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Jim Niedbalski: A trail for everyone, and everyone's legacy of trails

By Jim Niedbalski

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ADAMS — There are 4.12 million miles of roads in the United States, with 2.6 million paved and 1.4 million unpaved, with 46,876 miles of interstate highways, according to the Federal Highway Administration. This network connects cities and towns across the 3.8 million square miles of territory in the nation. Communities large and small would remain islands without these roads. Getting from point A to point B is always possible.

Just as roads connect islands of civilization, trails connect islands of wilderness, rural communities and pockets of natural areas. The National Trails System provides a network of trails for the enjoyment of the wilderness, cultural and historical values our vast country offers in an amazing variety of landscapes. But that's not all — the system also includes "trails" in the form of roads, thereby providing myriad routes in both urban and rural settings for people of all ages, interests, skills and physical abilities, according to the National Park Service, which administers the system.



On Oct. 2, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the National Trails System Act, the legislation that established the National Scenic Trails, National Recreation Trails and later, the National Historic Trails. (The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which protects both large and small segments of wild rivers, was also passed in 1968.) That original legislation, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, recognized the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails as the first NSTs. Over the years, nine more NSTs were added, the most recent the New England Trail in 2009. That 215-mile trail, from Long Island Sound in Connecticut to the Massachusetts-New Hampshire border, was assembled from the existing Metacomet-Monadnock Trail in Massachusetts and three trails in Connecticut.

In the system, there are 18,734 miles of National Scenic Trails designed mostly for foot travel, but some are also for equestrians and bicyclists. There are also 33,002 miles of National Historic Trails, which are predominantly roadways that highlight historical routes across our nation, such as the Oregon Trail and the Lewis and Clark Trail.

A Seattle, Wash., man, Bart Smith, just the other day finished walking all 30 of the NSTs and NHTs — a total of 51,736 miles over a 26-year period!

"Each (trail) is so unique and so different," Smith said in an Oct. 2 webcast celebrating the 50th anniversary. An outstanding photographer, Smith says of his passion: "Every trail has its own personality. I just love the challenge of trying to photograph the unique characteristics of each trail. It drives me. My wife says I'm not going to be able to stop," he told Backpacker magazine in June.

TRAIL MANAGEMENT

A significant component of the 1968 legislation was that it established a public-private partnership to manage the trails. Naturally the National Park Service could not maintain these trails on its own. Thousands of volunteers every year perform all kinds of tasks to keep the trails and their amenities in good shape, including clearing trees blocking the pathway, trimming brush, painting blazes, maintaining shelters and privies and a host of other chores. On the Appalachian Trail, for example, 31 trail clubs annually perform 250,000 hours of volunteer maintenance, according to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, a private non-profit that is the lead partner for the AT with the National Park Service.

The legislation also provided federal funds for the acquisition of private lands to establish a protected corridor for the AT and PCT. In 1968, only about half of the AT was on public land; now, 99.7 percent of the path is on public land or a public right-of-way. About 90 percent of the PCT is protected.

Among the NSTs, the most famous and most traveled is the venerable Appalachian Trail, which winds its way through Berkshire County for 90 miles on its 2,189-mile journey from Georgia to Maine. The ATC estimates 3 million people access the AT every year, for a day, a weekend, a week, or several months to "thru-hike" the entire trail.

More than just a footpath, the Appalachian Trail and other NSTs should also be viewed as an unbroken connection of ecosystems, and a laboratory for research on everything from endangered plants and animals to wildlife corridors to climate change. The dramatic elevation differences on many of these trails offer an array of climate zones to study, appreciate and protect. The AT ranges from 124 feet in New York to 6,643 feet in North Carolina; the PCT's high point is 13,153 feet in the Sierras, and drops all the way down to 140 feet on the Washington/Oregon border.

The challenge over the next 50 years is to confront and manage threats to these trails, such as overuse, development pressures and viewscape protection. Continued funding for trail protection is also crucial, as well as instilling in younger generations the value of these trails.

Of course, the trail doesn't have to be an NST in order to experience the sheer joy of putting one foot in front of the other, in an environment marked by color and contrast, of life and rebirth. Find a trail close to you in a public park or private preserve open to the public, and take a hike.



Jim Niedbalski is a member of the board of directors of the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association and the Massachusetts Appalachian Trail Committee. He has completed four of the National Scenic Trails.

