

CHAPTER 1: CREATING THE PLAN

The West Virginia Statewide Trail Plan was created as a result of recommendations made in the 1993-1997 West Virginia Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) calling on state agencies to “develop a concept plan for an integrated system of rivers, trails and greenways.” In 1995, members of the state trail community formed the West Virginia Trails Coalition (WVTC) to create and implement this Statewide Trail Plan for West Virginia (also referred to as “the plan”).

For the purposes of this plan and any proposed actions emanating from it, a trail is defined as a designated land or water corridor that provides access to recreational, aesthetic, alternate transportation or educational opportunities to motorized and nonmotorized users, for all ages and abilities.

WILD, WONDERFUL TRAILS CONFERENCE

The West Virginia Trails Coalition, with financial and logistical assistance from the National Park Service and former Gov. Gaston Caperton, hosted the Wild Wonderful Trails Conference in March 1997 to facilitate development of the plan. Before the conference, trail experts met January 17 and 31, 1997, as the Joint State Trail Plan Process Subcommittee to create the guidelines for developing the plan used by conference participants. The conference, attended by a broad spectrum of the trail community, included outfitters, state and federal agencies, private trail use and development groups, and interested members of the public.

Prominent Wild Wonderful Trails Conference attendee Gov. Cecil Underwood gave his support to the effort to create a statewide trail plan for West Virginia and commented, “I commend the West Virginia Trails Coalition as you develop a statewide plan for trails in our state. A trail plan needs to be part of any statewide development plan.”

The Statewide Trail Plan Committee was established at the conference as an inclusive advisory body to oversee development of the plan. Representatives from the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, state and local government agencies, private trail use groups, outfitters and volunteer organizations comprised the members of the committee. Using AmeriCorps*VISTA volunteers to coordinate meetings and the planning process, the Statewide Trail Plan Committee met monthly to lay the foundation for the development of the plan.

The Statewide Trail Plan Committee planned workshops to allow citizens from around West Virginia to articulate their desires for trails in their areas, as well as statewide. These workshops would give validity to the plan and gain public support for the planning process.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

With funding from the West Virginia Recreational Trails Advisory Board, and assistance from the National Park Service (NPS), the West Virginia Department of Transportation, Resource Conservation and Development Councils, local convention and visitors bureaus and volunteers, the West Virginia Trails Coalition held a series of 12 workshops throughout the state in the spring and summer of 1998. These workshops were well-attended and drew a diversity of people interested in the health and economic benefits of trail development and promotion. The workshops produced excellent input from the public and provided much of the raw data upon which the plan is based.

The workshop dates and sites were:

- Feb. 26 Wheeling
- March 12 Beckley
- March 19 Lewisburg
- March 26 Williamson
- April 2 Summersville
- April 9 Elkins
- April 16 Romney
- April 23 Martinsburg
- April 30 Bridgeport
- May 7 Parkersburg
- May 14 Charleston
- May 21 Hurricane

Staff from the NPS regional office in Philadelphia assisted with planning, facilitating and processing workshop data. Once the workshops were concluded, the Park Service analyzed the results to provide regional and statewide interpretations of information.

With these results and previous input provided by state agencies and private groups, the Statewide Trail Plan Committee met to develop a timeline and procedures for completing the plan.

The first step included creating and circulating drafts of the plan among the members of the Statewide Trail Plan Committee during the spring and summer of 1999. Members identified the plan's major issues and actions. They established a time frame for resolution.

The West Virginia Recreational Trails Advisory Board also funded a trail user survey to gain input from trail participants. The study, done through West Virginia University's School of Forestry, was overseen by Dr. David Ostergren, Ph.D., and conducted by graduate student Miles Phillips. It focused on out-of-state visitors and the economic benefits of trails. Statewide Trail Plan Committee members agreed that data from the user survey would be vital to future trail efforts and should be included in the

plan. The data focused on drawing trail visitors to the state and providing insight into areas where issues might arise.

A revised draft of the plan was prepared and distributed to workshop attendees, libraries, convention and visitor bureaus, and other interested parties. The public comment period ran from September to October 1999. Public comments were incorporated into the final draft version.

The West Virginia Department of Transportation handled mapping. The West Virginia Development Office did design and layout.

The Statewide Trail Plan Committee and its collaborating partners have created the plan as the framework for developing and utilizing West Virginia's trails to their full potential. This framework is vital to linking the many small and large-scale trail development projects now operating, or proposed, throughout the state. Linkage increases the miles and diversity of West Virginia's trails creating a more attractive, extensive and marketable trail network.

Another benefit of the plan was an opportunity to catalog the state's trails and identify where trail mileage and facilities are lacking. The plan will help identify areas with a lack of trails and provide tools for local communities to develop and maintain quality trail networks. For example, the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health increases state resident's participation in healthy activities. The bureau has funded community walking trails in Camden-on-Gauley, Grafton, Berkeley Co. and the town of Mathias through community-based initiatives grants. The bureau encourages communities and organizations to apply for these grants.

Rural communities around the state often have limited recreational opportunities. The solution sometimes is as simple as creating a short connecting trail to link the community with an already existing, but locally inaccessible, trail system. Other areas may want or need to have their own community trail developed due to lack of trails in close proximity.

Proof that such trails are needed and wanted is demonstrated by Matewan's community walking trail. Often devastated by floods since its founding, Matewan was surrounded with a floodwall in the early 1990s. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers included a community walking trail in the floodwall construction. A few naysayers viewed the trail as a boondoggle that would never be used. However, during morning and evening hours the trail is often crowded with local residents and now is viewed as a recreational and community asset by the town.

While every community will not have the luxury of a Corps of Engineers built trail, all communities in the state can benefit from the plan by using it to locate the funding and expertise needed to create or enhance their own trail systems and link them to others. Putting this valuable tool into the hands of communities and individuals will

help West Virginia develop into a state with a trail network benefiting all its citizens economically, physically and aesthetically.