



NATIONAL WATER TRAILS SYSTEM

WHAT IS A NATIONAL WATER TRAIL?

National Water Trails: Who Designates Them? Who Manages Them?

The National Water Trail designations recognize exemplary trails of local and regional significance. Through designation, these trails are recognized as part of the National Trails System.

National recreation trails (including national water trails) may be designated by the Secretary of the Interior or the Secretary of Agriculture (for trails on or in cooperation with National Forest Service lands).

Management of Individual National Water Trails

Each designated national water trail is managed by a local management entity (e.g., local, state, or federal government agency; nonprofit organization; interagency organization). The ongoing management responsibility and associated costs of the designated national water trail are the sole responsibility of the management entity.

What Are the Benefits of National Water Trail Designation?

Benefits of designation into the National Water Trails System include:

- Designation by the Secretary of the Interior, including a letter and certificate announcing the designation as a national water trail
- National promotion and visibility, including use by the management entity of use the National Water Trails System logo in appropriate settings and trail publications
- Mutual support and knowledge sharing as part of a national network
- opportunities to obtain technical assistance and funding for planning and implementing water trail projects
- As a result of designation, national water trails may gain
- positive economic impact from increased tourism
- assistance with stewardship and sustainability projects
- increased protection for outdoor recreation and water resources
- contribution to public health and quality of life from maintaining and restoring watershed resources
- access to networking and training opportunities
- assistance with recognition and special events highlighting the trail



Photos from the National Water Trail Website: <http://www.nps.gov/WaterTrails/Home/Images>



What are the National Water Trail Criteria and Best Management Practices?

As a subset of the national recreation trail designation, trails in the National Water Trails System must meet the four criteria for National Recreation Trail designation as follows:

- The trail (and its access points) must be open to public use and be designed, constructed, and maintained according to best management practices, in keeping with the anticipated use. Water trail access points that demonstrate state-of-the-art design and management are especially encouraged to apply for national water trail designation.
- The trail is in compliance with applicable land use plans and environmental laws.
- The trail will be open for public use for at least 10 consecutive years after designation.
- The trail designation must be supported by the landowner(s), (public or private), on which access points exist.



A designated water trail **must** incorporate the following best management practices:

Recreation Opportunities: The water trail route has established public access points that accommodate a diversity of trip lengths and provide access to a variety of opportunities for recreation and education.

Education: The water trail users are provided with opportunities to learn about the value of water resources, cultural heritage, boating skills, and outdoor ethics.

Conservation: The water trail provides opportunities for communities to develop and implement strategies that enhance and restore the health of local waterways and surrounding lands.

Community Support: Local communities provide support and advocacy for maintenance and stewardship of the water trail.

Public Information: The public is provided with accessible and understandable water trail information, including details for identifying access and trail routes; cultural, historic, and natural features; hazards; and water quality. The water trail is promoted to the community and broad national audience.

Trail Maintenance: There is a demonstrated ability to support routine and long-term maintenance investments on the water trail. Facilities are designed, constructed, and maintained by incorporating sustainability principles.

Planning: Maintain a water trail plan that describes a vision, desired future conditions, and strategies to strengthen best management practices.



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Frequently Asked Questions about the National Water Trails System

Q: What is the difference between national water trails and local or state water trails?

A: Several types of water trails exist in the United States. National water trails are water trails that meet the required designation criteria and best management practices (as confirmed by an application review process) and have been officially designated by the Secretary of the Interior or the Secretary of Agriculture (when on or in cooperation with the National Forest Service lands). Not all water trails meet these criteria or have been designated as national water trails. However, local and state water trails may be included in the National Water Trails System. You can learn more about the National Water Trails System or access the National Water Trail System database and map for information on specific designated national water trails. Many states have statewide water trail systems that provide information about and recognize water trails locally.

Q: What is the legislative authority of the National Water Trails System?

A: The National Water Trails System is a recently developed subset of the long-established National Recreation Trail (NRT) system. The National Trails System Act of 1968 (16 USC 1241-51) authorized creation of a national trail system composed of national recreation trails, national scenic trails, and national historic trails. Since 1971, over 1,100 national recreation trails have been designated on both public and private lands and waters throughout the United States.

The National Trails System Act gives the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of Agriculture the authority to develop “supplementary criteria” for national recreation trails. The National Water Trails System is now considered a subset under the umbrella of national trails defined by the National Trails System Act. With the recent development of the National Water Trails System, an enhanced focus on providing and promoting water-based trail opportunities throughout the United States will complement the existing network of national recreation trails. Click here to read in-depth about designation authority, management, and coordination.

