The Resource Challenges of America's National Trails System (Session Summary)

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Participants included staff from Appalachian National Scenic Trail, Nez Perce National Historical Park, the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office, and Yosemite National Park. Even with this small sample of eight people, we covered a lot of ground.

The 23 national scenic and national historic trails, created under authority of the National Trails System Act (16 U.S. Code 1241–51), total almost 42,000 miles in combined length—at least three times the total trail mileage in all National Park Service (NPS) units. They link together hundreds of significant natural and cultural resources, at least 90 national forests, and 62 national park areas. Several examples of standard or innovative resource management were discussed.

For each trail, when first established, a comprehensive management plan (CMP) is written, similar to a park's general management plan (GMP). Many of these trail plans are over 20 years old, but have not been updated or revised. CMPs should include a comprehensive list of resources—especially those of high value that contribute to the trail's purpose. Often these inventories are incomplete, sketchy, and hard to update. For the national historic trails, these resources (often containing historic structures, trail ruts, etc.) are called "high potential sites and segments."

Only one trail so far has benefited from a full inventory of natural resources (completed 20 years after the CMP). Kent Schwarzkopf described how, over the past 10 years, at a cost of $260,000, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail has been inventoried across 14 states. Although the trail crosses several NPS areas and national forests, the survey also included the 260,000 acres acquired for the trail since 1978. Details of this inventory are outlined in the 1999 George Wright Society conference proceedings (Schwarzkopf and Buchanan 1999). Long-term success of this inventory process relies on volunteer monitors—generally from trail clubs along the route. This requires an on-going training program because monitor turnover is averaging 3–4 years. A parallel inventory of the Appalachian Trail's cultural resources is proving more difficult and costly.

One historic trail organization, the Oregon–California Trails Association, has a developed a five-class typology of historic trail condition (unaltered, used, verified, altered, and approximate) that is now being accepted on an interagency basis. This classification system is called MET (Mapping Emigrant Trails).

Group discussion was organized to address three fundamental questions:

What is Working Best for Protecting Significant Trail Resources?

- Comprehensive resource inventories are critical if significant trail resources are to be protected. (This can be a problem for a newly established trail where planning budgets can only afford cursory inventories. If CMPs can be seen as a compact among partners, commitment among those partners for top-quality resource inventories may help address this problem.)
- The recent cultural landscape report for the Nez Perce National Historical Park (perhaps the only one conducted so far for resources associated with a national trail) has been very helpful in setting priorities for protection and management.
- Natural and cultural resources should be inventoried separately because of the different approaches of each set of professional disciplines, yet merged into synthesized maps and management products to

show crosscutting interactions.

- Full-time trail staff are needed for an adequate commitment to resource management.
- A crisis or two to make people realize how vulnerable many of these trail resources are could prove helpful.

What are the Obstacles to More Effective Resource Protection?

- National trails may be "administered" by NPS, but on the ground "management" is often carried out by others. Resource management may be difficult in this two-level system.
- These trails often cover great distances, touching many states, and may not even be known or recognized by local communities along them. They are thin, without boundaries, and therefore, extremely vulnerable.
- Sometimes, just after a trail is established by Congress, threats appear, putting trail administrators in a crisis mode, rather than allowing them to accomplish long-term, proactive works, such a comprehensive resource monitoring.
- There is great variability from trail to trail in practical experience, support, resource conditions, resource threats, and partner capabilities.
- Partners, such as tribal groups, are nervous if increased visibility and promotion bring increased visitation, in turn raising threats to sacred sites.
- Trail budgets are small, so little research and few inventories are conducted.
- The identity of these trails is unclear within NPS (three are officially "units," the rest are not). Therefore many do not qualify for agency programs and funding sources.
- Partnerships are critical to the well-being of these trails, yet many of our partners are clueless about resource monitoring and the value of on-going training.
- Few yet recognize the trails themselves as "historic fabric," so they are vulnerable to re-enactments and other inappropriate uses.

How Can Success in Sister Programs in Natural and Cultural Resource Management be Extended to National Trails?

- GIS (geographic information systems) offers tremendous promise to synthesize resource information for each trail and the National Trails System as a whole.
- Use the cultural landscape report for the Lolo Trail as a model for other national historic trails. (It was used as background information in setting up a permit system for this important overland stretch of the overlapping Lewis & Clark and Nez Perce national historic trails.
- Skill building through the interagency National Trails Training Partnership (NTTP) is important, as is recognition of state stewardship and other programs that assist the national trails.
- Foster the educational value of these trails—see them as a "nursery log" of future conservationists.

Reference

Schwarzkopf, Kent, and Holly Buchanan. 1999. Inventory and monitoring program along the Appalachian Trail. In *On the Frontiers of Conservation: Proceedings of the 10th Conference on Research and Resource Management in Parks and on Public Lands.* David Harmon, ed. Hancock, Mich.: The George Wright Society, 95–101.