Benefits of Trails and Greenways

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Building a better life through greenways and trails

The environmental, health, economic, and community benefits of trails for walking and riding.

From Trails and Greenways Clearinghouse

What Are Trails and Greenways?

Greenways are corridors of protected open space managed for conservation and recreation purposes. Greenways often follow natural land or water features, and link nature reserves, parks, cultural features and historic sites with each other and with populated areas. Greenways can be publicly or privately owned, and some are the result of public/private partnerships. Trails are paths used for walking, bicycling, horseback riding or other forms of recreation or transportation.

Some greenways include trails, while others do not. Some appeal to people, while others attract wildlife. From the hills of inland America to the beaches and barrier islands of the coast, greenways provide a vast network linking America's special places.

"To make a greenway is to make a community."

--Charles E. Little, Author of Greenways for America

Why Establish Trails and Greenways?

Trails and greenways provide countless opportunities for economic renewal and growth. Increased property values and tourism and recreation-related spending on items such as bicycles, in-line skates and lodging are just a few of the ways trails and greenways positively impact community economies.

* In a 1992 study, the National Park Service estimated the average economic activity associated with three multi-purpose trails in Florida, California and Iowa was $1.5 million annually.1

* According to a study conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, bird watchers spend over $5.2 billion annually.2

Promoting Healthy Living

Many people realize exercise is important for maintaining good health in all stages of life; however many do not regularly exercise. The U.S. Surgeon General estimates that 60% of American adults are not regularly active and another 25% are not active at all.3 In communities across the country, people do not have access to trails, parks, or other recreation areas close to their homes. Trails and greenways provide a safe, inexpensive avenue for regular exercise for people living in rural, urban and suburban areas.

"Three new gift shops have recently opened, another bike shop, a jewelry store, an antique and used furniture store, a thrift shop, a Wendy's Restaurant and a pizza and sandwich shop have also cropped up.All this is happening, and only with the PROSPECT of the trail opening in July. There is an air of excitement and anticipation now within this community. Something Connellsville has not felt for many

years." - Chris Wagner, Executive Director of the Greater Connellsville Chamber of Commerce, Pennsylvania

Environmental Benefits

Greenways protect important habitat and provide corridors for people and wildlife. The preserved Pinhook Swamp between Florida's Osceola National Forest and Georgia's Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge protects a vital wildlife corridor. This important swampland ecosystem sustains numerous species including the Florida black bear, timber rattlesnake and the Florida sandhill crane.

Trails and greenways help improve air and water quality. For example, communities with trails provide enjoyable and safe options for transportation, which reduces air pollution. By protecting land along rivers and streams, greenways prevent soil erosion and filter pollution caused by agricultural and road runoff.

Greenways also serve as natural floodplains. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, flooding causes over $1 billion in property damages every year. By restoring developed floodplains to their natural state, many riverside communities are preventing potential flood damage.

Finally, trails and greenways are hands-on environmental classrooms. People of all ages can see for themselves the precious and intriguing natural world from which they often feel so far removed.

Preserving Our History and Culture

Trails and greenways have the power to connect us to our heritage by preserving historic places and by providing access to them. They can give people a sense of place and an understanding of the enormity of past events, such as Native American trails and vast battle-fields. Trails and greenways draw the public to historic sites. The six-mile Bethabara Trail and Greenway in Winston-Salem, North Carolina draws people to the birthplace of the city, the original Moravian Christian village founded in the late 1700s. Other trails preserve transportation corridors. Rail-trails along historic rail corridors provide a glance at the importance of this mode of transportation. Many canal paths, preserved for their historic importance as a transportation route before the advent of railroads, are now used by thousands of people each year for bicycling, running, hiking and strolling. Many historic structures along canal towpaths, such as taverns and locks, have been preserved.

Create Greenways and Trails; Build a Better Life

As new development and suburbs are built farther and farther from cities, open spaces have disappeared at an alarming rate. People spend far too much time in traffic, detracting from time that could be better spent with their families and friends.

Through their votes, thousands of Americans have said 'yes' to preserving open spaces, greenways, farmlands and other important habitat. During the 1998 election, voters in 44 states approved over 150 conservation-related ballot initiatives. Trails and greenways provide what many Americans seek - close-to-home recreational areas, community meeting places, historic preservation, educational experiences, natural landscapes and beautification. Both trails and greenways help communities build pride by ensuring that their neighborhoods are good places to live, so that children can safely walk or bike to a park, school, or to a neighbor's home. Trails and greenways help make communities more attractive and friendly places to live.

Resources

1. The Impacts of Rail-Trails, A Study of Users and Nearby Property Owners from Three Trails, National Park Service, Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, 1992.

2. Economic Impacts of Protecting Rivers, Trails and Greenway Corridors, National Park Service, Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, 4th edition, 1995.

3. Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996.