

Trail Forum

Do the Right Thing — Stay on Designated Trails!

presented by DR. GENE W. WOOD

It is common for equestrian trail users to feel the urge to find a new way to get from here to there. Often, the urge is just to see what there might be on the other side of the ridge. Sometimes it is the impulse to get there by a quicker way. Other times, perhaps too often, the impulse is:

“Watch what my horse and I can do.”

As a trail horseman, I know these urges first hand. These are the curiosities and temptations that nag at most of us, sirens that call out to a sense of adventure, even indiscretion. With a good and willing horse under me — oh, the temptation of it all.

Whatever the driving force, such exercises create new trails without thought other than for the satisfaction of the moment. At their least offensive, they violate landowner or management agency regulations. At worst, they create ecological damage and safety hazards that those regulations were intended to prevent.

These behaviors and the resultant marks that they leave on the land, along with the new problems they create for the land managers and the images that they establish of horsemen as insensitive, reckless recreationists do not become us. In fact, these are the seeds of the discontent that land managers and others have increasingly developed with us.

As an ecologist and trail manager, I know the frustration of it all. The land manager typically has more trail mileage than he/she can maintain in an ecologically sound and human-safe condition. Typically, time, manpower, and money are inadequate for the already designated trail system.

Rarely do riders who leave designated trails and create new ones — either intentionally or unintentionally — have malicious intent. However, the trail rider's little bit of fun often becomes a significant problem for those who manage lands with equestrian trails embedded in them. When these managers themselves have no favorable attachment to the equestrian community or empathy for it, a case for barring us from these lands develops rapidly. If we expect to have a continuing availability of wildlands with trails open to horse traffic, we cannot afford the wrath of these people.

Three of the seven “Leave No Trace” (LNT) principles state: 1) travel and camp on durable surfaces, 2) leave what you find, and 3) be considerate of other visitors. A specific element of the first tenant is: “Stay on

designated trails.” It also could be an element of the other two. This is not simple dogma separating right from wrong. It is right for reasons of ecosystem protection, human safety, and respect for others who do not share our values and for those managers ultimately responsible for ecosystem and human wellbeing.

While it is easy to find designated trails on public lands that are, in general, not ecologically sound and that often have some safety hazards, this is certainly not the managers “desired condition” for any trail. Furthermore, on National Forest and Bureau of Land Management lands, it is a situation that is mandated by law to be resolved.

Huge amounts of trail mileage in this condition exist in the nation largely because most trail systems simply evolved as a result of users going from Point A to Point B, using the most expedient route across the landscape. The primary force driving the design of these trails was expediency. Ecological impacts were rarely a consideration.

In today's world, the ecological condition of our public lands is a top-of-the-mind issue for the public that owns them.

Very few members of this public have ever ridden, or will ever ride, a trail horse. Rogue trails that mar these landscapes by causing erosion due to their inappropriate grades, increase stream siltation due to inappropriate stream crossings, damage sensitive vegetation and wildlife habitats, and risk damage to culturally historic sites cannot, and should not, be tolerated. The response “We didn't mean to” will not cut it. Once the

damage is done, it is done, especially with respect to soils. Except for rare plants, and this is no small exception, we usually can re-grow a plant. We cannot re-grow a soil or a silted streambed.

We have come to a point in American culture where our aesthetic values for the public lands tend to override all other values. The public perception of “wilderness and “wildness” is an aesthetic. This wildness, possibly a perceived purity, is a “desired condition” goal of management and planning for the public lands, especially the National Forest System lands. In addition, in modern concepts for natural resource planning and management, the desired condition is one that can be sustained with modest amounts of human effort.

These conditions are believed to be manifests of healthy ecosystems. If equestrian trails are to be a part of the emerging visions for the public lands, they must be harmonized with the other users and ecological components and processes of these ecosystems. They cannot be ecologically discordant or aesthetically obtrusive, and they must be sustainable with ecologically and economically sound trail management practices. An evolving trail system, which is substantially if not heavily influenced by the continuing addition of rogue trails, can't possibly meet these criteria.

Public land managers have a responsibility for public safety on the lands that they manage. While it is recognized in legal statute in many states that equestrian activity has certain inherent dangers for the equestrian, the land manager continues to have certain responsibilities for trail hazards. Riders who

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create rogue trails increase these liabilities for the land manager, and do so without his/her consent. The rider who offers up the excuse: "Well, my horse and I made it. If others t can't, they shouldn't be out there" offers no resolution to the problem, especially once someone has been hurt due to a hazardous trail situation. Not every horse and rider is equally skilled, or perhaps as equally lucky.

Are trail equestrians the only guilty parties in the creation of rogue trails? Definitely not! Every trail user group shares in this problem. However, we can't answer for them; we can only answer for us. We create our own image and reputation for appropriate behavior towards the land and others that own and use it.

Are there times when leaving the designated trail may be the acceptable thing to do? Yes. Hunters with big game down at a site well off the trail may, and often do, require pack stock to get the game back to camp or home. Such use is not likely to result in the creation of a new trail, especially when traffic to the downed game is kept to that which is essential to move it.

It is an accepted standard that, topography permitting, campsites should be at least 200 feet from the trail. This is in fact a LNT guideline. This is not a new trail. It is simply access to the campsite that has been located in a manner that minimizes impacts on the land and that respects other trail users.

There are numerous "what if" scenarios that can be posed, which all end in circular arguments if someone is trying to avoid the fundamental purpose of staying on designated trails. Hopefully, we will all think about the situation objectively and realize that we need to stay on designated horse trails so that we will have some horse trails to stay on in the future.

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