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ON THE WEB

Building an 'Emerald Necklace,' Link by Link

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WHAT COULD BE Bicyclists ride the Baltimore & Annapolis Trail in Maryland which, despite the occasional forced dismounts is the sort of path envisioned for the East Coast Greenway.

THE bike trail is roughly eight feet wide. It is paved in black asphalt and hemmed in by a wooden split-rail fence. And when the sun comes out, as it did the other weekend, the Baltimore & Annapolis Trail in Maryland springs to life with cyclists, in-line skaters and wild rabbits. But no one on the trail, not even the spandex-wearing weekend warriors, could pinpoint where the path begins or ends.

"It starts in Annapolis," said Debbie Doering, 42, a cyclist from that town, who was riding a purple Bianchi road bike. A few miles up the path, Ron Coombs was unpacking a mountain bike from his station wagon. "It goes up to the B.W.I.," he said, referring to Baltimore-Washington International Airport. In other words, according to these bikers, the greenway would be about 13 miles long.

They were off by only 2,600 miles or so.

The B. & A. Trail, it turns out, is merely a tiny dash along a much longer ribbon of asphalt and dirt roads known as the East Coast Greenway. The greenway, a cyclist's version of the Appalachian Trail, begins near the Canadian border in Calais, Me., and ends at a beach in Key West, Fla. In between, it snakes through 15 states and the District of Columbia, hundreds of towns and countless neighborhoods, forming a seamless route - free of traffic lights and exhaust-spewing cars - for people who want to travel the East Coast on their own power.

At least it does on paper. So far, only 20 percent of the East Coast Greenway has been built and designated; in some places, the greenway is as navigable as the North Korean border. But enough of the trail has been plotted and temporary routes labeled that the greenway's pathfinders held a coming-out party in Washington last June to declare the trail officially open.

Though nobody has yet ridden the trail end to end. (A fit person, going at a solid pace of 70 miles a day, would need 37 days to complete it - and that's without a day of rest.) Even its staunchest advocates predict that only a handful of people will ever pedal the entire route. "Sure, but very few people have done the Appalachian Trail," said Ty Symroski, a city planner in Key West and a volunteer with the East Coast Greenway Alliance, the nonprofit group that is spearheading the trail. "If only three people did it, but 300 million dream about it, that would be worth it."

"Think about it," he added. "It would be an awesome ride."

But first, people have to know it exists. On a recent Saturday afternoon, on the Key West portion of the trail, wild chickens took refuge under shady palms, and the concrete path was filled with cyclists of all ages, from children on tricycles to elderly couples on tandems. Among them was Georgina Acuna, 31, a human resources consultant visiting from Miami, who was riding a rickety single-speed bike along the final, 2.3-mile leg of the greenway, hugging the shore, slicing past mangrove marshes, beachside homes and the emerald waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

Like most users of the greenway, Ms. Acuna saw only a local bike path. "This trail goes to the other side of Key West, right?" she said, as she stood at the very foot of the trail, just before it spills into Higgs Beach. A few feet away was a granite marker the size of a wastebasket, designating the spot as the "southern gateway" of the East Coast Greenway.

"No one is contesting that most people will use the greenway to travel short distances, or only on weekends," said Karen M. Votava, the executive director of the Greenway Alliance, based in Wakefield, R.I. She, too, invoked the Appalachian Trail as a model. "Only 400 or so people go the whole length of the Appalachian Trail every year. But if you look closer, over four million use it in short pieces." Chances are, even in its infancy the greenway has already surpassed that figure. Unlike the Appalachian Trail, which ambles through backwoods and national parks, the greenway does not avoid urban areas. (Its slogan is, "A trail connecting cities.") The idea for the long biking trail was born in the early 1990's as cities throughout the country, especially in the Northeast, began laying down bicycle paths. It was a movement fueled by an aging baby-boom population seeking to trim its waist line, and by environmentalists who embraced cycling as a clean alternative to cars.

The biggest boost came in 1991 when Congress, under heavy lobbying by environmental groups, authorized the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, known as Istea (pronounced ice tea). In addition to expanding the nation's highway system, the act set aside \$1.5 billion for building bicycle and pedestrian paths. Local governments contributed an additional 20 percent in matching financing.

"Istea was the pivotal moment," said Andy Clarke, executive director of the League of American Bicyclists in Washington. The program grew to \$2 billion in 1998 under the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, and is up for renewal this year. Cities as divergent as New York and Portland, Me., began using the money to build minigreenways, though the total number of bike paths is hard to pin down. Many used old railroad rights of way, and by 1998 there were 198 converted rail-trails in the country, totaling 359 miles. That number has climbed to 1,250 rail-trails today, with a combined 12,585 miles, according to the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a nonprofit group in Washington.

The East Coast Greenway Alliance was formed in 1991 to stitch together the new trails. The idea was to create an "emerald necklace" connecting every city along the coast, as well as the suburbs, exurbs and rural areas in between. To date, 61 segments totaling 650 miles are complete, half on former rail beds. Organizers are also working on lining up existing campsites so cyclists can sleep along the trail.

One of the most popular segments is the B.& A. Trail, which goes over an abandoned railroad spur. An estimated two million people use the trail every year, including Steven George, 46, a

warehouse worker from Glen Burnie, Md., whose front door faces the greenway. "I bike down to my mom's house in Annapolis," he said.

The B. & A. Trail skips over six-lane highways, trickling ravines and traffic lights. It is an idyllic 13.3-mile ride out of the Baltimore area - until you hit a stop sign near a road called Boulders Way. To continue south toward Washington, on the Washington, Baltimore & Annapolis Trail, cyclists have to swerve onto Route 2, share the road with 50-m.p.h. traffic, cross a bridge into Annapolis, and zigzag through 10 miles of tricky local streets to the nearby town of Odenton.

There, at the corner of Odenton Road and Route 170, near a 7-Eleven and the Crab Galley seafood carry out, a new asphalt trail materializes out of nowhere. But the trail, nearly completed, runs for only 2.3 miles before it dead-ends at a housing development. To reach the next leg of the greenway, cyclists have to traverse another six miles of sidewalks, local streets and unmarked intersections.

And Maryland is one of the more complete states. Neither Delaware nor Georgia claims an inch of existing greenway. New Hampshire has a single temporary route: along the shoulder of coastal Route 1A. And South Carolina is still poring over maps. "The biggest obstacle is money," said Ms. Votava of the Greenway Alliance. To date, \$600 million has been allocated for the trail. Another \$1.5 billion, she estimated, is needed to complete it by 2010.

Each mile costs roughly \$1 million to build, but some are much costlier. No bikes, for example, are allowed over the bridges that span the Susquehanna River in Maryland, and it is less than certain that the state will erect a 1.4-mile bridge just for cyclists and pedestrians - so far \$2 million of the estimated \$8 million needed for the bridge has been raised. (Cyclists currently have to arrange to transport their bikes by car.)

And then there is the Nimby factor. The greenway has sparked occasional protests from homeowners who fear that it will invite criminals into their backyards. "People raise the specter of crime, but it's shown to have no validity," said Mr. Clarke of the bicyclists' league, referring to several surveys that examined the neighborhood impact of such greenways. "Bicycle users typically don't carry large television sets on their backs." Still, places like Greenwich, Conn., and Providence, R.I., have kept the trail from going through their communities.

To publicize and raise money for the trail, about a dozen cyclists are planning to pedal the entire 2,600-mile route this fall, or at least the outlines of it. The inaugural tour is scheduled to depart from Calais, Me., on Sept. 12, and end in Key West 53 days later, though many routes - and permission to ride over highway bridges - are still being worked out.

But Jack Kurrle, 74, a retired tool-and-die engineer from Sun City West, Ariz., is already in training. "It's the same reason why people climb Mount Everest," said Mr. Kurrle, an avid cyclist who rides a recumbent bike. "It's a chance to be the first one to ride the trail."

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