

# National Recreation Trails

## A FORGOTTEN DESIGNATION

What value does federal designation add to open space resources that are not all federally owned and managed? Over the years the federal government, under the auspices of the National Park Service and USDA Forest Service, has designated trails across the United States as National Recreation Trails. A survey of federal, nonfederal public, and private National Recreation Trail managers indicated that few knew they maintained a federally designated trail. As a result, the managers could not use the designation to help them manage the trails. The time is right to revitalize this system.

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Many trails across the United States are part of the 1968 National Trails System Act (NTSA; P.L. 90-543), which authorized the establishment of a system of trails. Under this legislation, two types of trails are congressionally authorized and well-known: National Scenic Trails (the Appalachian and Pacific Crest Trails were the first in 1968) and National Historic Trails (the first four designated in 1978 were the Iditarod, the Lewis and Clark, the Mormon Pioneer, and the Oregon National Historic Trails). National Scenic Trails are continuous protected corridors for outdoor recreation, whereas National Historic Trails generally consist of trail segments and remnant sites; for example, past routes of exploration, migration, trade, communication, and military action. Currently there are eight National Scenic Trails and 12 National Historic Trails.

Also included in the NTSA is a lesser-known but much larger category of trails, the National Recreation Trails (NRT). NRTs are existing trails recognized by the federal government as contributing to the National Trails System that do not meet the special scenic or historic status and thus do not require congressional authorization. Criteria for inclusion include readiness (trail must be ready for public use already), availability (reasonably accessible to urban areas), length (may vary but must be continuous), location (wherever possible the significant nat-

ural and cultural features of the surrounding area should be incorporated into the trail network), design commensurate with anticipated use, and certification (that the trail will be available for public use for at least 10 consecutive years, following which the trail may be recertified in perpetuity).

There are 822 National Recreation Trails across the United States adding more than 10,000 miles of trails to the system. NRTs include a wide variety of trail types, uses, lengths, topography, history, and physical challenges. They support a wide range of activities, including hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, motorized recreation, and horseback riding. Two-thirds of NRTs are federally managed, and the remainder are managed by a variety of nonfederal public and private entities, such as state governments and private foundations.

NRTs differ in physical characteristics (length, elevation, surface type), social characteristics (allowable uses, trail amenities), and management concerns (level of maintenance, signage). Most of the trails (63 percent) were designated National Recreation Trails between 1978 and 1981. It is time for a reevaluation of this lesser-known system.

### Methods

Some data on National Recreation Trails were available from the *Register of National Recreation Trails* (USDI-NPS 1993), including the name and



This paved nature trail located near Washington, DC, is one of 822 National Recreation Trails.

number of each trail, its designation date, seasons of use, and uses permitted. Uses were categorized as foot, bicycle, snowmobile, handicapped, water, horse, ski, interpretive, underground, and motorized. Trail surface types were categorized as asphalt, wood, natural or native material, or concrete. Finally, the register listed trail length, administering agency, and contact address.

A mail-back questionnaire was designed and administered to NRT managers using Dillman's (1978) total design method. Variables included in the instrument were types of uses, surface types, challenges most often experienced by NRT managers (Chase 1987; Pettit and Pontes 1987; Jacoby 1990; Tilmant 1991; Watson et al. 1991; Chavez et al. 1993; Moore 1994; Chavez 1996a) and management techniques used (Chavez 1996b, 1997). Also included were questions about the managers such as gender, age, level and type of education, and length of employment in recreation management and in NRT management.

Of 822 NRT managers, 512 completed and returned questionnaires, for a response rate of 62 percent. Using the *Register of National Recreation Trails* (USDI-NPS 1993) we compared respondents to nonrespon-

dents on several variables and found no significant differences.

#### Use of NRTs

The managers reported that hiking and walking were by far the most popular activities on National Recreation Trails (80 percent), and for some (14 percent) hiking and walking constituted all of their NRT use.

Twenty-five percent reported their trails were used for interpretation or nature walks. Slightly fewer reported use by equestrians (22 percent) or mountain bikers (21 percent). (Note that these are not exclusive categories; some trails are used for more than one activity.)

A large majority of managers reported no use in any of the following activity categories: water-based activities (96 percent), in-line skating (93 percent), motorized use (93 percent), and snowmobiling (92 percent).

#### Conflicts on Multiple-Use Trails

To understand how social conflicts might occur on NRTs requires some background on the allowable uses on those trails. Half of the NRTs allowed nonmotorized single use, and almost as many (39 percent) allowed nonmotorized diversified use (for example, they allowed hikers and equestrians). Few

trails allowed a mixture of nonmotorized and motorized use (8 percent) and even fewer were designated for only motorized single use or motorized diversified use (2 percent).

Regardless of trail type (single or multiple use), there were few reports of social conflicts (*table 1, p. 42*). When looking at all trails, most social conflicts were between pedestrians and other groups; looking at only the trails that allowed multiple use, most conflicts were between bikers and other groups. The relatively low number of conflicts may result from two factors: most trails had no portion of their trail in urban areas (88 percent) and many trails were single use (50 percent). NRTs are prevalent in rural areas, despite the NTSA criterion that trails be "reasonably accessible to urban areas" (NTSA; P.L. 90-543, Section 4).

There was a relationship between surface type and social conflicts as suggested by previous research (Gobster 1995). Trails that were asphalt or partly asphalt had slightly higher levels of social conflict than nonasphalt trails (25 percent compared to 17 percent), possibly because most asphalt trails are located in urban areas and get more use.

Issues of more significance to the trail managers were related to safety and resource damage. Although safety



Christine DeMarco

**This National Recreation Trail, formerly the Washington and Old Dominion (W&OD) railroad tracks, stretches for miles into rural Virginia. The section shown here runs through suburban Vienna, Virginia, posing a distinctly urban challenge to users—dodging traffic.**

was considered the most important management issue (80 percent ranked it first or second in a list that included safety, accidents, user conflicts, and resource damage), the most frequently cited problem was resource damage (using the same list, 25 percent reported that it occurred frequently or often). This latter problem was not tied to the number of times trails received maintenance, although nearly one-quarter (21 percent) reported no maintenance of their trails and 28 percent reported maintenance occurred only once a year.

### Knowledge and Awareness

Most NRT managers were men (72 percent) in their forties (mean age = 42.8) with fewer than 10 years managing the NRTs (mean = 8). Most managers held a BA or BS degree (44 per-

cent), several had a master's degree (14 percent), and a few had earned a doctorate (2 percent). By far the greatest percentage of survey respondents (43 percent) worked for the USDA Forest Service, followed by municipal parks and recreation departments (12 percent), state governments (9 percent), the National Park System (6 percent), US Army Corps of Engineers (6 percent), and USDI Bureau of Land Management (3 percent), as well as private companies, universities, and foundations.

One rationale for NRT designation offered in the 1968 Act was that it would convey some prestige to the trails, which would result in favorable publicity, community benefits, and added protection. However, the present study shows that most of the managers have little knowledge about

NRTs, and many were not even aware that a trail they managed carried the NRT designation. A few typical comments were: "We haven't been able to locate this trail." "We've talked to a lot of people, and they didn't know anything about the trail." "No one has heard of this trail." "There are very few people around anymore who know anything about it."

The latter statement may help explain the lack of awareness by managers. About 80 percent of the trails were designated before 1982, whereas most of the NRT managers started in their positions after 1988. Apparently there is little institutional memory about these trails, as most managers learned about them in the course of this study. Only one manager mentioned that he had used the NRT designation, to form partnerships to assist with trail upkeep.

Another potentially critical issue was the closure of NRTs. From two managers we heard the following: "The trails at this park are no longer available to the general public" and "Plans are to remove these trails in the near future."

In all, we found that 6 NRTs were closed, though their names still appeared in the *Register of National Recreation Trails* (USDI-NPS 1993). Another 15 were "no longer managed as National Recreation Trails" despite the fact that there are no management guidelines to follow once a trail has been designated an NRT.

### Conclusions

NRT managers reported few social conflicts but had concerns about safety and resource damage. Although many NRTs offered myriad recreational opportunities, some had been closed to use by the general public and others may be closed in the near future. Many of those that remain are open to single or multiple nonmotorized use. Few managers were aware that they managed a trail designated as an NRT or had used the designation to their advantage.

Awareness of NRTs can be easily remedied; indeed, awareness was raised simply by our survey instrument. Only one manager mentioned

**Table 1. Top five conflicting uses among respondents on National Recreation Trails, as reported by trail managers.**

Use of Trail	Frequency	Multiple-Use Trails
Recreation—other or dog	20%	20%
Recreation—mountain biking	15%	15%
Recreation—other trails	15%	15%
Number of people—through trail	10%	10%
Recreation—overstated	10%	10%

how he used the NRT designation to his advantage, by forming partnerships. Although partnerships are not panaceas, there are characteristics of partnerships (Selin and Chavez 1993, 1994) that could be used successfully by all NRT managers.

The time is right for a formal review of the NRTs by the agencies overseeing them, particularly to address awareness and issues of concern to managers. Such a review was recently initiated by the National Recreation Trails Revitalization Roundtable, a group composed of representatives from American Trails, American Hiking Society, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, and others, as well as federal land management agencies such as the National Park Service. At this time no additional trails are being designated as NRTs although this is expected to change in the near future. In fact, the review is likely to produce a streamlined application process. In addition, efforts are under way to develop a website for NRT information which should result in more knowledgeable

managers and users. Together, these efforts may help revitalize National Recreation Trails.

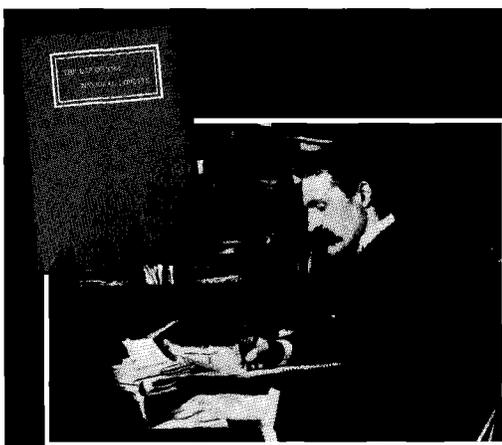
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