

# The Trail Horse User Group: A Perspective on Progress<sup>1</sup>

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A few days ago I was working with my trail crew on the construction of a bridge suitable for horse traffic when Stuart MacDonald called. He was seeking a short article or editorial on recreational horse trails that included conservation concerns.

However, he had some caveats: a) keep it short, and b) try to be positive. As someone who has been worrying over recreational horse use and natural resource protection issues in managed forests and wildlands for the last 19 years, I found both requests to be challenging.

On the positive side, I have seen progress in the sensitivity of recreational trail horse users towards environmental protection issues. The cooperative efforts of Back Country Horsemen of America (BCHA) and the Back Country Horsemen Education Foundation to provide scholarships for BCHA members throughout the nation to become trained as Masters of Leave No Trace at the Nine Mile Ranger District, Lolo National Forest, Montana has been an important step forward. Furthermore, those completing this training return to their respective states to teach LNT techniques to their fellow trail horsemen.

The 1998 National Symposium on Horse Trails in Forest Ecosystems drew 175 registered participants from 37 states. In addition, out of that symposium grew the Southeastern Equestrian Trails Conference (SETC) and the Ohio Valley Equestrian Trails Symposium (OVETS). The former recently met for the ninth consecutive year. It has cycled through 6 southern states and now encompasses 14 member states. OVETS recently has had good success, and its future seems bright. Several other attempts have been made to form similar symposia in various parts of the nation. Furthermore, the American Horse Council has now created a Recreation Committee that is largely focused on trails issues and a trail equestrian now serves on the American Trails Board of Directors.

In the last 12 months two horse trail books, each of substantial size, have been published: Equestrian Design Guidebook for Trails, Trailheads, and Campgrounds<sup>2</sup> and Recreational Horse Trails in Rural and Wildland Areas<sup>3</sup>. Each is aimed at the

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<sup>1</sup> Original manuscript requested by American Trails for publication on their website [www.americantrails.org](http://www.americantrails.org) in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Hancock, J., et al. 2007. Equestrian design Guidebook for Trails, Trailheads and Campgrounds. USDA-For. Serv., Tech. and develop. Prog., 2300 Recreation, 0723-2816-MTDC. 312 pages.

creation of recreational horse trails and trail facilities that are user safe and environmentally sound.

To me, one of the most promising recent developments is the formation of a group that intends to create a national horse trails organization to encompass all types of trail horse use across the national landscape. One of the key players in this movement is Brian Bourne, Trails Specialist, Shawnee National Forest, who in his lead presentation at SETC 2008, cautioned the conference attendees that when conservation and recreation are in conflict on the public lands, conservation will win. It was a succinct and accurate statement. The hoped for new organization guided by this understanding, and having conservation concerns at its core is an exciting new development that shows great promise for the future.

But in the context of evaluation, when one turns around in the saddle and looks at the trail just left, we find a picture of reality. If after more than 40 years of professional work in natural resource science and policy, I let my comments lead anyone to believe that all is well and the future is nothing but bright in the world of horse trails, I would be guilty of a fundamental lie.

Despite the progress we have made, as a user group, we are still unable to articulate and understand a land ethic. As articulated by Aldo Leopold in his universally known essay “The Land Ethic,” *A thing is right when it preserves the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.* Just a few paragraphs after this statement, he cautioned: “The road to conservation is paved with good intentions that often prove futile, or even dangerous, due to a lack of understanding of either land [the ecosystem] or economic land use.” For example, LNT is about trail etiquette, critically important procedures for showing respect for other trail users and the aesthetics of the land. On the other hand, it has very little to do with understanding human activity as an ecological process and recognition of ecosystem components and natural processes. LNT with pack and saddle stock will move towards a land ethic when the organization, its literature and its outreach teachers have a better grounding in ecology, i.e., and understanding of the land.

The appeals and litigation brought by some recreational horse organizations against public land management agencies sometimes seem to suggest an indifference to the potential of horse use to damage natural resources as well as to the statutory mandates that the foremost responsibility of the agencies is to protect natural and cultural resources important to the nation or state and its people. Some pending legislation as well as management plan and rule appeals (e.g. designated trail regulations) and litigation against the Forest Service not only ignore the agency’s mandate for resource protection, they also ignore the potential to increase the proportion (40%) of the National Forest System budget used to deal with such processes. (This includes the land management planning process including statute-mandated public involvement. Also, this figure was published prior to the last several catastrophic fire years.)

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<sup>3</sup> Wood, G. W. 2007. Recreational Horse Trails in Rural and Wildland Areas. Dept. of Forestry and Natural Resources, FClemson University, Clemson, SC. 254 pages.

**Finally, in some situations it appears to me that for every two steps forward we may be backing up at least one in understanding the fundamental prerequisites for preserving recreational trail horse use on public lands. As the lead founder of both the 1998 National Symposium and SETC in 2000, I know clearly the original purpose of these conferences; i.e., creation of a forum for informed discussion of the best available science, policy, and user values that can lead to the preservation of a cultural heritage in a natural heritage setting. The concept for the conference is currently represented as “a conference for those interested in building, maintaining, and enjoying equestrian trails.” What happened to the concerns for conservation? Where is the depth of substance?**

**In summary, equestrian trail users are awakening to the fact that we are recreating largely on public lands owned by more than 350 million citizens with natural resource protection as their foremost concern. As some fraction of the 1.1 million Americans that own horses, we as trail riders must take stock of our situation. The future will be only as bright as the quickness with which we can articulate, understand, and meaningfully implement a land ethic in how we behave on trails and in the natural resource policy arena as well as in how we design, build, and maintain trails.**