

The National Trails System: What It Is And How It Came To Be

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In April 1965, the secretary of the interior directed the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation to take the lead in conducting a nationwide trails study. This was in response to President Johnson's "Natural Beauty" message Feb. 8, 1965, in which he called for development and protection of a balanced system of trails -- in the nation's metropolitan areas as well as in the countryside - in cooperation with state and local government and private interests. In part, the president said: "We can and should have an abundance of trails for walking, cycling, and horseback riding, in and close to our cities. In the backcountry we need to copy the great Appalachian Trail in all parts of America."

This need for trails as well as other types of recreation facilities was clearly visible in the post-war boom in recreation participation. In a survey conducted in 1960 for the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, created to assess this need, walking for pleasure ranked second among all recreation activities.

Trails for America

The nationwide trails study led to publication of a report in December 1966, entitled "Trails for America." The report called for federal legislation to foster the creation of a nationwide system of trails. In fact, earlier that year the secretary of the interior had already proposed legislation to the Congress to accomplish this. The report and the legislation proposed three categories of trails for the nationwide system - national scenic trails and two other categories that were different from what eventually came to pass. The report heavily emphasized national scenic trails and the role that they should play in meeting the nation's needs for trail recreation. The Appalachian Trail was to be the first national scenic trail. The report proposed three other national scenic trails - Pacific Crest, Continental Divide, and Potomac Heritage - and identified five other routes that exhibited high potential - Lewis and Clark, Oregon, Santa Fe, Natchez Trace, and North Country.

With input from the public and private interests, Congress spent two years working on the national trails legislation. Finally, Congress passed the National Trails System Act and the president signed it into law on Oct. 2, 1968. The act established two national scenic trails - the Appalachian and the Pacific Crest - and called for studies of 14 other routes. It also established two other categories of trails in the national system - national recreation trails and connecting or side trails. Overall administration of the system is the responsibility of the secretary of the interior. Some authorities in the act, however, are shared with the secretary of agriculture.

National Scenic and Historic Trails

As envisioned in "Trails for America," national scenic trails are to be very special trail: "A standard for excellence in the routing, construction, maintenance, and marking consistent with each trail's character and purpose should distinguish all national scenic trails. Each should stand out in its own right as a recreation resource of superlative quality and of physical challenge." According to the act, national scenic trails "will be extended trails so located as to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, and cultural qualities of the area through which such trails may pass." "Extended trails" was defined in a 1983 amendment to mean at least 100 miles long. National scenic trails are to be land-based (i.e. not water routes) and generally are to be continuous. However, the 1983 amendments provide that studies of potential national scenic trails may conclude that it is feasible to propose one or more trail segments that together are 100 miles long.

The act provides that only Congress can authorize the establishment of a national scenic trail. Overall administration is assigned to either the secretary of the interior or the secretary of agriculture, each of whom assigns the responsibility to a particular agency within their department. The act directs these agencies to encourage state and local governments, private organizations, and landowners to become actively involved in the development and management of segments of the trails.

The original 14 studies of potential national scenic trails, plus others since 1968, have been completed. Today, there are eight national scenic trails in various stages of development. Only the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails are nearly complete.

The studies of several of the historic routes of our nation concluded that it was not feasible to establish them as national scenic trails (i.e., continuous, land-based trails). However, because of their importance to our nation's history, many people felt something should be done to preserve, mark, and commemorate them. In 1978 Congress amended the National Trails Systems Act to create the category of national historic trails. At the same time, it designated the Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, Lewis and Clark, and Iditarod (Alaska Gold Rush) trails as national historic trails.

Like national scenic trails, national historic trails can only be authorized by Congress and are assigned to either the secretary of the interior or the secretary of agriculture with most of the same administrative authorities as for national scenic trails. To qualify as a national historic trail, a route must have been established by historic use. It must be nationally significant as a result of that use, i.e., it must have had a far-reaching effect on broad patterns of American culture (including Native American culture). It must also have significant potential for public recreational use or historic interest based on historic interpretation and appreciation.

Unlike national scenic trail, national historic trails can include water routes. The Lewis and Clark National historic Trail, for example, is primarily composed of the Missouri and Columbia rivers and their tributaries because the expedition actually traveled these routes. National historic trails can also include highways that follow or parallel the historic route and are marked for travel by automobile. Thus, a national historic trail may not always be the same as the actual historic route. It is a linear network of historic and recreation sites that preserve and commemorate the trail and that are connected by various types of routes (land and water trails and highways) providing for retracement or approximate retracement of the historic route.

Today, there are eight national historic trails.

National Recreation Trails

The category of national recreation trails is designed primarily to incorporate trails in and near cities into the National Trails System. Trails in federal and state park and forest areas or on private lands away from cities may also become national recreation trails.

National recreation trails may be in a variety of locations, including some that might not be considered scenic. Unlike national scenic trails, there is no minimum length and they may be open to motorized use if permitted by the manager of the trail. National recreation trails are designed by the secretary of the interior or, where national forest lands are involved, by the secretary of agriculture. Applications for designation are prepared and submitted by the agency, organization, or individual owning or managing the trail. The process established to designate national recreation trails does not necessarily further the development of new trails, since only trails that already exist may be designated. However, the national recognition that accompanies designation often leads to greater community/public support for trails and their development.

Today, there are more than 770 national recreation trails totaling more than 8,400 miles administered by federal, state, and local agencies; private organizations; and corporations.

Connecting Trails

Connecting or side trails are intended to provide additional points of public access to national scenic, historic, or recreation trails; access from such trails to nearby points of interest; or connections between such trails. They may be designated by the secretary of the interior or the secretary of agriculture upon application from the administrator of the trails.

There are no specifications in the National Trails System Act describing where a connecting or side trail may be located, what uses may be permitted, etc., nor have any supplementary descriptive information, guidelines, or criteria ever been promulgated. Perhaps it is because of this vagueness that the category has remained unused. No connecting or side trail has ever been designated. Another reason may be the fact that any such trail could generally just as easily (or more so) be designated a national recreation trail.

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