

For the Love of Water Trails



Create a water trail and provide new recreational opportunities for your community.

Water trails are routes that connect access sites along river, lake and coastal shorelines. Each trail is as unique as the landscape it moves through and the experiences provided along it. The routes can be short — linking a few sites in just a few miles — although some, such as the Northern Forest Canoe Trail or the Alabama Scenic River Trail, are many hundreds of miles long. They can stretch through remote wilderness, meander through suburbia or provide access along a fascinating urban waterfront, like the Detroit River Heritage Water Trail. Water trails can accommodate day-use only, and they can also provide campsites and overnight accommodations, such as the Hiawatha Water Trail on the southern shore of Lake Superior.

While many water trails are created with human-powered boats in mind, others are designed for both motorized and non-motorized use, adopting a “share the water, share the facilities” philosophy such as the Inland Waterway from Lake Huron to Lake Michigan. This might mean rules of etiquette are posted at a busy boat ramp, a low floating dock for paddle craft is added to a marina, or a separate area of a park shoreline is dedicated to launching hand-carried boats.

It’s the Experience that Counts

While most of us can daydream about getting out on the Lake Tahoe Water Trail, or an Okefenokee Canoe Trail, chances are we are going to become most familiar with the waterways close to home. This is a good thing!

No matter what the craft — canoe, kayak, raft, rowboat, scull, sailboat, stand-up paddleboard or small motorboat — experiencing life from sea level offers a different perspective on the world, and maybe even ourselves. You could say that water trails are pathways to discovery, connecting us to history, our heritage, the aquatic life below us and the nature all around us. They are routes to better health and wellness, getting us acquainted with our own muscle power and our powers of observation. And noticing our surroundings — perhaps with the help of interpretive materials — often leads to greater awareness, care and respect, instilling a sense of stewardship for the environment around us.

Access Sites and More Information

Water trails are all about packaging. How many access sites do you want to string together? How will you promote experiences along the whole trail? What can you give people to help them plan their day, or their journey? How will you provide the best safety information to prepare them for the conditions and level of difficulty they may experience?

The strongest piece of infrastructure for a water trail is a network of good access sites. Planners will tell you to aim for an access site every one to two miles in urban environments, and every five to eight miles in rural and remote landscapes. But many water trails exist today using the access sites currently available to them with hopes of filling gaps in future years. There is no lack of creativity in the kinds of public and private launch and landing sites being strung together to create water trails, including public parks, port facilities, campgrounds, private marinas, resort communities, harbor facilities, B&Bs, restaurants, museums, tribal docks, wilderness shorelines, downtown businesses and nature preserves.

In addition to providing detailed information about all of the access sites along your water trail, users will want to know what there is to do and see along the trail. Think of the water trail as a pathway to destinations, a self-guided tour, each with a unique and wonderful character. This is where packaging comes into play, particularly in the form of partnerships.

Partnerships Are Prime

Very few site managers have the luxury of owning all of the access sites along a water trail. Even if you are the only land owner, you will likely need the help of others outside your department to provide the support needed to make your trail successful, such as interpretive programs and events, sign design, skill classes and much more.

Connecting a network of access sites to create a trail-wide experience usually requires bringing each site manager together, along with perhaps outfitters, chambers of commerce representatives, elected officials, paddling and boating groups, Coast Guard Auxiliaries, sheriff departments, etc. Your list of partners will reflect the ownership, politics and interests of the surrounding town or region.

You will need to create a partnership to develop a common vision and determine who will be the main champion or sponsor for the trail. Typically, partners work together, with the help of public input, to develop a management plan that will guide community outreach, promote education and stewardship, advocate for safety, plan events, set priorities, coordinate recreation programming, share resources, seek grants — basically do whatever is necessary and desirable to support each other and the trail as a whole. Water trail partnerships go by many names — coalitions, alliances, councils, associations — and the Internet is full of their collaborative work. Check out the partnership behind the Willamette River Water Trail, the Huron River Water Trail, The Cass River Greenway and Tillamook County Water Trail as a sampling of the rich relationships and products powering water trails these days.

Good for Business

Like most things recreational, water trails can add significantly to a community's bottom line. Dining and overnighting, equipment rentals, shuttle services and user fees all add up. Think ecotourism, outdoor classrooms, skill workshops and downtown riverwalks.

The partnerships fueling water trails today will just as likely be led by a tourism consortium or a nonprofit organization as a park agency. In fact, the chamber of commerce model is a good one to apply to water trails, where each member has a vested interest in the good of the whole — in this case, the entire water trail and the region it serves. In short, water trails can boost the value of your existing investments in boating facilities, provide users with a much richer recreation experience, promote environmental awareness and add black ink to your community coffers. For many people, it's love at first sight!

10 Steps for Planning a Water Trail

- Agree on a trail vision.
- Form a planning team and build partnerships.
- Inventory trail segments and site facilities.
- Generate public outreach and involvement.
- Analyze and inventory information and field check data.
- Make trail and site recommendations.
- Create an action plan.
- Produce a guidebook, maps, website and apps.
- Find funding and identify resources.
- Take action!

Planning Assistance

The [National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program](#) has been helping water trail partners create and improve access to waterways throughout the country for almost 20 years.
www.nps.gov/rtca

Water Trail Resources

[National Water Trails](#): The National Water Trails System is a distinctive national network of exemplary water trails that are cooperatively supported and sustained. Best Management Practices Tool Box.
www.nps.gov/watertrails

[American Canoe Association](#): Registry of water trails in all 50 states; National Paddlesports Instruction Programs. www.americancanoe.org

[American Trails](#): Resources and library for water and boating trails; National Recreation Trails database with water trail profiles. www.americantrail.org

[Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics](#): Widely adopted Leave No Trace Principles (also see the river corridors version) www.lnt.org

[National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance](#): Success stories and trail resources; Planning Assistance. <http://www.nps.gov/ncrc/portals/rivers/projpg/watertrails.htm>

For accounts of how water trails contribute to economic development, check out [North Carolina's 2008 Paddle Tourism Study](#), [Oregon Park and Recreation's 2005-2014 State Trails Plan](#), and the [2012 Pennsylvania Recreational Water Trails Economic Impact Study](#).

For examples of water trail partnerships and collaborative efforts, check out Willamette River Water Trail <http://willamettewatertrail.org/water-trail-partnership>, the Huron River Water Trail, <http://huronriverwatertrail.org/how-you-can-help>, The Cass River Greenway, <http://www.cassriver.org/partners.html> and Tillamook County Water Trail's guidebooks, www.tbnep.org

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