



National Recreation Trails: Why They Matter

This is not your father's [National Recreation Trail](#). More than 1000 trails nationwide have been designated as "NRTs," connecting people to local resources and improving their quality of life. But while many older NRTs are found on federal or state lands that are less accessible for everyday use, a new crop of community trails that support daily recreation and physical health is being added to the system. These local trails -- which gain access to technical assistance and funding opportunities through the designation -- complement the recreational opportunities of more remote trails and help build a stronger sense of community. The system grew larger just this week; take a look at the [22 trails just added](#) to the increasingly diverse NRT system.

Learning from the Field: Massachusetts Housatonic River Walk



Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Restoring native plants on the Housatonic River Walk

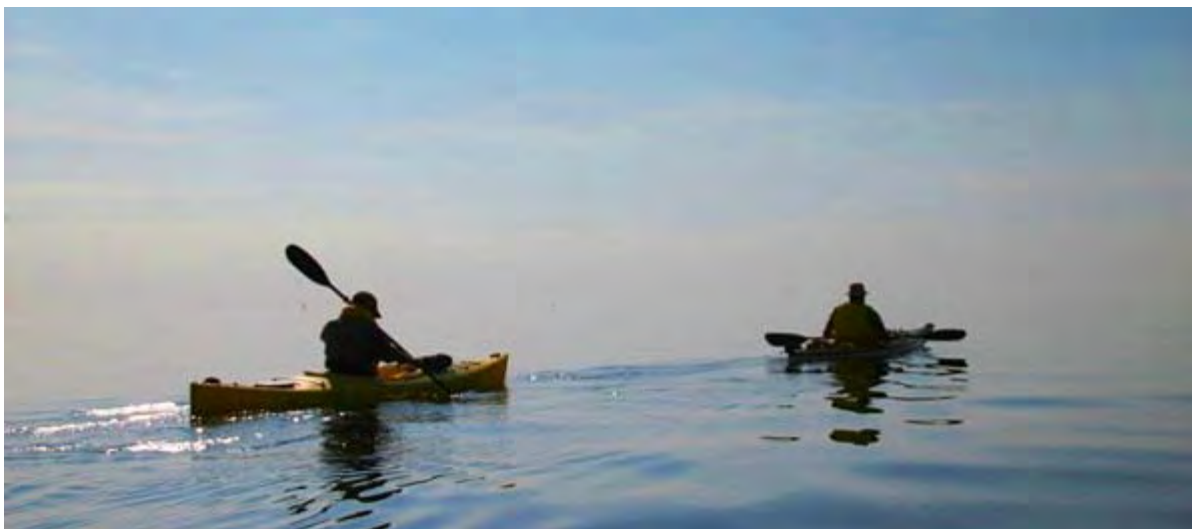
It started as a cleanup project. Trash and pollution littered the banks of the Housatonic River in western Massachusetts. But almost 400 tons of trash later, supporters of the [Housatonic River Walk](#) (newly designated as a National Recreation Trail) have moved on to other initiatives. With an eclectic

array of more than 2100 volunteers helping out over the years -- ranging from farmers to canoeists -- advocates are now focused on riverbank restoration and replacing exotic, invasive plants with what supporter Rachel Fletcher calls "native natives": plants propagated from local seeds.

The work of Fletcher and her colleagues is inspired, in part, by native son W.E.B. Du Bois, who gave a speech about the importance of preserving the Housatonic River back in 1930. "We felt he was speaking to us directly," said Fletcher, when she located the actual text from his 1930 speech. "All that he called for, we were trying to do in our own small way." The River Walk includes [Du Bois River Garden Park](#), which features a rain garden that helps remove pollution and lets stormwater soak slowly into the earth, rather than channelling it directly into the river. Key to their success in cultivating new volunteers is ensuring that everyone understands the project's context. "We do slideshow lectures and tours for school groups before they volunteer," says Fletcher, "so they have a sense of the big picture and how their activity connects with the whole."

Learning from the Field: National Trails...National Trends

Stuart Macdonald of the nonprofit group [American Trails](#), which is the National Park Service's lead partner in the NRT program, has seen a few major trends evolve over the years. First, he says, "What we're trying to do is make more out of the National Trails System. It's not just about remote, highly seasonal trails -- it's about trails in people's lives, in their communities."



Water trails: The [Florida Circumnavigational Trail](#) near Cedar Key (Doug Alderson)

Another development is the popularity of [water trails](#), which include marked routes for canoes and kayaks, maps, facilities, and official management status. Finally, Macdonald notes an increase in trails on federally managed lands owned by the [U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#) and the [Bureau of Land Management](#). "The designation provides a branding boost to trails, and it's a clear way of inviting the general public onto their property, in addition to traditional hunting and fishing folks," he says.

Stuart's Picks

Some of Macdonald's favorite recent projects include the [Milwaukee Urban Water Trail](#), the [Clear Creek Trail](#) in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, and [Horton's Slough Trail](#), which is located inside Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma.



Catalysts: Getting Involved

Learn more about the [benefits of NRT designation](#) and information about [how to apply](#). The new [NRT brochure](#) is also now available.

Don't forget to celebrate [National Trails Day 2009!](#) There are over 1000 events taking place on Saturday, June 6, so you're sure to [find one near you](#).



Let's Work Together

Could your project benefit from 1-2 years' staff time from a National Park Service specialist?

If you're working on restoring a river, building a community trail, or making an urban park flourish, we'd love to talk with you about ways we could work together. Please call or email your [regional representative](#) today. The next program application deadline is **August 1, 2009.**

Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Building another link on the Housatonic River Walk