

National Scenic and Historic Trails

What is a trail?

The commonly accepted definition of trail is a travel way established either through construction or use which is passable by at least one or more of the following, including but not limited to: foot traffic, stock, watercraft, bicycles, in-line skates, wheelchairs, cross-country skis, off-road recreation vehicles such as motorcycles, snowmobiles, ATVs, and four wheel drive vehicles.

What is a National Trail?

National Trails are officially established under the authorities of the National Trails System Act. There are several types:

National Scenic Trails are continuous trails over 100 miles long that provide outstanding non-motorized recreation opportunities.

National Historic Trails commemorate historic or pre-historic travel routes that are of significance to the entire Nation. To qualify for designation as a national historic trail, a trail must meet the following criteria:

- have been established by a historic use and have historical significance as a result of that use,
- have historic use of the trail that has had a far and reaching effect on broad patterns of American culture, and
- have significant potential for public recreational or historical interest.

A designated trail should generally follow the route of the historic trail but may deviate if necessary.

National Recreation Trails are regional and local trails recognized by the Secretaries of Agriculture or Interior that provide a variety of outdoor recreation uses that are accessible from urban areas.

What is the Federal role in National Trails management?

The National Trails System Act of 1968 made it Federal policy to recognize and promote trails by providing financial assistance, support of volunteers, and coordination with States and other authorities. As a result, eight National Scenic Trails and 15 National Historic Trails have been established by law. Over 800 national recreation trails have been recognized by the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior. In addition, other Federal laws support and fund trails programs.

Which Federal agencies are responsible for National Trails?

The Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and US Forest Service administers the National Scenic Trails and National Historic Trails. Several other agencies also have on the ground management responsibilities.

Who builds and manages National Trails?

Most trails in America are publicly managed. Most of the enduring ones, however, are supported by partnerships between agencies and concerned citizens. The Appalachian National Scenic Trail is a classic example of this type of partnership, where thousands of volunteers contribute hundreds of thousands of hours annually to keep the trail clear, safe, well-marked, and monitored. The largest national trails organization —the 75,000-member Rails-to-Trails Conservancy — linking citizen advocacy with State and county projects that have transformed over 10,000 miles of former rail beds to trails.

How can the public get involved in National Trails?

There are a number of volunteer opportunities associated with National Trails. For more information contact the local Bureau of Land Management office or the local volunteer organization for a specific National Trail.