

**Trailblazing Towards the Centennial**  
***Notes on A Strategy for Trails in the National Park Service***



**February 2008**

**To: National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program**

**From: Volpe Center  
U.S. Department of Transportation**

## Purpose of this document

*Trails are an important component of the national park system, and are of growing significance to the nation: as a resource for healthy recreation, a means of active transportation, and for the economic benefits they generate. According to the Outdoor Industry Foundation report, “The Next Generation of Outdoor Participants—2007,” trail uses are the biggest gateway activities introducing millions of Americans to active outdoor lifestyles.*

As the National Park Service (NPS) approaches its centennial in 2016, one specific commitment of the President’s Centennial Initiative is that NPS will “rehabilitate over 2,000 miles of trails within or connected to national parks, including trails accessible to those with disabilities.” As the National Trails System Act celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2008, and in order to meet the centennial commitment, and to address the other trails issues and opportunities NPS currently faces, a national trails strategy is needed.

This document:

- **Lays out the challenges, issues, and opportunities NPS currently faces with respect to trails.** Because of a historically divided administrative structure, with different agencies and offices sharing overlapping jurisdictions, the operation, management, and stewardship of national trails is fragmented. Trails policy and inventory are uncoordinated, there is a disorganized priority-setting system for trails investments, and a lack of clear communications about who is responsible for what contributes to public confusion and, possibly, undermines public understanding of and support for trails. This arrangement is not deliberate, but has evolved over time as new offices and programs have been established.
- **Identifies who needs to be involved in developing, implementing, and supporting a national trails strategy.**
- **Outlines a strategy for NPS trails, including fulfillment of the Centennial commitment and recognition of the 40th anniversary of the National Trails System Act.**
- **Highlights action items and next steps for moving forward.**
- **Lists potential funding sources for trails.**
- **Recaps exemplary trails success stories.** Lessons learned from these successes can be applied to future trails projects.

*Note: This paper was prepared by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) Volpe Center as an exercise in program analysis and development. All notes and recommendations are for consideration only, and do not constitute statements of DOT policy.*

### *Why trails are highly valued*

A healthy network of NPS trails, and other trails, helps create and link to livable communities, encourages outdoor recreation, attracts visitors, and improves overall quality-of-life. In addition, trails play an integral role in each of the five themes of the NPS Centennial Initiative:

- **Stewardship.** Trails encourage conservation, especially among children, and they empower communities to claim ownership of their national parks.
- **Environmental Leadership.** Trails provide an alternative to automobile use, leading to decreased congestion and air pollution.
- **Recreational Experience.** Trails promote exercise and healthy life habits, and provide opportunities for family interaction in a safe, outdoor setting close to home.
- **Education.** Trails exist as “outdoor classrooms” where people of all ages can learn about their surroundings and the importance of community service.
- **Professional Excellence.** Trails bring considerable economic opportunities to local communities and businesses through eco-tourism.

Focusing on trails will also help to meet the four recreation-based pledges of the Centennial Initiative:

- ❖ Encourage collaboration among and assist park and recreation systems at every level—federal, regional, state, local—to help build an outdoor recreation network accessible to all Americans.
- ❖ Establish “volun-tourism” excursions to national parks for volunteers to help achieve natural and cultural resource protection goals.
- ❖ Expand partnerships with schools and boys and girls associations to show how national park experiences can improve children’s lives.
- ❖ Focus national, regional, and local tourism efforts to reach diverse audiences and young people and to attract visitors to lesser-known parks.

## Challenges in developing a national trails strategy

*Because of a historically divided administrative structure, with different agencies and offices sharing overlapping jurisdictions, the operation, management, and stewardship of national trails is fragmented. Trails policy and inventory are uncoordinated, there is a disorganized priority-setting system for trails investments, and a lack of clear communications about who is responsible for what contributes to public confusion and, possibly, undermines public support for trails.*

### ***The central issue: lack of coordination***

Over the past few decades, several trails programs and offices have been created. At the time of their creation, each program or office was intended to focus on a particular area.

- ❖ **Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program.** RTCA does not provide capital funding for trails projects, but serves as a source of coordination, knowledge, facilitation, and technical expertise to communities and parks. Staff are well versed in all state, federal and private funding sources available as well as skilled community organizers.
- ❖ **Park Facility Management Division (PFMD).** This office is responsible for major NPS capital investment and maintenance programs, including the Park Roads and Parkways Program, which spends hundreds of millions of dollars every year. Trails projects may be eligible for these types of PFMD funds in some cases. However, one major area of emphasis within PFMD is addressing NPS's significant maintenance backlog, and reversing the effects of years of deferred maintenance.
- ❖ **Long Distance Trails Program.** National Historic and Scenic Trails are overseen by the Long Distance Trails Program. They are administered by their own program offices. Some, but not all, are part of the NPS. The Appalachian Trail is unique in being considered a unit of the NPS system.
- ❖ **External (non-NPS) organizations.** Federal agencies (such as the Federal Highway Administration), state and local agencies, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector play significant roles in trail administration, management, stewardship both within and outside parks.

Over time, as federal involvement in trails has expanded, the remits of each of these programs and offices has widened, so that they now overlap, or are perceived to overlap. With the many different people and agencies involved in trails, and no single point of entry for trails issues nationally, it can often be difficult to understand who is responsible for what, and by which processes work is done.

Given this administrative structure, how can a national trails strategy be developed and implemented? This paper focuses not on program reorganization, or in attempting to centralize trails policy or management, but on attempting to coordinate between programs and offices: sharing information, collaborating on policy, and working together to communicate clearly within and without NPS—to agency decisionmakers, to Congress, to stakeholders, and to the public.

## *Current challenges*

Because of the lack of coordination on trails, there are several major challenges in developing a national trails strategy.

### **Uncoordinated trails inventory**

Many different kinds of trails exist, according to users and purposes, but there is no easily accessible, coordinated inventory of all of them. Such an inventory would enable better decision-making by allowing priorities to be set within a more complete context.

- ❖ *Trails within parks.* Individual park units often contain many miles of trails, either paved or unpaved serving recreation, transportation and interpretive purposes. These are not necessarily recorded consistently in regional or national inventories. Many trails serve multiple functions and cross many jurisdictions.
- ❖ *Trails connecting parks to communities.* Trails that extend outside park borders may be owned or maintained (or both) by other governments, organizations, or private landowners. Including them in a central inventory would facilitate the creation of a much more accurate picture of how trails contribute to connectivity. The NPS Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program supports some but not all of these kinds of trails.
- ❖ *Designated National Trails, including National Historic and Scenic Trails.* These trails are part of the “National Trails System”—created by the National Trails System Act of 1968. Within NPS, designated long-distance trails are administered separately from parks and the RTCA program. Most are **not** designated as national park units, although many have a close association or actually pass through park units. In addition, National Recreation Trails are part of the National Trails System, and are designated by the Secretary of the Interior. Most of the 2,000 trails are administered by state and local government or other federal land management agencies, such as the U.S. Forest Service. The non-profit organization American Trails plays a leadership role in supporting the National Recreation Trails system.

### **Lack of a consistent NPS national trails policy**

There is no single NPS national trails policy, nor a set of internally consistent management policies from the various agencies, offices, and other groups involved with trails. Without clearly defined goals, there is no master vision guiding the development of or investment in trails, and no overall structure that can provide a strong explanation or justification for trails investments at all. A comprehensive set of policies pertaining to National Historic and Scenic Trails has been drafted (NPS Director’s Order 45), but never approved.

### **Disorganized prioritization and management systems for trails investments**

Currently, potential trails projects are developed in an entirely decentralized, “bottom-up” fashion: individual applicants put together project packages on an ad-hoc basis, tied to specific program eligibility criteria and funding schedules. Such projects are not necessarily developed according to any regional or national priorities, and there are rarely safeguards in place to ensure that real needs—and not just a series of funding opportunities—are being effectively addressed. The best *applications*, not necessarily the best *projects*, receive funding, and funding is often coordinated neither between programs

nor even between projects. There is a need to reconcile, or harmonize, the various NPS budget categories from which trails projects can be funded: resource planning, rivers/trails planning, RTCA, and the National Trails System.

**Fragmented approach to stewardship; internal and external confusion**

There are often conflicts between trails user groups, and the fact that there are a multiplicity of both NPS and non-NPS trails—for which responsibility is sometimes unclear—creates additional confusion, both among management agencies and among the public. The various phrases and designations involving the word “trails” (“National Trails System,” “National Recreation Trails,” “National Scenic and Historic Trails,” “NPS trails,” just the word “trails” by itself, and all the programs and advocacy groups that include that word in their names) are often hard to differentiate.

**Bottom line: unsustainability on present trends**

Lack of agreement on a consistent set of national policies and a process to coordinate trails projects results in inefficient decision-making, inconsistent policy execution, fragmented capabilities and staff capacity, and strained relationships with partners, both public and private. If the present situation continues, a great deal of time, money, effort, and goodwill may be wasted, and trails advancement opportunities may pass by.

## Recommendations: concept for a national strategy for trails

*The centerpiece of the concept to move forward with a national strategy for trails is the establishment of an NPS Trails Task Force, initially led by the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program, in connection with the 40th anniversary, in 2008, of the National Trails System Act.*

This paper can be shared with key players: national and regional program leaders. If there is sufficient buy-in for the recommendations, a conference call can be arranged to discuss how to proceed to establish a national Trails Task Force (TTF). The TTF can be modeled on the task force recently established for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Program.

It is not necessary that any current agencies or offices cede any of their current jurisdiction or authorities in order to achieve the above. *Coordination*, not *centralization*, is the most important factor. The TTF can be a useful coordinating mechanism—not an overriding executive.

### *Action items*

1. **Internal coordination.** All of the agencies and offices involved in the operations, management, and stewardship of trails—via the TTF—should begin to coordinate. The following information should be inventoried and reconciled, with the goal of having clear, consistent information at hand, in an agreed-upon standard format, for agency decisionmaking, policy formulation, and internal and external communications:
  - ❖ Agency/office descriptions: mission, jurisdiction, financing, contact information.
  - ❖ Agency/office policies/policy goals. Major issues faced.
  - ❖ Trails data: inventory (including maps/GIS), condition, and ownership/jurisdiction.
  - ❖ Relevant trails legislation, regulations, etc.
  - ❖ Relevant trails funding: federal programs; other funding sources. Project eligibility.
  - ❖ Partnerships: existing and potential, including affiliated stakeholder groups.
  
2. **Meet the goals of the Centennial Initiative.** The Centennial goal of rehabilitating 2,000 miles of trails must be clearly enumerated, so that more detailed criteria can be used to determine which trails projects are the highest priorities: that is, which projects will best help NPS meet its goal. A clearly defined approach is needed.
  - ❖ *Context.* TTF goals should be expressed in the context of the mission and other ongoing activities of NPS. For instance, asset management is a significant activity within NPS; it aims to ensure that capital and maintenance funds for facilities and infrastructure are being used most effectively. How can the goals of asset management be reconciled with other goals—such as preserving resources and providing an enjoyable visitor experience—with respect to trails? What lessons learned and/or best practices for trails already exist that can be used for the TTF?

- ❖ *Criteria.* Factors such as agency goals, performance measurement, changing demographics, census data, usage, connectivity to communities, urban/rural balance, and stakeholder and public input can serve as a basis for criteria upon which trail needs will be determined.
- ❖ *Needs.* Based on a thorough regional evaluation of specific trail needs for each individual trails project, NPS can properly evaluate applications for funding, and can target funding sources that are tied directly to particular needs.

**3. Establish annual work program.** With more specific objectives identified, and overlapping trails jurisdictions coordinated, a process can be established for evaluating potential trails projects and matching them with appropriate sources of technical expertise, community support, and funding. Such a structure would ensure an orderly consideration of all trails ideas.

- ❖ *Guidance.* Materials must be created to distribute to potential park, state, and local/community applicants who wish to advance trails projects, explaining the goals of the TTF and the process by which projects will be evaluated. A Request for Proposals mechanism can be used to ensure that all proposed projects are considered fairly and on an equal basis.
- ❖ *Targets.* Year-by-year targets must be established beginning with FY 2008 and extending through FY 2016 that reflect tangible, achievable goals throughout this process. Targets can include measures such as: overall mileage improved, increased accessibility, projects by state, by park size, by surrounding urbanization, by visitation, by project scale, etc.
- ❖ *Evaluation: identification and prioritization.* Utilizing the TTF trails criteria, NPS and its partners, as appropriate, can identify and prioritize trails that are the most suitable candidates for rehabilitation.
- ❖ *Funding.* Federal, state, local, private, and non-profit sources all offer various channels through which NPS can match appropriate funding sources to trails projects. (See later in this document.)
- ❖ *Implementation.* Projects that receive funding can proceed to planning, design, and construction activities.
- ❖ *Evaluation: lessons learned.* Projects that are implemented should be reviewed and monitored: did they work? What worked best? What can be learned for future projects? A database should be created and maintained, so that an ongoing knowledge base will help to advance the state of the practice.
- ❖ *Refinements.* The process itself can be improved as a result of what is learned from trails project successes.

## *Benefits of coordination*

If a national trails strategy can be developed, and the programs and offices involved in trails can coordinate, the potential benefits are many, and include:

- ❖ *Better planning and prioritization system for trails projects.* With a better-integrated planning and prioritization methodology, real needs, and genuinely high priorities, can be addressed first, and funds and efforts targeted accordingly, at projects that can make the most impact. Instead of the current system, which relies on the best applications or the most persistent applicants seeking funds on a program-by-program basis, a regional or even national means of planning and prioritization will allow for better phasing of and coordination between projects, especially different types of projects, involving different jurisdictions. The various trails management agencies will be able to collaborate, and to consider trails needs as a whole, rather than agency-by-agency. With this could come a much greater understanding of the entire planning process, creating a level of transparency that may allow for more (and more meaningful) partner and public involvement in identifying, developing, selecting, and implementing projects—and less contention about how, why, and which projects are funded.
- ❖ *More effective use of public funds.* The current “crazy quilt” of federal, state, and local funds, for which coordination is the exception rather than the rule, could be replaced by a more integrated scheme, as part of which all potential funding sources are considered as a whole, so that the most effective use may be made of them—in terms of eligibility, availability, amount, administration, and timing. Better coordination of public funds may also allow for the more effective deployment of private funds.
- ❖ *Seamless public use, and superior public understanding of trails.* As internal coordination improves, external coordination can follow suit. Better, more consistent external guidance can be made available that more clearly, and more holistically, explains the various types of trails that now exist, their features and characteristics, and the way they are managed and maintained. The different trails agencies and programs can work together to inform their audiences, supporting each other in their outreach and education. A single “portal” can be created, so that a trails user, by learning about one trail, has a way to tie into the rest of the national trails network, and can learn about *all* trails everywhere. This has the potential to greatly enhance public understanding of trails, which in turn can lead to significant increases in both the use of and the support for trails.

## Appendix 1: Potential trails funding opportunities

*The Centennial Initiative, which may bring up to \$3 billion in new public and private investment over the 10 years leading up to 2016, can provide funding for achieving NPS trail goals. However, other appropriate funding sources may also be brought to bear.*

Even if realized in full, Centennial funding will be insufficient to achieve all of the goals and projects of the NPS trails strategy. NPS can help bridge this gap by seeking out and fully utilizing the many and varied funding mechanisms already in place, including those described below.

- **Recreational Trails Program (RTP).** This program currently provides about \$75 million per year to the states for recreational trails. NPS can, does, and should continue to work with local and state trails groups to increase awareness at the state level for projects that might be candidates for RTP funding.
- **Transportation Enhancements (TE).** This funding stream is for federally funded, community-based projects that expand travel choices and improve transportation infrastructure. TE allocates more funding than RTP and includes several categories that could lend themselves to trails projects. One such category is Rail-Trails, which provides funding to convert rail corridors to trails. Converted rail corridors make ideal trails because of their flat grade, long length, intact right-of-way, and few street crossings. Another category is Pedestrian and Bicycle Facilities, under which new or reconstructed off-road trails is an eligible activity. The 42-mile Suncoast Trail on Florida's Gulf Coast links neighborhoods, schools, and an 8,000-acre wilderness park. Construction for the trail was made possible with \$3.2 million in Enhancements funds. All Enhancements projects must serve a transportation function, and trails, particularly those that connect national parks to local gateway communities, provide many benefits from a transportation perspective.
- **Alternative Transportation in Parks and Public Lands (ATPPL).** This new program, administered jointly by the Department of the Interior (including NPS) and the Federal Transit Administration, allocates roughly \$20 million annually for alternative transportation projects. The \$165,000 received in 2006 by NPS for bus connections to day use trails at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks serves as an example of how this funding source can best be used. However, most project funding awarded during FY 2006-07 did not go to trails projects; the suitability of such projects within the ATPPL program is a topic of ongoing discussion between FTA and NPS.
- **Park Roads and Parkways (PRP).** Trail improvements were part of 49 PRP projects from FY 2005 through FY 2007.
- **NPS Recreation Fee Program.** This is currently the major internal funding source for trail work.\* With the recent passage of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), at least 80 percent of recreation enhancement fees collected will remain at local NPS sites for various uses, potentially including trails enhancements. NPS can

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\* NPS FLHP PRP PowerPoint presentation, Washington, DC, March 12, 2007, Slide 10.

work within the guidelines of FLREA to ensure it is adequately collecting national-park trail user fees and that those fees are properly put back into the trails system.

- **NPS Repair and Rehabilitation Program.** “Trail rehabilitation” qualifies as a suitable project-type under this program, which is coordinated by NPS regional offices.\* Each regional office could prioritize their trail needs and determine which of their trails are in “poor” condition, thus increasing their likelihood for rehabilitation funding.
- **NPS “Connect Trails to Parks—Enhance the National Trails System” Initiative.** The FY 2008 White House funding request may provide \$850,000 for signage to better link park areas to nearby national historic and scenic trails. These funds exemplify the growing interest in sharing the history of the National Trails System in advance of the 50th Anniversary of the National Trails System Act in 2018.
- **State Funds.** Through inclusion in State Transportation Improvement Programs (STIPs), as well as in state and regional trail and greenway plans, NPS can partner with local stewards of individual parks, especially those that are of historical and economic importance to any particular state.
- **Foundations, Conservancies, Non-Profit Groups.** In addition to the aforementioned park and trail groups, many additional organizations in the areas of public health, bicycle and pedestrian advocacy, and environmental conservation have an interest in strengthening our national trail system.

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\* NPS FY08 Greenbook, [http://home.nps.gov/applications/budgetweb/downloads/fy\\_2008\\_greenbook.pdf](http://home.nps.gov/applications/budgetweb/downloads/fy_2008_greenbook.pdf), pg. ONPS-106.

## **Appendix 2: Existing successes and future opportunities for trails enhancement**

*The May 2007 document “The Future of America’s National Parks” lists potential actions and examples toward achieving the 2,000-mile Centennial goal, such as rehabilitating the last section of the towpath at Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park so hikers and bikers can traverse its 185-mile length; rehabilitating trails at Mount Rainier National Park; and creating trails to provide visitors access to the natural and cultural resources and history at Mount Rushmore National Memorial.*

However, a more comprehensive national strategy will ensure that NPS, both internally and with its partners, has the capability to administer a coordinated, effective trails program, and will ultimately help the best trails projects to move forward in development and implementation. Several national parks have already placed trails at the forefront of their agendas. Though much work remains to be done, at these parks and many others, the following examples could serve as models for success in stewardship, partnership, and community involvement that can and should be replicated throughout the National Park System.

### **Grand Teton National Park**

The town of Jackson, Wyoming is a bustling tourism destination attracting 2.5 million visitors each year. Though separated from Grand Teton National Park (GTNP) by a mere four miles, currently there is no public transportation or trail connecting the town to the park. Continuing efforts are ongoing, led by the non-profit organization Friends of Pathways, to complete this critical link.

The recently adopted GTNP Transportation Plan authorizes 41.3 miles of multi-use pathway construction extending to the southern edge of the park closest to Jackson. Meanwhile, Jackson has begun the planning and construction of an “Education Pathway” through the town’s many federal land management agency visitor centers. Included as a focal point in the County Pathways Vision, created by Jackson Hole Community Pathways, is a shared-use community pathway for non-motorized travel that will ultimately connect GTNP to the pathways in Jackson.

### **Golden Gate National Park—“Trails Forever”**

Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) contains some of the most heavily utilized national-park properties and trails in America. GGNRA is the largest contiguous federal land along the California coast, which stretches from Oregon to Mexico. Since much of this land was once used for military and other purposes, many trails are poorly located without a notable “destination,” and erosion has become a major issue. The Golden Gate National Park Conservancy began the “Trails Forever” initiative in 2003 to rehabilitate 60 miles of trails in order to build a world class trail system and protect park resources north and south of the Golden Gate.

Since much of GGRNA abuts densely populated areas, a signature element of Trails Forever is to restore connections to gateway communities that are not cognizant of the NPS presence in the Bay Area. Over 4,000 volunteers are involved in community engagement activities, including the Richmond County YMCA Community Trailhead Pilot

Project, which led to the installation of a trailhead sign at the YMCA modeled after NPS orientation kiosks.

### **Everglades National Park**

The Everglades Trail is a 99-mile connection from the Kissimmee River all the way to Biscayne Bay, connecting over 20 local, state, federal, and private conservation sites. The Trail project was initiated by local conservation groups and has since garnered the support of the Office of Greenways and Trails, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Visit Florida, and the participation of many state and federal agencies, including NPS.