



Partnership for the National Trails System

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PARTNERSHIP FOR THE NATIONAL TRAILS SYSTEM POLICY ON APPROPRIATE USES OF NATIONAL SCENIC AND NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAILS

Issue: Appropriate uses of National Scenic and National Historic Trails.

Background: Since the passage of the National Trails System Act in 1968, Congress has designated 30 national scenic trails and national historic trails. Each of these national scenic and national historic trails has its own legislative history, is managed in accordance with its own management framework, and provides its own unique opportunities for outdoor recreational experiences to the public.

This panoply of experiences provided by national scenic and national historic trails is due in part to geography and resource conditions unique to each trail, and in part to the culture in which each trail was created. The types of intended uses provided on different national scenic trails covers a broad spectrum of non-motorized trail uses, include hiking, snowshoeing, skiing, horseback riding and stock packing, and bicycling. Different national historic trails provide for different modes of land- and water-based transport, depending on the modes of transportation best suited for travel between various sites and segments along a particular historic trail.

Recreational uses appropriate on some trails may not be appropriate on others. For example, the policy of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy states that: “The Appalachian Trail is, first and foremost, a footpath open to any and all who travel on foot. Its sole purpose as a recreational resource is to provide an opportunity for travel on foot through the wild, scenic, pastoral, and culturally significant lands of the Appalachian Mountains. Except in isolated instances where historically recognized nonconforming uses are allowed by legislative authority, the footpath of the Appalachian Trail should not be used for any other purpose... Other recreational uses (of Trail lands) should be considered compatible if they do not require modifications of design and construction standards for the Trail footpath or facilities; cause damage to the treadway or Trail facilities; require an engine or motor; or adversely affect the Trail experience or the cultural, natural, or scenic resources of the Trail.”

The Pacific Crest Trail Association’s policy for management of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, encourages hiking and horseback riding, but not mechanized or motorized uses. The Association supports the USDA Forest Service’s long-standing Regional Order prohibiting bicycle use on the PCT, which was recently re-affirmed by the USDA Forest Service as being “consistent with the legislation, regulations, directives, the recommendations of the PCT Advisory Council, and the PCT Comprehensive Plan.”

At the other end of the spectrum, the Arizona National Scenic Trail is used widely by hikers, horseback riders, and bicyclists. The mission of the Arizona Trail Association is to “build, maintain, promote, protect, and sustain the Arizona Trail as a unique encounter with the land.” The Association interprets this mission as seeking to minimize conflicts among trail users and encourage harmony between hikers,

mountain bikers, and equestrians. The Association states that “(t)he Arizona National Scenic Trail is one of the only National Scenic Trails in the country that encourages mountain bikers to enjoy the

adventurous route spanning from border to border. Much of the trail design was accomplished with consultation from mountain bikers; the trail was built to International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) specifications, and many of the volunteers who helped build the trail were members of the mountain biking community. While mountain bikers are encouraged to explore and enjoy the Arizona Trail, there are a number of segments that are off limits due to wilderness restrictions.”

Other National Scenic Trails provide for multiple non-motorized recreational uses in varying degrees, from the New England and Ice Age National Scenic Trails, which aspire to be hiking-only trails, with horseback and bicycle use along some individual segments; to the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, which is managed primarily for hiking and horseback riding but which may allow other uses that do not substantially interfere with the nature and purposes of the trail in some areas; to the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail, which is open to hikers and horseback riders and is accepting increased bicycle use on some segments that are not in designated wilderness or national parks; to the Florida, North Country, and Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trails, which provide for horseback and bicycle use on sections of trail that are co-aligned with rail trails and roads.

National Historic Trails are inherently different, in that they are designed to be “extended trails which follow as closely as possible and practicable the original trails or routes of travel of national historic significance. Designation of such trails or routes shall be continuous, but the established or developed trail, and the acquisition thereof, need not be continuous onsite. National historic trails shall have as their purpose the identification and protection of the historic route and its historic remnants and artifacts for public use and enjoyment.” The National Trails System Act refers to national historic trails with special emphasis on “high potential historic sites,” which are defined as “those historic sites related to the route, or sites in close proximity thereto, which provide opportunity to interpret the historic significance of the trail during the period of its major use,” and “high potential route segments,” which are defined as “those segments of a trail which would afford high quality recreation experience in a portion of the route having greater than average scenic values or affording an opportunity to vicariously share the experience of the original users of a historic route.”

Access to these sites and segments may be by auto or other appropriate mode of non-motorized or motorized transportation (for example, both dog sleds and snowmobiles may be permitted on the Iditarod National Historic Trail, and both sailboats and motorboats are permitted on the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail). “Auto tour routes,” which are identified in the Comprehensive Management Plans for some national historic trails, typically follow the approximate route of a trail along all-weather roads, providing access to trail sites and segments open to the public. In short, the “nature and purpose” of national historic trails is focused on the protection and interpretation of these historic resources, and not the mode of transportation for visitors.

Policy

It is the policy of the Partnership for the National Trails System to encourage each primary trail organization to work in partnership with its agency partners to develop policy guidance that carries out the nature and purposes for which the trail was authorized by Congress. This guidance should include specific reference to the types of uses that are considered appropriate on that specific trail, including, where necessary, criteria that define conditions under which other recreational uses may be permitted.

Appropriate recreational uses vary from national scenic or historic trail to national scenic or historic trail. Uses that may be appropriate on one national scenic or historic trail may not be appropriate on others. The Partnership for the National Trails System honors, respects, and supports the determination of uses appropriate for each national scenic and national historic trail made by the primary nonprofit organization in consultation with the federal agency responsible for that trail.

For national scenic trails, these types of appropriate uses may or may not include hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, or other forms of non-motorized recreational travel. The degree to which certain recreational uses may be considered appropriate should focus on the nature and purposes of that specific national scenic trail, as provided for and described in the legislative history and management direction for that trail, and the specific types of recreational experience and level of resource protection envisioned for that trail in the administrative history and traditions of that trail.

For national historic trails, motorized and mechanized modes of travel, as well as non-motorized and non-mechanized modes of travel, are permitted between segments and sites. However, any mode of travel or recreational activity may be prohibited at historic sites or on historic segments where such use may adversely affect historic resources or the public's enjoyment of those resources. The degree to which certain recreational uses may be considered appropriate should focus on the nature and purposes of that specific national historic trail, as provided for and described in the legislative history and management direction for that trail, and the specific types of recreational experience and level of resource protection envisioned for that trail in the administrative history and traditions of that trail.

The policy guidance of each primary trail organization should complement the Comprehensive Management Plan for that specific national scenic or historic trail and foster and encourage to the greatest extent possible consistent management along the length of the Trail across multiple jurisdictions.

Agency plans for each jurisdiction, whether Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state, or local jurisdiction, should reference and complement the Comprehensive Management Plan for that trail and provide for the nature and purposes for which the Trail was authorized.

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