

Rails-to-Trails *Conservancy*

Railstotrails.org

Inspiring Movement

Creating a nationwide network of trails from former rail lines and connecting corridors to build healthier places for healthier people

Rail Trail Ingredients:

Recycling

Land conservation

Wildlife habitat preservation

Non-automobile transportation

Historical preservation

Physical fitness

Recreation access for wheelchair users

History of the Rail-Trail Movement

It began in the mid-1960s, quietly, gradually, hesitatingly. There wasn't much fanfare. It was primarily a Midwestern phenomenon, barely noticed in places like New York, Los Angeles or Washington, D.C. People didn't say, "Is that the latest fad?" They said, "That's a really smart idea!"

The idea was to convert abandoned or unused rail corridors into public trails. Unlike the complex railroad system that was crumbling physically and financially, the concept was simple. It didn't require or even claim an inventor. Once the tracks came out, people just naturally started walking along the old grades, socializing, exploring, discovering old railroad relics, marveling at old industrial facilities such as bridges, tunnels, abandoned mills, sidings, switches and whatever else they could find. In the snows of winter the unconventional outdoor enthusiast skied or snow shoed on the corridor, but these were days before even running and all-terrain bicycles were common, so the predominant activity was walking. Of course, none of the corridors were paved or even graded — they were simply abandoned stretches of land.

"Rails-to-Trails" is what people started calling it, and the name was catchy and descriptive enough to give the concept a tiny niche in the fledgling environmental movement that was gathering momentum, bracing for huge battles shaping over clean air and water. However, it was destined to move into the mainstream of the conservation and environmental movements. After all, it had all the ingredients: recycling, land conservation, wildlife habitat preservation and non-automobile transportation - not to mention historical preservation, physical fitness, recreation access for wheelchair users and numerous other benefits.

Today, more than 40 years later, rail-trails have begun to make a significant mark, with 15,000 miles of rail-trails and over 100 million users per year. But in 1965 few Americans understood the importance of the idea. Rails-to-Trails was still a highly localized movement — "we've got an abandoned railroad track, so let's use it." Only gradually did there emerge a realization that America desperately needs a national trails system and that unused rail corridors are the perfect backbone for that network.

— *Peter Harnik, co-founder, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy*