



Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy Sitka Ranger District

Prepared by: Alaska Trails

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CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- The community of Sitka enjoys a well-developed trail system compared to other Southeast Alaska communities.
- Sitka's excellent trail system came about through the work of the following agencies and organizations, their employees and volunteers:
 - Sitka Trail Works, a local trail nonprofit, with a strong multi-year track record of working with partners to raise funds, design, build and maintain trails
 - Locally based USFS (USFS) staff, including Sitka-based Landscape Architects
 - A supportive Parks and Recreation Department within the City & Borough of Sitka (CBS)
 - Support from locally based Alaska State Division of Parks and Recreation staff
- In recent years, as demand for outdoor recreation has grown, local capacity for trails work has declined, with elimination of the CBS Park planner position, reductions in Alaska State Parks staffing in Sitka and reductions in USFS staff and trails funding.
- A recently constructed cruise terminal nearly doubles capacity for cruise visitors to Sitka, from an average of 200,000 to roughly 380,000 visitors in 2022. The city's short-term tourism plan includes estimates of up to 510,000 cruise visitor arrivals in 2023 and beyond.
- Linking increased use to increased resources will be a key part of the solution to capacity challenges.
- New investments in trails, trailhead parking, signage and wayfinding, and related infrastructure and programs are needed to accommodate the growth of the cruise industry, provide a quality experience for independent visitors, and retain benefits for residents.
- Most trail project priorities in or near Sitka focus on filling gaps, creating connections and upgrading or extending existing trails.
- Community goals for trail improvements include:
 - Upgrade/relocate select segments of the existing in-town and edge-of-town trail systems. For example, completing the Cross Trail, upgrading the trailhead closest to the new cruise terminal, relocating the Verstovia Trail off private lands, and improving the Gavan/Harbor Mountain Trail.
 - Develop one or more "world class" trails to bring more visitor spending to the community. For example, the proposed South Sitka Sound Coastal Trail, upgraded alpine loop trails with cabins, or Kruzof Island multi-use trail system.
- Sitka Trail Works is updating the 2003 Sitka Trails Plan. They developed the original 2003 plan in partnership with land management agencies. The update will add detail and specificity to the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy (TSTS) plan while incorporating a multi-jurisdictional focus.
- More work is needed with small cruise operators and USFS staff to identify appropriate locations with available capacity to place new trails suitable for these operators and their passengers.

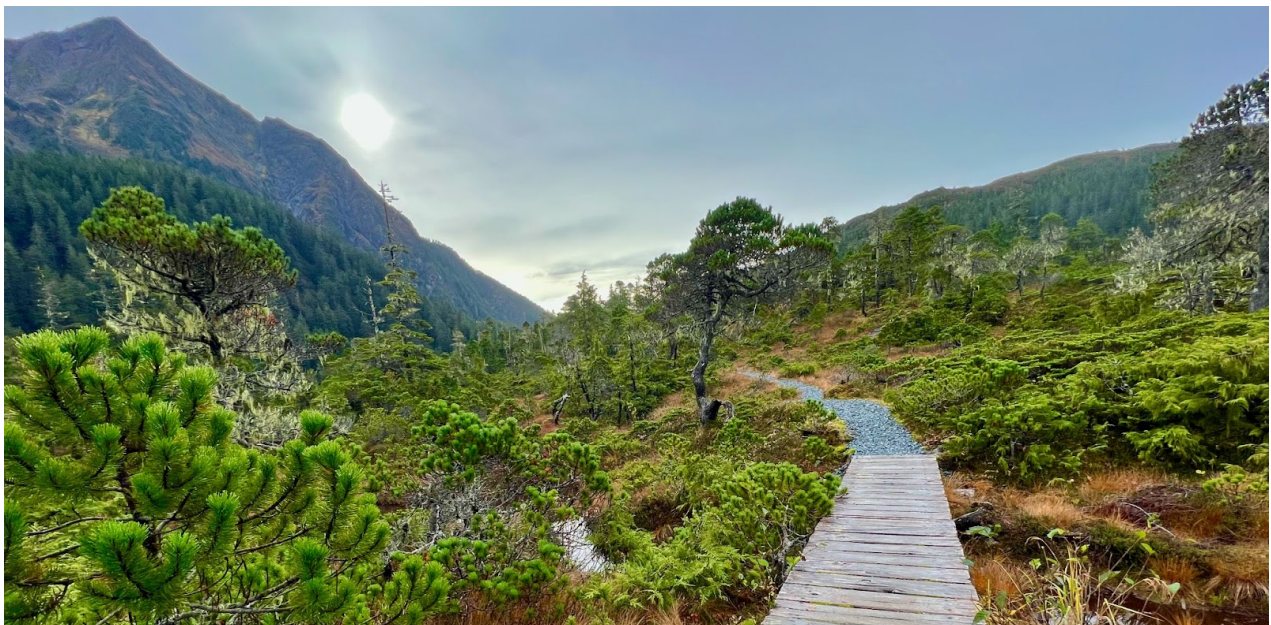
INTRODUCTION

At the direction of the USFS, Alaska Trails¹ has taken a community-driven approach to developing the Tongass National Forest Sustainable Trails Strategy. This work was prepared under a Challenge Cost Share Agreement between the USFS and Alaska Trails. This chapter specifically highlights the current trails status in and around the community of Sitka within the Sitka Ranger District. For a more in depth introduction to the entire project, consult the overall Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy Introduction and for more insight into the regional issues, consult the Forest-wide Chapter.

Within this chapter is a discussion of the issues and opportunities facing this community and Ranger District in their pursuit of a sustainable trail system. For the purposes of this project, ***a sustainable trail system is defined as socially relevant and supported, ecologically resilient, and economically viable.*** Building on this information, the chapter identifies priorities for new trails, trail maintenance and trail decommissioning. The chapter also highlights other general approaches, policy changes or actions which could lead to a sustainable trail system.

The goal of every planner, including those who prepared this strategy, is that their work will create tangible results. For this strategy to improve the sustainability of the Sitka Ranger District's trail system, these recommendations will need to be considered and, where deemed appropriate, implemented.

The staff at Alaska Trails are immensely grateful to the organizations and individuals who generously offered their wisdom, insight and feedback as this chapter was developed, including USFS, the City of Sitka, Sitka Trail Works, community organizations, Alaska Native Tribal organizations, and local residents.



Alpine views from the Beaver Lake Loop Trail; Photo: Haley Johnston

¹ www.alaska-trails.org

OVERVIEW

Sitka Ranger District Overview

Situated adjacent to the outer coast of the Gulf of Alaska, the Sitka Ranger District encompasses Baranof Island, part of Chichagof Island and many smaller islands. The Ranger District includes the federally designated South Baranof Wilderness and a portion of the West Chichagof-Yakobi Wilderness. The Sitka Ranger District enjoys the diverse and abundant plant and wildlife populations of the Alexander Archipelago. The relatively mild climate and intact habitats – on land, on the coast and at sea – make Sitka an excellent place to explore, hike, visit and view wildlife. Whales, sea otters, brown bears, eagles, deer and mountain goats are some of the wildlife most commonly seen within the Ranger District.

Sitka Community Overview

The community of Sitka, with a population of 8,518², is located on the Pacific side of Baranof Island. Directly to the west, and within view of downtown, are Kruzof Island and Mount Edgecumbe. Sitka has a rich and vibrant cultural heritage and is the ancestral and current home of Tlingit native Alaskans. Other, much smaller communities within the Ranger District, include Tenakee Springs, Baranof Warm Springs and Port Alexander. The Sitka community is connected to other communities in Southeast Alaska by the Alaska Marine Highway System and regular air service by both large airlines and smaller air taxis. Sitka's road system is 14 miles long from end to end.

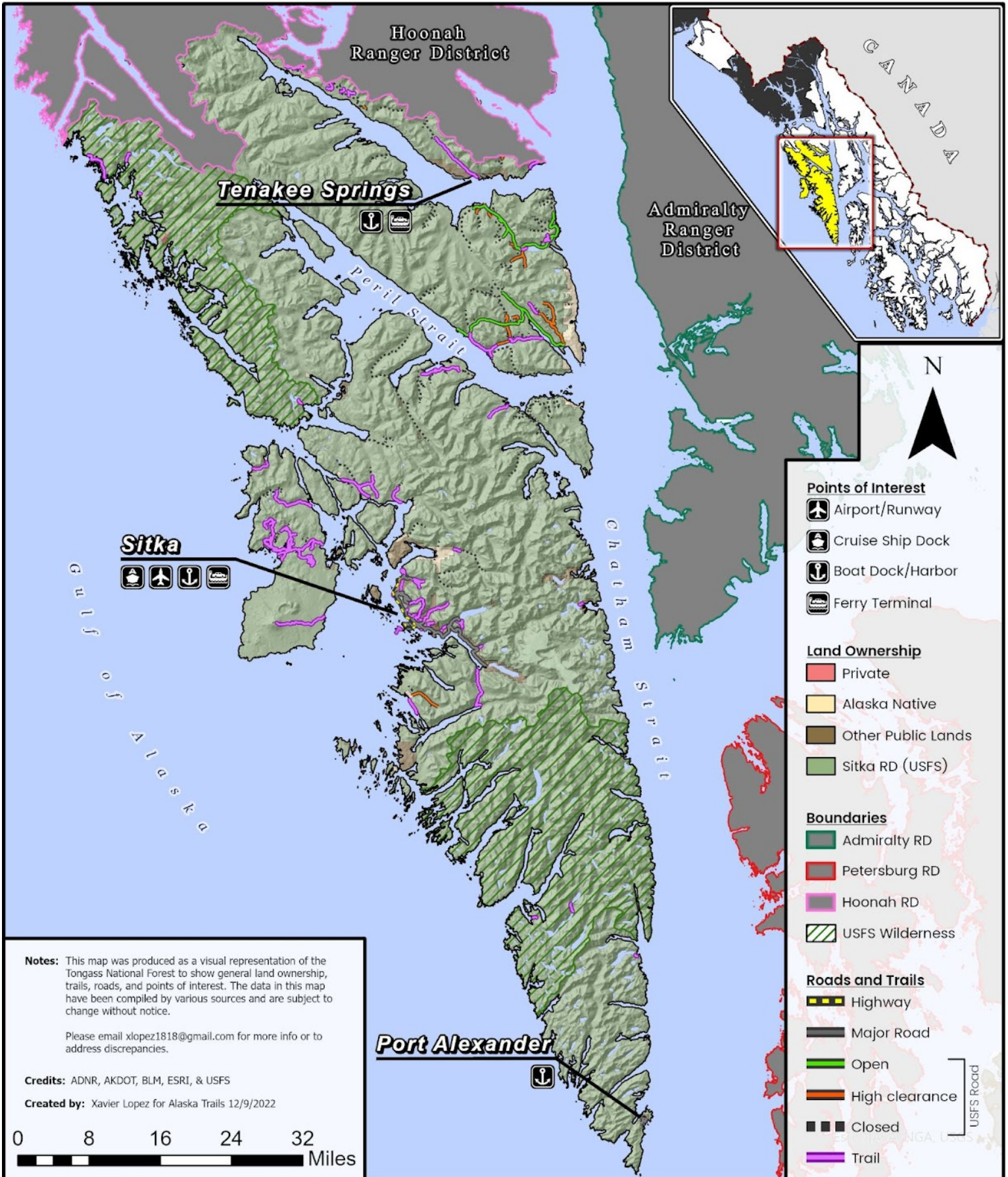
The community hosts a hospital administered by Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC), the Alaska State Trooper Academy, a United States Coast Guard base, multiple radio and TV stations, the University of Alaska Southeast's Sitka campus, Outer Coast College, three high schools, a public library and a recently constructed cruise ship port. Several of these are located on Japonski Island, which is connected to downtown Sitka by a bridge. Sitka is known for its strong and diverse arts and cultural institutions, including summer arts camps, Sitka National Historical Park and its totem poles, Russian colonial history, and fine arts festivals.

Compared to many Alaskan communities, Sitka has an extensive trail system. Much of this road based trail system is multi-jurisdictional, with trails often beginning on City and Borough of Sitka (CBS) land and climbing upland to the Tongass National Forest. The most pressing challenge facing the Sitka trail system is a need for increased capacity for trail maintenance and construction, requiring contributions from CBS, the State of Alaska, USFS, and local and regional nonprofits and businesses. The Sitka Ranger District can attract visitors to Sitka (particularly high-value independent travelers), retain outdoor-minded residents and improve safety by investing in the existing trail system and constructing new trails.

² <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US0270540-sitka-ak/>

Tongass National Forest Sustainable Trails Strategy

Sitka Ranger District



- Points of Interest**
- Airport/Runway
 - Cruise Ship Dock
 - Boat Dock/Harbor
 - Ferry Terminal

- Land Ownership**
- Private
 - Alaska Native
 - Other Public Lands
 - Sitka RD (USFS)

- Boundaries**
- Admiralty RD
 - Petersburg RD
 - Hoonah RD
 - USFS Wilderness

- Roads and Trails**
- Highway
 - Major Road
 - Open
 - High clearance
 - Closed
 - Trail

Notes: This map was produced as a visual representation of the Tongass National Forest to show general land ownership, trails, roads, and points of interest. The data in this map have been compiled by various sources and are subject to change without notice.

Please email xlopez1818@gmail.com for more info or to address discrepancies.

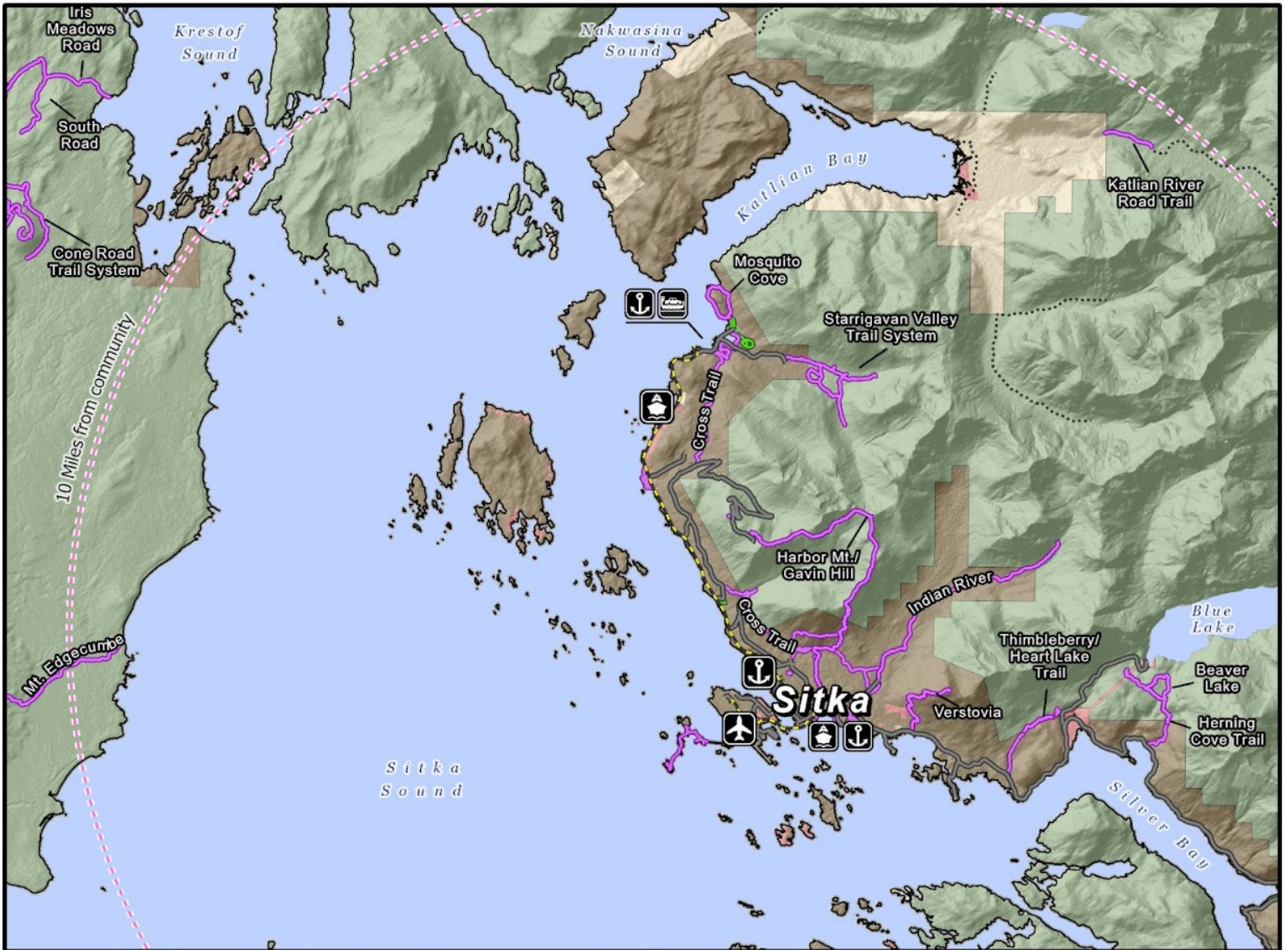
Credits: ADNR, AKDOT, BLM, ESRI, & USFS

Created by: Xavier Lopez for Alaska Trails 12/9/2022



Tongass National Forest Sustainable Trails Strategy

City of Sitka



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Credits: ADNR, AKDOT, BLM, ESRI, Sitka Trail Works, & USFS

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Points of Interest

- Airport/Runway
- Cruise Ship Dock
- Boat Dock/Harbor
- Ferry Terminal

Land Ownership

- Private
- Alaska Native
- Other Public Lands
- Sitka RD (USFS)

Roads and Trails

- Highway
- Major Road
- Trail
- USFS Road - Open
- USFS Road - High clearance
- USFS Road - Closed



Background Documents

There are several historic, current and in-progress plans that are relevant to the Sitka Ranger District, including:

- Sitka Short Term Tourism Plan, 2022
- Sitka Sound Coastal Trail Draft Design Narrative, 2020
- Commercial Use Allocation on Sitka Area Trail and Roads, 2020
- Kruzof Island Outfitter/Guide Environmental Assessment, 2015
- The Sitka Comprehensive Plan 2030. CBS, 2018
- Sitka Sustainable Outdoor Recreation Action Plan, USFS/Agnew::Beck, 2012
- Revised Environmental Assessment, Sitka Access and Travel Management, USFS 2007
- Sitka Trail Plan, 2003 (led by Sitka Trail Works, with CBS, USFS, State Parks)
- In progress: City of Sitka Parks & Recreation Facilities plan
- In progress: 2023 Sitka Trail Plan



An alpine section of the Harbor Mountain/Gavan Hill Trail; Photo: Haley Johnston

CURRENT USES AND TRENDS

Community Use Trends

While Sitka is a community with strong ties to ocean life, it is also a community with numerous residents and community organizations who care deeply about Sitka's terrestrial trail system. This is evidenced by the fact that Sitka has and supports a trails nonprofit, Sitka Trail Works, one of two such local organizations in Southeast Alaska. Sitkans run, hike, bike, socialize, use motorized recreation vehicles, ski, hunt and forage on the trails adjacent to their community and they advocate for trail funding, maintenance and expansion. Additionally, Sitka hosts the popular, annual Alpine Adventure Run on USFS trails.

Tourism Trends

The community of Sitka has long been popular with independent travelers and saw a near doubling of the number of cruise ship visitors, from 200,000 prior to the pandemic to 380,000 visitors in 2022. The city's short-term tourism plan includes estimates of up to 510,000 cruise visitor arrivals in 2023 and beyond.

Alaska Visitor Statistic Program - VII (2016) Data of Interest³

The Alaska Visitor Statistic Program, most recently completed in 2016, contains the following data on summer visitors to Sitka:

- Sitka received 9% or about 170,000 of the total 1,857,500 out-of-state, summer visitors to Alaska in 2016. The majority of visitors to Sitka (94%) arrive for pleasure/vacation as opposed to visiting friends or family or for business.
- As of 2016, Sitka was a secondary destination in the Southeast Alaska cruise market. Of out-of-state travelers to Sitka, 82% arrived via a cruise, 17% by air and 1% via ferry. An unknown but significant share of cruise visitors in 2016 arrived on small 50-150 person ships (small cruise ships) or chartered yachts.
- The construction of a private cruise terminal allowed large ship docking for the first time in 2022, dramatically expanding the visitation capacity as compared to these 2016 numbers.
- The average stay for those out-of-state visitors who do stay overnight in Sitka was 5.5 days
- While in Sitka, visitors were most likely to engage in culture/history activities, wildlife viewing, hiking/nature walks, city/sightseeing tours, and fishing with rates of participation of 39%, 22%, 17%, 17%, and 12%, respectively.
- 36% of visitors to Sitka had been to Alaska before, a higher rate of return visits than the state average, suggesting that first time travelers to Alaska decided that Sitka was an attractive place for a return visit.
- The average visitor to Sitka spent \$917 in Alaska, just slightly below the statewide average of \$1067 for all visitor types. This is higher than the average for visitors to Southeast of \$760, but well below the average of \$1,674 per trip for independent out-of-state visitors.

In addition to independent travelers and large-vessel cruise ships, the small cruise industry also brings significant numbers of visitors to Sitka. Some small cruise operators begin or end their cruises in Sitka, and benefit the local economy by maintaining their vessels in Sitka.

³ <https://www.alaskatia.org/wp-content/uploads/12.-AVSP-7-Summ-Profiles-Southeast.pdf>

The small cruise industry in Southeast Alaska is growing and several dozen new ships are under construction. There is increasing demand by small cruise operators to provide more opportunities for passengers to disembark and explore the Tongass National Forest, which will likely increase as new ships enter the market. Constraints in meeting this large and growing demand include the challenging natural landscape, land use restrictions including federal Wilderness designations, and the desire by operators to provide their clients with uncrowded locations. Interviews, surveys and conversations with small cruise operators indicated the following:

- Client demographics are changing. Visitors all want to “get off the boat” for walks and hikes.
- The amount of small cruise operators is growing. Many operators avoid going to the same places at the same time, but onshore destinations with desirable trails are limited by commercial use areas operating at capacity and a general lack of shore accessible trails.

USFS National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) Data of Interest⁴

The most recent U.S. USFS National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) Data for Sitka Ranger District is from 2016. The NVUM was designed for National and Forest-level analysis, not Ranger Districts. Unfortunately, the NVUM data lumps together visitors to Hoonah and Sitka Ranger Districts, limiting the value of data to individual Ranger Districts or communities. This is exacerbated by the different use patterns in Sitka and Hoonah Ranger Districts, which are influenced by factors including Sitka’s larger population, more extensive trail system, and additional visitor infrastructure. Thus, these numbers may not paint an accurate picture of activities in Sitka Ranger District but are included here because they are the only available data from USFS about use and visitor preferences.

From the aggregated NVUM data, it is known that there were 264,000 visitors in total to the Sitka and Hoonah Ranger Districts in 2016. Visitors participated in activities at the following rates:

- 85.9% of visitors participated in Hiking/Walking
- 57.4% viewing Natural Features
- 46.0% viewing Wildlife

Outfitter/Guide Use of Trails on the Sitka Ranger District

There are 189 total permitted outfitter/guides for the Tongass National Forest. Outfitter/guides are an important part of the regional and local economy. The Sitka Ranger District has 33 permitted outfitter guides, as of 2/13/2023.⁵ Most permitted outfitter/guides in the Tongass have use across multiple districts, so those permitted in Sitka Ranger District may also guide clients in other Ranger Districts. Only Juneau Ranger District has more permitted outfitter/guides than Sitka. On average, outfitter/guides serve an average of 5883 clients each year in the Sitka Ranger District. Some, but not all, of these clients utilize USFS Trails. A better understanding of outfitter/guide use specific to trails would help the USFS and local partners plan and prioritize projects, while supporting this sector of the local economy.

⁴ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/nvum>

⁵ The number of permits is a snapshot in time and can change throughout the year, particularly in the spring as applications are processed.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Issues

- The dramatic growth in cruise travel to Sitka will **increase trail demand** for walking, hiking, e-biking and biking opportunities. Trail needs range from safe roadside paths to adventurous hikes into the alpine. New demand will stretch the capacity of trailheads and trails, where relative solitude is valued by residents. Planning is needed to guide this use, so both visitors and residents have enjoyable, safe trail experiences.
- Current and prospective **trails cross multiple land jurisdictions**, complicating trail planning and construction, and requiring work with community partners across jurisdictions.
- **Interest in trails continues to grow, while trails funding declines.** No mechanism currently exists linking growing tourism activity to a commensurate increase in funding to sustain and improve the quality of local trails for visitors and residents. Addressing this issue is a main goal of this TSTS project, and will require collaboration between the City and Borough of Sitka(CBS), USFS, the State of Alaska, Sitka Trail Works, the business community, and other partners.
- **Local partners have limited capacity.** Sitka is a small community with many needs. CBS revenue is limited by a low per capita property tax base which is capped by City charter. CBS needs additional funding to address a costly backlog of deferred maintenance on roads, water, sewer and other public infrastructure. Other trails nonprofits, such as Trail Mix in Juneau, receive dedicated funding from their local city's tax base. Sitka Trail Works, by contrast, does not. Sitka lacks a large pool of potential corporate and individual donors.
- High precipitation with associated erosion and a physical environment that includes rough, variable terrain, including wetlands and steep slopes, make **trail building especially expensive.** These conditions, as well as remoteness, increase upfront costs to design and construct sustainable, low maintenance trails.

Opportunities

- Sitka Trail Works and the Sitka Conservation Society are great resources for the USFS and the community. Tapping into their capacity to fundraise, design, construct and maintain trails on National Forest System lands is a helpful starting place for partnerships with the Sitka Ranger District.
- Sitka Trail Works has long established relationships with skilled, local trail building contractors and a proven track record of efficient project delivery.
- Sitkans rise to the occasion to support their trails with individuals often clearing blown down trees or debris from trails when needed.
- Strong Alaska Native entities - the federally recognized Sitka Tribe of Alaska and Shee Atika Incorporated - have lands and business interests within the Sitka Ranger District area. Their support of and/or interest in trails projects, and the resources they could bring, could be a help in sustaining and improving local trails and workforce.
- Adventure Sitka Inc, the owner of the Sitka Sound Cruise Terminal, and Shee Atika Incorporated are developing visitor attractions and excursions in the Sitka area. Engagement with these entities as partners is essential to accurately prepare for visitation.
- The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT/PF) is constructing a road to Katlian Bay, totaling nine miles of new single-lane, unpaved road with bridge crossings. The new road will open access to large areas of undeveloped land The road passes through State of Alaska, National Forest System and Shee Atika, Incorporated land.These land holders and community partners need to work together to plan, construct and maintain recreation infrastructure in the newly accessed State of Alaska and National Forest

System lands while respecting the rights of the private land owner, Shee Atika Inc. With smart planning this area can help meet growing demand for quality recreation experiences.

COMMUNITY & USER GROUP GOALS

These goals were articulated in conversations with USFS staff, local residents, permitted outfitters and guides, City and Borough of Sitka staff, and other stakeholders and individuals associated with the community of Sitka.

Additional feedback was received via online surveys including Sitka Trail Works' online surveys for the 2023 Sitka Trails Plan

Summary Goals

- Help build a stronger, more durable local economy
- Make it easier and more inviting to be active, healthy outside
- Be good stewards of our spectacular natural setting
- Provide diverse, equitable recreational opportunities; seek projects that are good for residents and visitors
- Work within our means and by working together, increase our means!

Sitka Community and User Group Goals

- Secure more sustainable funding to maintain and build new trails
- Provide trails for a diverse array of users, uses and settings; "spread people out"
- Offer easy strolls "for people who never thought they would go for a hike" as well as more demanding hikes
- Offer a spectrum of intensity of use, from busy trails with numerous, simultaneous users to trails that are quiet and offer opportunities for solitude
- Provide access to diverse natural settings: coastal, alpine, old growth forest, lakeshore
- Provide trails for different purposes: exercise, recreation, dog walking motorized users, bicycling, commuting, hunting/gathering access,
- Provide easy, inviting connections from residential and lodging areas to natural areas
- Offer quality trails usable in all four seasons
- Provide trails that benefit both residents and visitors
- Provide trails that access or become world class attractions, helping to draw visitors and visitor spending; particularly higher spending, independent, overnight visitors
- Work towards a skilled, locally based trails workforce, able to assist in design and permitting of new trails, maintenance of existing and construction of new trails
- Identify new locations, greater capacity to meet demand for small cruise ship passengers to have enjoyable on-shore hikes

Small Cruise Industry Goals

- **Increased shore access** - These operators have requested new trails, better coordination on the timing of visits by cruise boats and the repurposing of logging roads for their commercial use. Specific suggested locations for further discussion and assessment include the Lindenberg Head/Todd area near Sitkoh Bay, Krestof Sound, Saook Bay and Sulioia Bay.

RECOMMENDED TRAIL PROJECTS

The following are the specific recommendations for trails to build, maintain, plan, and/or decommission that have been identified through conversations with USFS staff and the Sitka community, while addressing the community goals outlined above. Throughout the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy those trail projects that are simultaneously beneficial to residents, visitors, and could help increase business and employment opportunities have been prioritized, when possible.

Recommendations for Trail Building

These recommendations include trails that will need additional pre-construction planning.

Starrigavan Area Trails*

The USFS has completed conceptual planning for this expansive, popular recreation area, including an environmental assessment in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) with a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). This work sets out ambitious but generalized plans for building/restoring mountain bike trails, ATV trails, and new/upgraded hiking trails. More work is needed to develop specific trail plans and weigh relative benefits of these projects vs. other uses of finite funding. Potential trail projects in the area include:

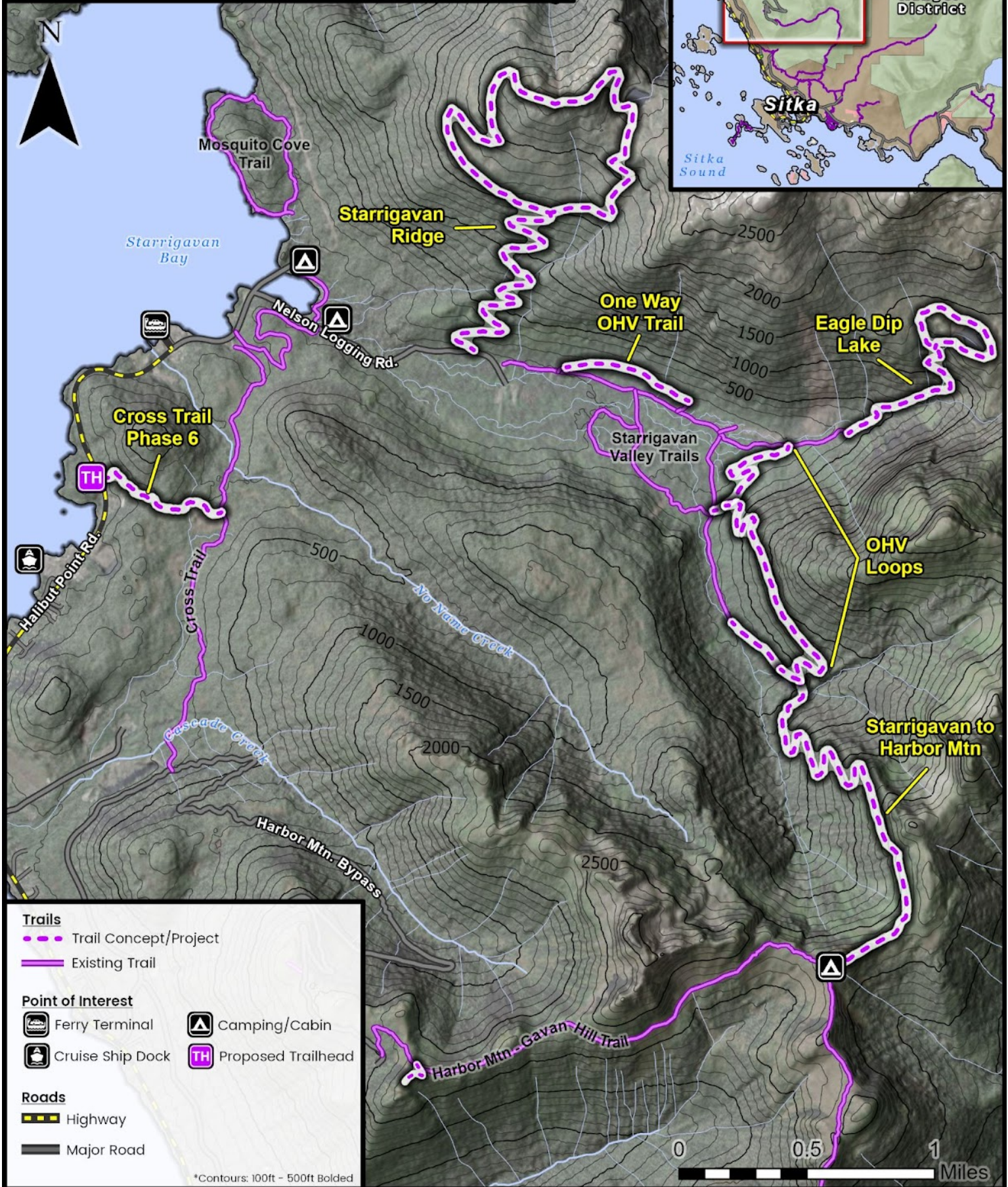
- a. *Starrigavan Ridge Trail* - This project would reroute a steep, muddy and eroded, but increasingly popular user-created trail. Construction as a USFS system trail would address resource damage and safety concerns from poorly sited user routes that climb at unsustainable grades and lead to slippery footing and tripping hazards.
- b. *Mountain Biking Trails* - Constructing mountain bike trails within the existing looping trails of Starrigavan Valley would accommodate a variety of users, while optimizing the experience for all user groups. Trails would be placed within the “Starrigan Valley Trails” area on the following map.
- c. *Starrigavan Valley to Harbor Mountain/Gavan Hill Connector Trail* - Constructing this 2.5 mile trail would provide access from Starrigavan Valley to both downtown Sitka and the Harbor Mountain Recreation Area, giving adventurous travelers and residents a more challenging day or multi-day hiking option.
- d. *Eagle Dip Lake Trail* - This trail is an uneven and brushy route with multiple user-created paths up and down a steep section and a difficult crossing of the upper Starrigavan stream channel. More community outreach is needed to confirm if constructing this trail as a USFS system trail is a community priority. This strategy recommends that the Sitka Ranger District coordinate with Sitka Trail Works to determine if this trail is community supported.

Prior to construction of any trail projects in the Starrigavan area, parking, trailheads and maintenance of existing trails should be prioritized. The Sitka Ranger District, with funds from the Pittman-Robertson Act and State of Alaska DOT, plan to improve the trailhead and parking on Nelson Logging Road in the near term.

****See map on following page. Note, this map is not intended to represent an official alignment. It is instead illustrative of an idea for a possible trail. Further community engagement and design and planning will be necessary to evaluate this trail's feasibility and appropriateness.***

Sitka Ranger District

Starrigavan Recreation Enhancements and Cross Trail Phase 6



Harbor Mountain/Gavan Hill Trail*

- a. The Gavan Hill trail to the south begins at an intersection with the Cross Trail and includes a 1.5-mile section that climbs 1800 feet. A *reroute of this steep section* is needed to minimize resource damage and environmental impacts and improve user experiences. NEPA is finished for this project and designs are nearly complete. Funds are needed for construction.
- b. A hike-in, first-come, first-serve, no-fee shelter is located near the midway point of the Harbor Mountain/Gavan Hill trail. Developing a *reservable public use cabin* near the Harbor Mountain Trailhead would offer a popular, road accessible, revenue generating facility.
- c. Formalize the *trail to the Harbor Mountain Viewpoint* above the Harbor Mountain Trailhead to reduce erosion and provide access to World War II historical properties. Planning for this is being finalized with anticipated implementation in 2024.

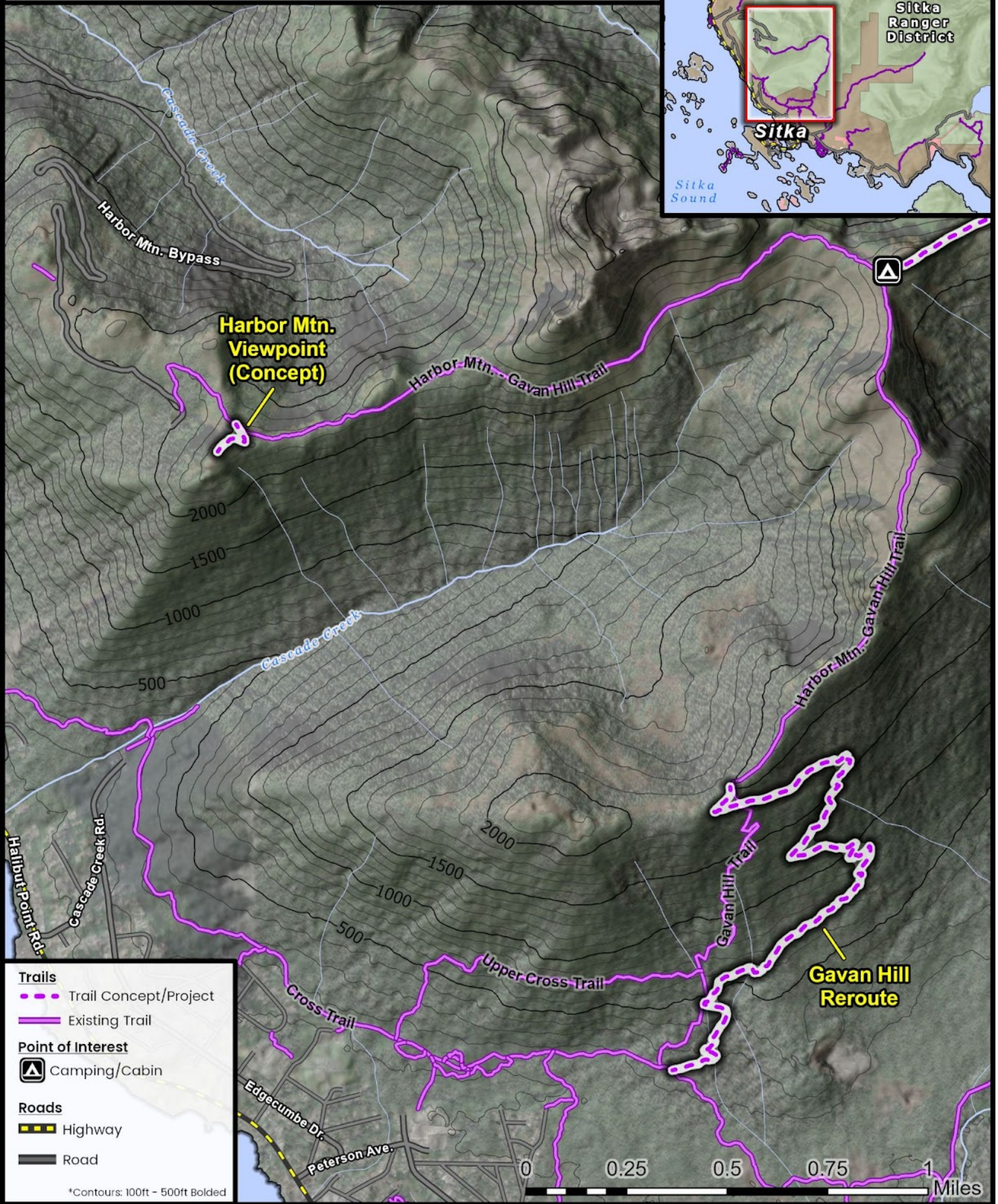
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Distant hikers on the Harbor Mountain/Gavan Hill Loop; Photo: Haley Johnston

Sitka Ranger District

Gavan Hill Reroute / Harbor Mtn Viewpoint



Mount Verstovia Trail/Cross Trail South

The existing Verstovia Trail is steep and seriously degraded. Despite conditions, the trail remains popular with those seeking a demanding climb and is the community's most popular backcountry, alpine skiing destination. The trail is in need of relocation and reconstruction to create a safer trail experience, lower the burden of maintenance of the trail, reroute sections of the trail off of private lands and reduce resource damage. This strategy recommends the following options, all of which require funding for design, planning and construction.

- a. *Reroute the lower Verstovia Trail* along the western ridge of Verstovia Mountain.
- b. Build a *new Mount Verstovia Trailhead* at the end of Price Street; the current parking lot on Sawmill Creek Road is insufficient for existing and growing use.
- c. *Extend the Cross Trail* roughly 1600 feet past the current terminus at Indian River (Kaasda Héen) to the northern end of Price Street. This project will occur on City and Borough of Sitka (CBS) land, but collaboration between CBS and the Sitka Ranger District will be necessary to ensure project success and integration into the multi-jurisdictional trail system.

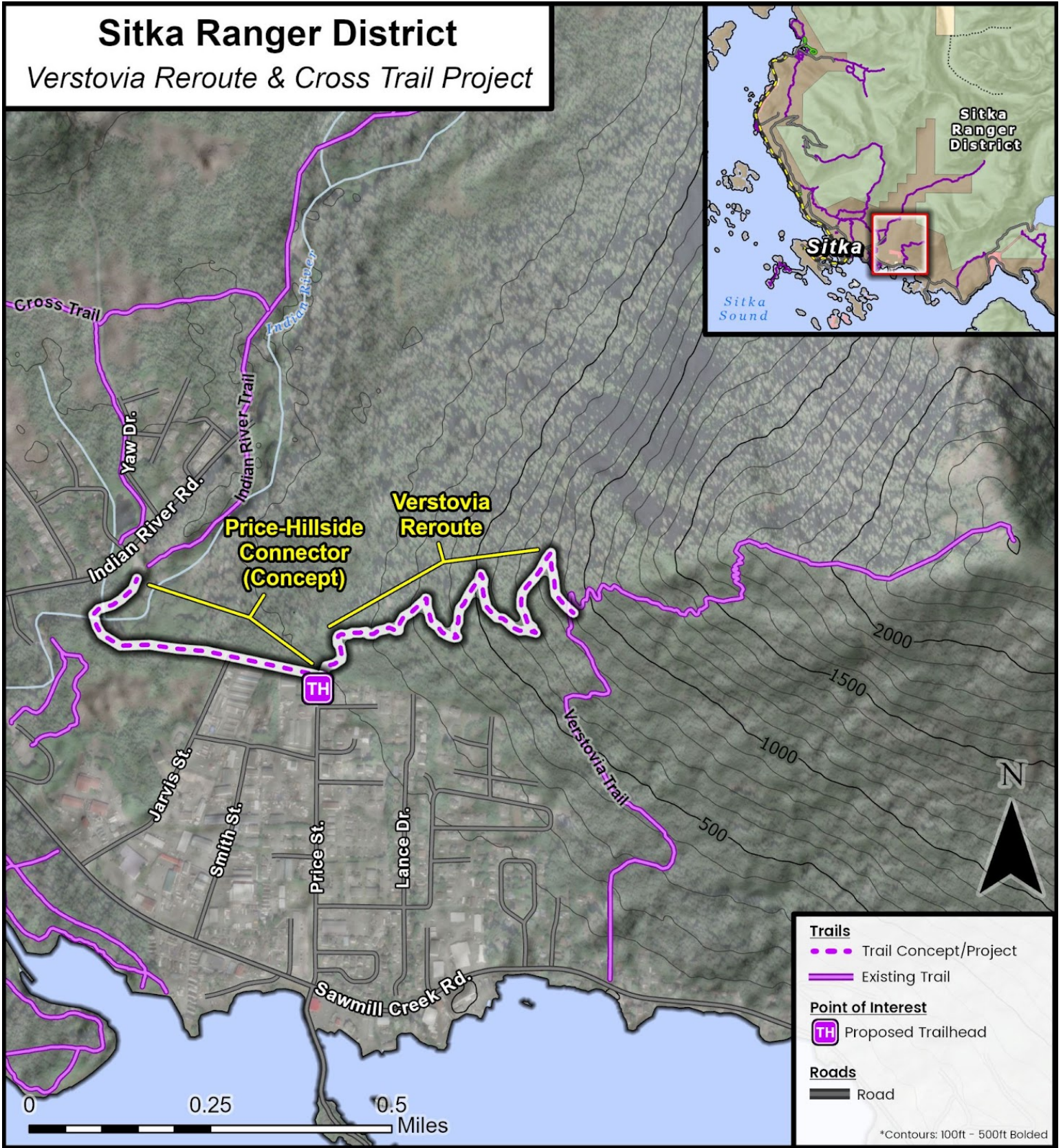
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Left: Views from Picnic Rock, the reward for the steep Verstovia hike; Photo: Lione Clare, Sitka Trail Works
Right: Current parking situation along Sawmill Creek Road; Photo: Ben Hughey, Sitka Trail Works.

Sitka Ranger District

Verstovia Reroute & Cross Trail Project



Upper Cross Trail (aka High Cross Trail) Reconstruction

This popular non-USFS system, looping route provides challenge, views, solitude and access to old growth forest a short distance from Sitka High School and residential neighborhoods. Several existing bridges along the route are damaged beyond repair. Due to the proximity to the community and the benefits of looping trails (they spread out users and help to reduce user conflicts) this strategy recommends that the Sitka Ranger District collaborate with partners to update this trail to a safe, usable condition.

South Sitka Sound Coastal Trail/Hut to Hut (see map on following page)

The concept of the South Sitka Sound Coastal Trail was first advanced during the development of the landmark 2003 Sitka Trail Plan. That plan identified coastal hiking trails as a top priority of local survey respondents and outlined a three- or four-day backpacking trail along the scenic rocky coastline on the south side of Sitka Sound. The route was again identified as a first tier project in the 2012 Sitka Sustainable Outdoor Recreation Action Plan. Strong public support was most recently demonstrated during development of the 2023 Sitka Trail Plan.

Located on the outer coast of Baranof Island on Hot Springs Bay off Sitka Sound, 16 miles south of Sitka, this ambitious boat accessible trail has the potential to offer a signature destination for outdoor enthusiasts from all over the world. This project would create two loop trails, the 11-mile North loop with three huts and the 6-mile South loop with one hut (17 miles total of new construction), while also providing access to the historic Goddard Hot Springs bath houses. These developments will result in the community-identified and desired three- to four-day hiking opportunities with overnight stops at proposed coastal huts or at an existing coastal USFS cabin.

The USFS, with partners, should pursue this process in phases. The Sitka Sound Coastal Trail Design Narrative included recommendations for phases which were identified as three distinct loops. The following map instead imagines a large loop that is bisected by the historical and existing Goddard to Redoubt Trail. The trail would require a collaborative approach as much of the southern portion of the loop is on City of Sitka and State of Alaska Lands, while the northern portion of the route is on National Forest System land. Potential phases for trail building could include:

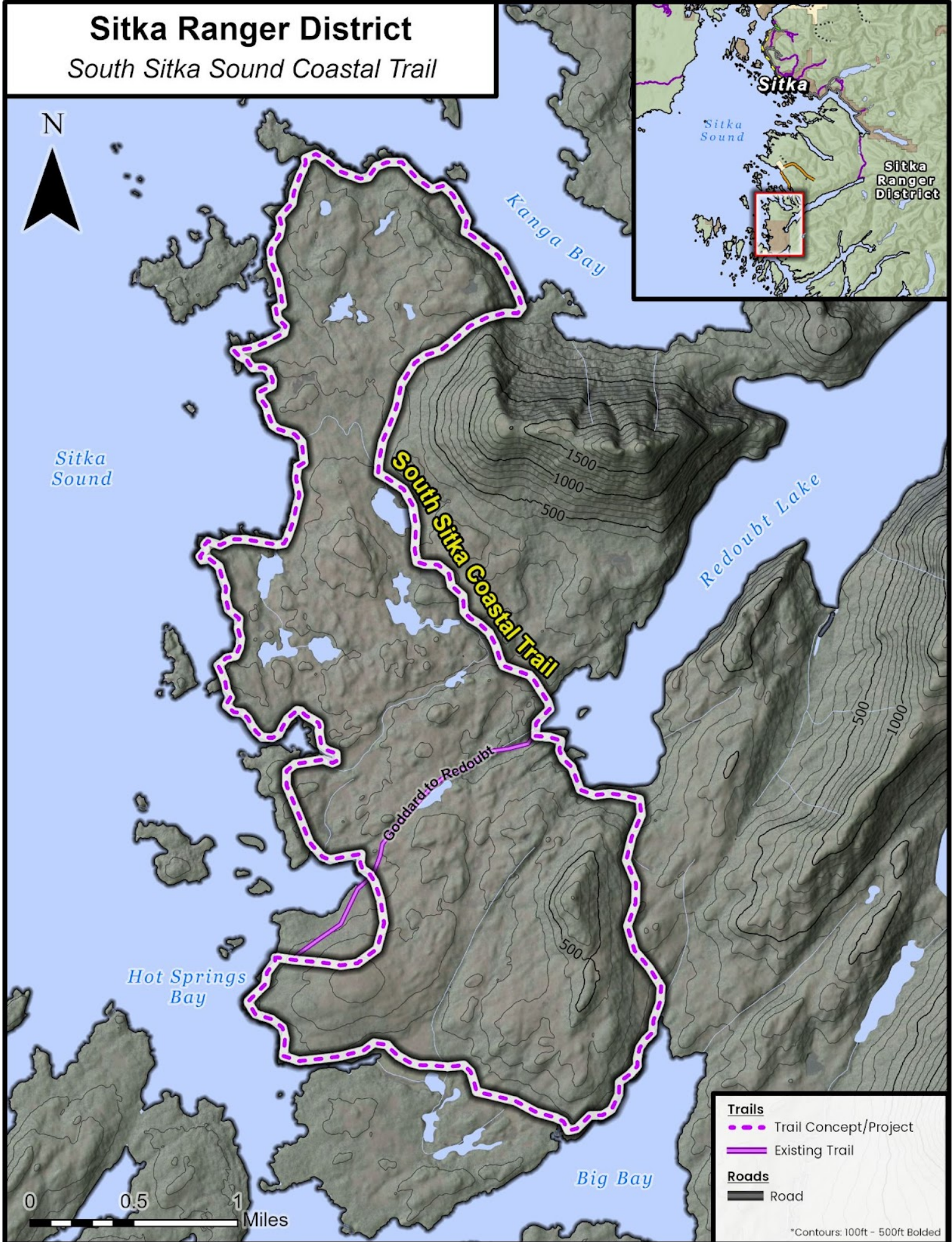
- 1) Maintenance and improvements to the existing Goddard to Redoubt Trail, while this trail is *not* on National Forest system land, collaboration with the City and Borough of Sitka on this project would ensure future compatibility with the overall South Sitka Sound Coastal Trail
- 2) Extending the existing Goddard to Redoubt Trail north from Redoubt Lake to meet the Kanga Bay Cabin; this section of trail crosses onto National Forest system land before ending at the Kanga Bay Cabin.
- 3) Completing the loop from the Kanga Bay Cabin along the shore of Sitka Sound to meet the eastern end of the Goddard to Redoubt Trail; this trail would begin on National Forest system land before ending on City and Borough of Sitka (CBS) land at the eastern end of the Goddard to Redoubt Trail.
- 4) Assist as possible with partners (City of Sitka, State of Alaska, Sitka Trail Works) to complete the southern portion of the looping trail.

****See map on following page. Note, this map is not intended to represent an official alignment. It is instead illustrative of an idea for a possible trail. Further community engagement and design and planning will be necessary to evaluate this trail's feasibility and appropriateness.***

Sitka Ranger District

South Sitka Sound Coastal Trail

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Recommendations for Maintenance

All established trails in the Ranger District require regular maintenance. This strategy assumes that the Sitka Ranger District is attempting to provide the minimum level of maintenance to ensure residents and visitors encounter reasonably safe and enjoyable trails. Beyond basic maintenance, the writers of this strategy have received specific feedback about certain trails that should be prioritized for maintenance or require a higher level of maintenance than what could reasonably be described as “routine”. Notable suggestions for maintenance are described for trails identified as priorities by the Ranger District below. Additional trail maintenance needs can also be found in the following table.

Indian River Trail

Low grades and ease of access make this a “trail for everybody”. There is also community interest in the USFS evaluating the compatibility of reclassifying this trail for bike use. Great American Outdoors Act funds have been allocated to replace failing bridges on this trail but additional work is needed, including rehabilitating sections of the trail as it approaches the waterfall near its terminus.

Salmon Lake Trail

This trail is close to the community of Sitka, is used commercially by permitted guides and provides hike-in access to a USFS cabin. These factors contribute to the prioritization of this trail for maintenance.

White Sulfur Springs

Maintenance was completed on this trail from Mirror Harbor to the USFS White Sulfur Springs Cabin in the mid-2000s. Accumulated deferred maintenance, remoteness, complexity of complying with Wilderness regulations and maintaining access to a USFS public use cabin, all contribute to the prioritization of this trail for maintenance.

Mt. Edgecumbe

This iconic, volcanic hike is enjoyed by visitors and residents of Sitka alike. Great American Outdoors Act funds have been allocated to this project, but additional graveling of the trail is needed. Proximity to Sitka and the unique trail experience contribute to the prioritization of this trail for maintenance.

Additional Trail Maintenance Details:

Trail Name	Action	Miles	Notes
Starrigavan Estuary Life	Maintain	0.2	Accumulating deferred maintenance on popular boardwalk and signage may necessitate investment in future years.
Beaver Lake – Herring Cove	Maintain	1.97	FY 22-23 Added gravel and repaired bridge. Replacement of bridge near Herring Cove trailhead on CBS land will be needed in the next 5-10 years.
Shelikof	Maintain	1.33	FY 22-23 finished gravel and repairs. Continue maintaining
Mt. Edgecumbe	Maintain	7.05	Needs gravel for maintenance.

Trail Name	Action	Miles	Notes
Lake Eva	Maintain	2.9	Continue Maintaining; A high level of commercial and private use should trigger regular evaluation of maintenance needs.
Kruzof Island Multi-use Trails	Maintain	>10	Mud Bay road system is the most popular OHV destination in the SRD. Improvements to the landing, moorage, and trailhead area would enhance the experience.
Harbor Mountain	Repair	5.74	Erosion damage at trail start
Eagle River	Repair	5.63	Restore road for ATV and bike use
Starrigavan Valley OHV Trails	Maintain		Need to replace two bridges
Lake Suloia	Rehab	0.65	Needs extensive work
Ship Cove	Maintain	0.25	Historic CCC Route being reconstructed FY22 onward. Additional work needed to connect two sides of Port Alexander
Katlian River Road	Repair	0.75	Will be accessible by road after current construction finished
Sitkoh Lake Trail	Rehab	4.43	Reconstruction planned
Mist Cove	Maintain	0.62	Continue maintaining
Port Mary	Maintain	1.14	Continue maintaining

Recommendations for Planning

Katlian Bay - The Katlian Bay State Road project is now under construction, using funds from a State of Alaska 2012 General Obligation Bond. The road opens access to a large area with significant outdoor recreation opportunities, part of which is in Native ownership. Most of the mid and upper valley is Forest Service System lands. *Planning is needed to guide future use.* Specific issues include recreation investments, trespass and environmental challenges including flooding. *Community engagement will be critical in this planning work.*

Recommendations for Decommissioning

At this time, no specific trails in the Sitka Ranger District have been identified for decommissioning. Potential candidates for decommissioning that were discussed and should be investigated further include trails/roads in the Sitkoh Creek and Port Banks areas, as well as former logging roads with little recreational value. A map enabled survey of local residents may be useful in determining which logging roads are utilized by the community and which could be decommissioned. Further community outreach is needed.

RECOMMENDED GENERAL APPROACHES

While this strategy primarily focuses on recommendations of trails to build, maintain or decommission, it is also necessary to highlight other general approaches, policy changes or actions that could lead to a more sustainable trail system. Addressing these recommendations may be necessary before trails are considered for building, maintenance or decommissioning. In other cases, addressing these recommendations can happen concurrently with trail work, but doing so is still critical to achieving a sustainable trail system in the Ranger District. This strategy recommends the following actions for the Sitka Ranger District:

Establish new models for expanding local capacity to complete trail work.

- a. **Establish quality, multi-year trail crews at the Ranger District** - By establishing crews and/or supporting partner organizations to establish their own trail crews, the Sitka Ranger District could reduce the burden of annual training, better maintain their existing trails and more efficiently embark upon new trail projects.
- b. **Commit to hiring and training local workers** - A local crew would help to reduce turnover, increase experience and expertise in the Ranger District and build trust and rapport with the community of Sitka. Increasing compensation and/or providing housing would also help to retain a high quality workforce.
- c. **Contribute to the training of non-USFS trail crews** - Training crews contracted to work on National Forest System lands would help to ensure high quality trail work and establish the Sitka Ranger District as a willing and enthusiastic partner in the pursuit of a sustainable trail system.

Support partners in establishing a regional database of recreation facilities

- a. Establishing priorities for maintenance at the Sitka Ranger District is currently difficult due to the lack of information about the condition of existing recreation facilities.
- b. Trail users do not differentiate if they are on City and Borough of Sitka, State of Alaska or National Forest System land, and many trails in the area cross multiple landowner jurisdictions, necessitating a regional database of recreation facilities.
- a. Basic information including trail length, grade, dates of prior work, bridge condition, tread type, known issues, user groups etc. are not always known and a comprehensive database would help to answer preliminary maintenance questions and prioritize maintenance resources.

Explore options to speed the process from trail conception to construction.

- a. The timeline from trail concept to completion has grown enormously despite advancements in technology (LIDAR, construction techniques, etc) that should theoretically reduce this timeline.
- b. If USFS staff lack the capacity to **efficiently** plan, design and construct trail projects, the Sitka Ranger District should consider outsourcing as much of this work as is reasonable to private consulting firms and/or non-profit organizations.
- c. Fund or support the capturing of LIDAR for all areas where recreational use exists or is proposed to dramatically speed the process of trail evaluation and design.

Take a multijurisdictional approach to trails in the Sitka area.

- a. A multijurisdictional approach is especially important in Sitka due to the robust involvement and support of local partners and the patchwork of land ownership in the area.
- b. Maintenance responsibilities for multijurisdictional trails need discussion and formalization amongst all partners.
- c. Participate and partner with the City and Borough of Sitka, the Sitka Tribe of Alaska, and Native Corporation land owners with the project lead, Sitka Trail Works, in finalizing the new Sitka Trail Plan.

- d. Empower local partners to seek private investment for multi-jurisdictional projects. For example, support Sitka Trail Works in securing funding from the cruise industry to support recreation and trails projects in and near Sitka.