

THREE BIG IDEAS EMERGE IN 2012 and SPAWN TRANSFORMING ACTIONS

During 2012 the blossoming of several seminal ideas that describe essential characteristics of the National Trails System spawned several initiatives that can potentially transform the nature of the scenic and historic trails on-the-ground. Each of the three ideas has been germinating for some time at varying rates of development. The convergence of major actions emanating from them helped make 2012 a very noteworthy year for the National Trails System.

The first idea, that national historic trails should be on-the-ground heritage resources that people can use for recreation, was explored in both urban and rural settings during the Historic Trails Workshop in May 2012 in Socorro, New Mexico. Although some work to make new trails for recreation has been underway for a number of years along some of the national historic trails, most of the effort of the agencies and the trail organizations has been focused on “telling the story” of these trails and interpreting the significant sites along them. The emerging idea is that the intent of the National Trails System Act (16 U.S.C. 1241) (NTSA) is for these trails to both preserve historic resources and serve as recreational routes for people today to walk in the footsteps of our ancestors.

This intent adds another dimension to the imperative to preserve the historic remnants of the trails: how to make trails that enable people to experience those remnants and the landscapes experienced by their historical travelers without destroying those historic artifacts. Carrying out this intent by physically making trails provides a great opportunity for historic trail organizations to attract new people to their work – the same kinds of people who form the core of the scenic trail organizations. Embracing this mission opens the possibility for much greater collaboration and sharing of skills between scenic and historic trail organizations.

The second idea is that one of the essential characteristics of national scenic and historic trails is that they have two equally critical dimensions – length and width. The exceptional length of these trails has long been recognized, but except for the Appalachian Trail, there has not been any concerted effort to manage the national scenic and historic trails as environmental corridors of any width. That insufficient, damaging practice changed for parts of the trails during the summer of 2012 with the release by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) of three Policy Manuals directing the administration and management of national scenic and historic trails within the National Landscape Conservation System. Among their significant provisions, these Policy Manuals implement the purpose and requirements of the National Trails System Act that the administrator of each trail select and delineate a right-of-way for it.

Respecting the intent of the NTSA that “National scenic trails ... provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass” and that “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 BLM has stipulated that the national trails rights-of-way shall be management corridors of considerable width. The Lander, Wyoming BLM Field Office Resource Management Plan, first to be issued under the new Policy Manuals, defines a National Trail Management Corridor, ranging in width from 5 to 12 miles, along the entire length of the Continental Divide National Scenic and the Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic Trails through its management area.

The BLM Policy Manuals and the Lander RMP recognize that it is not enough to protect the ruts and other historic artifacts of the historic trails. The landscape setting that provides the context for those historic features must be preserved, as well, to allow trail users to have a vicarious experience of the historic use of the trail. Similarly it is not enough to provide tread for hikers and equestrians to follow for long distances via the scenic trails. The “nationally significant” landscapes through which these trails pass must be preserved, for it is the quality of the journey through these landscapes that provides for public “enjoyment” and makes national scenic trails exceptional and significant. Quite simply, the national trail without the protected “nationally significant” landscape surrounding it is incomplete. The experience of wildness, of their natural setting by trail users is essential for both national scenic and historic trails to be complete.

The third idea, that the 30 national scenic and historic trails of the National Trails System comprise a large landscape, is the newest, and perhaps the most profound, of the three. This idea arose in the process of the inter-departmental Federal agencies Collaborative Landscape Planning (CLP) initiative during the spring and summer of 2012. The tangible result of this planning is a proposal for \$61 million of Land & Water Conservation Fund money to be used to acquire 120 parcels of land from willing sellers along 7 national scenic and 4 national historic trails. This proposal is the first time that land acquisition projects for several of the scenic and historic trails have been presented together as a National Trails System package.

Agency leaders with whom we talked about this CLP proposal during “Hike the Hill” in February were extremely enthusiastic about it because they understood that it combines resource conservation with recreation opportunities, just as Congress intended in the NTSA. They were also enthusiastic about the layers of interagency collaboration and public/private partnership – hallmarks of the National Trails System – manifest in the proposal; it is the way we work. Participating in the realm of large landscape planning put the National Trails System on the map of national resources as a true system rather than as a collection of trails. The intangible benefit of the National Trails System as a large landscape is in becoming recognized as an iconic national resource system complementary to the National Park System, National Wildlife Refuge System, National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, and the Wilderness System. As with the units of these other resource systems, while each trail has its own value and significance, belonging to the National Trails System puts it among the exclusive ranks of the Nation’s most important and treasured natural and cultural assets. These national resource systems in turn help define our common identity and shared heritage as Americans.

National historic trails as recreation routes, national scenic and historic trails as heritage and environmental corridors, the National Trails System as a large landscape are profound ideas with great potential to significantly change the way our trails are understood, respected, and managed. Although they have already borne sweet fruit the full potential of these ideas to transform the nature of the scenic and historic trails on-the-ground is yet to be realized. They are dynamic ideas still evolving which we must nurture and use to guide more fruitful preservation and development of our national scenic and historic trails. Will you help us do so?

Enjoy a beautiful spring!



– Gary Werner, Executive Director, Partnership for the National Trails System

