**Rails to Trails**

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Our pace is so fast. In the ever‑changing and evolving world of technology, we literally cannot keep up with the times. Once upon a time the train seemed like the epitome of the modern world. Sleek and bold trains were our nation’s pride and joy and symbolized the possibilities of a world beyond the one in which we lived. Connecting large cities and small towns, used for transportation and for the shipping of goods, the train was the pulse of the nation.

But times change. With the advent of the car and the building of mass highways, trains became a secondary form of transportation. Railroad tracks were abandoned. Nature took over and where once a track split through the woods, only a shadow of the track remained.

Enter the Rails‑to‑Trails Conservancy (RTC), a group of outdoor enthusiasts who in 1986 began the arduous task of transforming abandoned railroad tracks into nature trails. Banding together with other conservation groups, RTC removed tracks and molded the trails into wonderful paths running through urban and rural areas.

There is something remarkable about traveling the nation in pursuit of the abandoned railroad track now converted to greenways, bicycle paths, and nature trails. What better way to see the country than by traversing these rail beds?

**The History of the Rails‑to‑Trails Conservancy**

The beauty of RTC is that by converting railroad rights‑of‑way for public use, it has not only preserved a part of our nation’s history but also allowed a variety of outdoor enthusiasts to enjoy the paths and trails.

Bicyclists, in‑line skaters, nature lovers, hikers, equestrians, and paddlers can enjoy the trails, as can railroad history buffs. All of Florida’s rail‑trails are wheelchair accessible. Throughout Florida, there are thirty active RTC trails, and each year more are added. You can find trails near cities and rural trails far from the madding crowd. In many ways we have come full circle. By preserving part of our history, we can enjoy the trails as if time stood still.

The concept of preserving these valuable corridors and converting them into multiuse public trails began in the Midwest, where railroad abandonments were most widespread. Once the tracks came out, people started using the corridors for walking and hiking while exploring railroad relics ranging from train stations and mills to bridges and tunnels.

Although many people agreed with the great new concept, the reality of actually converting abandoned railroad corridors into public trails was a much greater challenge. From the late 1960s until the early 1980s, many rail‑trail efforts failed as corridors were lost to development, sold to the highest bidder, or broken into pieces.

In 1983 Congress enacted an amendment to the National Trails System Act directing the Interstate Commerce Commission to allow about‑to‑be‑abandoned railroad lines to be “railbanked,” or set aside for future transportation use while being used as trails in the interim. In essence this law preempts rail corridor abandonment, keeping the corridors intact for trail use and any possible future use

.This powerful new piece of legislation made it easier for agencies and organizations to acquire rail corridors for trails, but many projects still failed because of short deadlines, lack of information, and local opposition to trails.

The Rails‑to‑Trails Conservancy was formed in 1986 to provide a national voice for the creation of rail‑trails. RTC quickly developed a strategy to preserve the largest amount of rail corridor in the shortest period of time: a national advocacy program to defend the new railbanking law in the courts and in Congress, coupled with a direct project‑assistance program to help public agencies and local rail‑trail groups overcome the challenges of converting a rail into a trail.

The strategy is working. In 1986 the Rails‑to‑Trails Conservancy knew of only seventy‑five rail‑trails and ninety projects in the works. In 2001 there were more than 1,000 rail‑trails, and many additional projects under way. The RTC vision of creating an interconnected network of trails across the country is becoming a reality.

The thriving rails‑to‑trails movement has created more than 7,700 miles of public trails for a wide range of users. People across the country are now realizing the incredible benefits of rail‑trails.

**Benefits of Rail‑Trails**

Rail‑trails are flat or have gentle grades, making them perfect for multiple users ranging from walkers and bicyclists to in‑line skaters and people with disabilities.

In urban areas rail‑trails act as linear greenways through developed areas, efficiently providing much‑needed recreation space while serving as utilitarian transportation corridors. They link neighborhoods and workplaces and connect congested areas to open spaces. In many cities and suburbs, rail‑trails are used for commuting to work, school, and shopping.

In rural areas rail‑trails can provide a significant stimulus to local businesses. People who use trails often spend money on food, beverages, camping, hotels, bed‑and‑breakfasts, bicycle rentals, souvenirs, and other items. Studies have shown that trail users have generated as much as $1.25 million annually for a town through which a trail passes.

Rail‑trails preserve historic structures, such as train stations, bridges, tunnels, mills, factories, and canals. These structures shelter an important piece of history and enhance the trail experience.

Wildlife enthusiasts can enjoy the rail‑trails, which are home to birds, plants, wetlands, and small and large mammals. Many rail‑trails serve as plant and animal conservation corridors, and, in some cases, endangered species can be found in habitats located along the route.

Recreation, transportation, historic preservation, economic revitalization, open‑space conservation, and wildlife preservation—these are just some of the many benefits of rail‑trails and the reasons why people love them.

The strongest argument for the rails‑to‑trails movement, however, is ultimately about the human spirit. It’s about the dedication of individuals who have a dream and follow that vision so that other people can enjoy the fruits of their labor.

**How to Get Involved**

If you really enjoy rail‑trails, there are opportunities to join the movement to save abandoned rail corridors and to create more trails. Donating even a small amount of your time can help get more trails up and going. Here are some ways you can help the effort:

* Write a letter to your city, county, or state elected official in favor of pro‑trail legislation. You can also write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper highlighting a trail or trail project.
* Attend a public hearing to voice support for a local trail.
* Volunteer to plant flowers or trees along an existing trail or spend several hours helping a cleanup crew on a nearby rail‑trail project.
* Lead a hike along an abandoned corridor with your friends or a community group.
* Become an active member on a trail effort in your area. Many groups host trail events, undertake fund‑raising campaigns, publish brochures and newsletters, and carry out other activities to promote a trail or project. Virtually all of these efforts are completed by volunteers, and they are always looking for another helping hand.

Whatever your time allows, get involved. The success of a community’s rail‑trail depends upon the level of citizen participation.

**How to Use Rail‑Trails**

By design, rail‑trails accommodate a variety of trail users. While this is generally one of the many benefits of rail‑trails, it also can lead to occasional conflicts among trail users. Everyone should take responsibility to ensure trail safety by following a few simple trail etiquette guidelines.

One of the most basic etiquette rules is “Wheels yield to heels.” Bicyclists (and in‑line skaters) yield to other users; pedestrians yield to equestrians.

Generally, this means that you need to warn users (to whom you are yielding) of your presence. If, as a bicyclist, you fail to warn a walker that you are about to pass, the walker could step in front of you, causing an accident that could have been prevented. Similarly, it is best to slow down and warn an equestrian of your presence. A horse can be startled by a bicycle, so make verbal contact with the rider and be sure it is safe to pass.

Here are some other guidelines you should follow to promote trail safety:

* Obey all trail rules posted at trailheads.
* Stay to the right except when passing.
* Pass slower traffic on their left; yield to oncoming traffic when passing.
* Give a clear warning signal when passing.
* Always look ahead and behind when passing.
* Travel at a responsible speed.
* Keep pets on a leash.
* Do not trespass on private property.
* Move off the trail surface when stopped to allow others to pass.
* Yield to other trail users when entering and crossing the trail.
* Do not disturb the wildlife.
* Do not swim in areas not designated for swimming.
* Watch out for traffic when crossing the street.
* Obey all traffic signals.