelchairs, walkers and runners," said Conroy. "There's even been a recent CNN anchor sighting. It's really starting to pop as a destination." The Chief Ladiga Trail connects the municipalities of Piedmont, Jacksonville, Weaver and Anniston.

In the fall of 2008, the Chief Ladiga Trail will officially connect with Georgia's Silver Comet, an approximately 66-mile pathway. "The Coca-Cola Company has donated \$100,000," said Conroy. "And along with the millions of dollars already spent on the conversion, costing around \$60,000 per mile, we now have nearly a 100-mile stretch of paved trail."

Where the two trails meet, a small park called the Stateline Gateway sits halfway in Alabama, halfway in Georgia. It provides a place where people can meet, rest and picnic at the site of the longest Rail-to-Trails conversion in the Southeast. There's also a developing partnership with Amtrak, where bikers can ride along the trail, then take the train back to their starting point in Atlanta.



**To commemorate Alabama's link to the Appalachian Trail, this plaque was recently dedicated on a Cheaha Mountain portion of the Pinhoti Trail.**

*Photo by Pete Conroy.*





**Enjoying the results of all his hard work, Pete Conroy enjoys biking on the Chief Ladiga Trail at the Stateline Gateway where he enters Georgia and the trail becomes the Silver Comet.**

*Photo by Roxana Conroy.*

With the newly connected trails and the expanding interest in ecotourism, Conroy is seeing the secondary and tertiary impacts of all the activity in the growth of local B&Bs, hotels, restaurants, gas stations and other establishments along the way. Since he serves as the de facto tour guide, regional expert and all-around information clearinghouse, he receives several e-mails a day from people asking for recommendations on where to stay, eat and entertain themselves as they vacation along the trails.

"My office is kind of the epicenter of this," Conroy laughed. So he offers suggestions, sending links and noting his favorites, as well as forwarding information from the local chambers of commerce.

Conroy is also quick to point out events at the former Fort McClellan. The base re-use project has brought in nearly 3,000 new jobs and around 300 new families to the area, supporting the businesses, schools, university campus and other agencies in the former military base. Other communities across the country are looking at Fort McClellan as a national model for base re-use projects.

"The synergy in the redeveloped military base ties into the synergy of economic development in North Alabama," Conroy said.

Most notably, the former base serves as the summer home for the Alabama Symphony Orchestra and each summer the site hosts the 'Music at McClellan' concert season. In addition to Stars and Stripes Pops! and Classics Under the Stars, this summer the Swedish band ABBA plays with the symphony.

"We hope folks will come to see us," said Conroy.

For more information on the Pinhoti Trail and the Chief Ladiga Trail, visit <http://epic.jsu.edu>. For more information on Music at McClellan, visit <http://www.musicatmcclellan.org>. □