



A Vision for Nebraska Trails

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Above: The Chicago and North Western's Cowboy Line west of Gordon. This segment will include short-line railroad operation along with development of the Cowboy Trail.

Previous page: Chimney Rock, a landmark of past and present trails.

A Vision for Nebraska Trails

Traditionally, trails are thought of as facilities that provide for recreation and exercise. As a result, trails and paths are typically found within parks, as one of many features that public spaces offer to users. Yet, there are many reasons for developing trails outside of parks. Recent national experience with trails development suggests that linking places and resources of all types together produces a variety of benefits.

Principles of Trails Development

A trails system for Nebraska should adhere to six basic principles:

- 1. The system should be statewide.* Much of Nebraska's population is concentrated in the urban east and along the Platte River/I-80 corridor. Yet, a trails system for Nebraska should be statewide in scope, providing facilities for all parts of the state, not just the most heavily populated areas. Such a network will foster regional contacts among all Nebraskans and will make the state more accessible to visitors.
- 2. The system should benefit a wide variety of users.* While trails development frequently focuses on pedestrians and bicyclists, the system should

serve a wider public. It should be inclusive, providing quality facilities for many types of users, from equestrians to off-road vehicle users, from in-line skaters to cross-country skiers and canoeists. In addition, a trails system should accommodate all types of people -- senior citizens, children, families, people with disabilities, rural and urban residents, and visitors.

- 3. The system should have multiple benefits.* The creation of recreational opportunities is central to trails development; however, the system should have benefits beyond recreation. These benefits and roles, discussed in more detail in this section, include transportation, education, family experience, health and safety, and economic development.

- 4. The system should create economic opportunities.* By encouraging people to visit areas new to them, a trails network can create opportunities which enrich users' lives and help build local economies. Trail users need supporting services, producing niches for new or expanding businesses. For example, a trails system can promote an awareness of the history of Native Americans in Nebraska. The system can accomplish this by including three of the state's Indian reservations. This, in turn, can create significant economic opportunities on the reservations. Similarly, the economies of small towns can benefit from new visitors who are attracted by a multi-faceted recreational resource.

Right: The Mo Pac East Trail between Lincoln and Wabash. This trail, purchased by the Great Plains Trails Network and owned by the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District, will be the state's longest developed rail-trail by the end of 1994.

5. *The system should provide many levels of meaning and experience.* Nebraska's history and geography are both rich and subtle -- a story of courage and persistence, and of many people's interaction with the land. A trails system should be experiential, helping to weave recreation, environment, education, history, and communities together into a rich tapestry of meaning.

The statewide trails plan should be dynamic, growing and changing with time. Some proposed trail segments will change: new trail opportunities will emerge, while others may disappear. New ideas and exciting possibilities will develop. The plan should establish a framework for the planning and development of trails. The ideas and actions of people interested in and committed to learning and promoting the continuing story of Nebraska will add changing colors to the canvas of a dynamic trails system.

Benefits of a Trails System

These general principles help point the way to a system concept. This concept can be further refined by considering the benefits of a trails system, which include:

- *Recreation and Fitness.*
- *Economic Development.*
- *Improved Community Image and Quality.*
- *Awareness and Interpretation of History.*
- *Environmental Education and Preservation.*



- *One Nebraska: The Forging of Unity.*
- *Community Development and Local Transportation.*
- *Corridor Conservation for Multiple Uses.*

■ Recreation and Fitness

Improved recreation is usually considered the central benefit of a state trails program. Thus, trail requirements are often defined in relation to user groups: hikers, bicyclists, equestrians, skiers, canoeists, off-road vehicle users, and others. Recreational needs attract people to the trails system. A great trails program can enrich the recreational experience by adding other dimensions. However, the foundation for a rich, multi-level network remains outdoor recreation.

Trails-related activities are among the most popular and fastest growing forms of recreation in the state. These activities can be enjoyed individually or in families and social

groups by people of all ages. Trails provide recreation for many people at relatively low cost.

The 1993 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS - 93), conducted by the University of Nebraska's Bureau of Sociological Research as part of the update of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), underscores the growing popularity and need for trail-related facilities. Among all outdoor recreational activities for Nebraskans over age 5, walking ranks first with 108.3 million annual occasions, followed by bicycling at 43.7 million annual occasions, driving for pleasure at 34.7 million, and running and jogging at 22.2 million. Among other high-ranking trail-related activities, off-highway vehicle riding ranked sixth with 13.2 million occasions, walking a nature trail ninth at 6.3 million, and boating eleventh at 5.9 million.

A large proportion of Nebraskans also participate in trail activities. Of adults over age 19, 81.4% went for a recreational walk during the last year, 45.1% visited an historic site, 32.5% rode a bicycle, 19.6% ran or jogged, 17% rode an off-highway vehicle, and 11.9% rode horseback. Of children between ages 5 and 18, 77.8% rode a bicycle, 76.3% went for a walk, 55.7% visited an historic site, 34.5% ran or jogged, and 31.5% rode horseback. The Recreational Participation Table (page 12) displays the results of NASIS - 93.

Recent experience on Nebraska's trails systems reinforces the popularity of trail-related activities. A trail census conducted on one day in June, 1993 by the Great Plains Trails Network recorded over 6,000 trail users on Lincoln's system. The Rock Island Trail was the busiest segment, reporting over 2,300 daily users. In Omaha, the Keystone Trail is so congested that it experiences frequent recreational "traffic jams." Growing demand for trails is causing other communities, from villages to major cities, to enter the business of developing trails.

Trails development provides facilities which accommodate some of the state's most popular and frequent outdoor recreational activities. Trails touch the lives of many people and provide places for activities that are good for mind, body, and spirit.

■ Economic Development

The popularity of outdoor recreation in general and trail-related activities in particular suggests that an innovative and broad-ranging trails system can become a powerful force for rural economic development. Tourism has emerged as Nebraska's third largest source of revenue from outside the state, adding an estimated \$1.9 billion in 1993 to the state's economy. Trails systems have a demonstrated impact on increased tourism.

Local economic development theory suggests that two important sources of growth are:

TRAIL USERS OPINIONS IN LINCOLN

"Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the trail census was the personal testimonials offered to the census takers. Many users on all five trails stopped to chat, and some reported how wonderful the trails were for walking, for commuting to work, and for recreation.

Descriptive words were 'wonderful,' 'terrific,' 'enjoyable,' 'great,' and 'beautiful.' A woman who walks the trail every day said she didn't know what she would do without it. Others said that we need more trails."

*- Joan Dietrich
Great Plains Trails Network
Summer, 1992*

Participation in Outdoor Recreation and Trail Activities: 1993

Activity	Ages 5-18			Ages 19 and over			All Nebraskans		
	% of Population Participating	Annual Occasions (millions)	Rank	% of Population Participating	Annual Occasions (millions)	Rank	% of Population Participating	Annual Occasions (millions)	Rank
Walking	76.4	19.2	2	81.4	89.1	1	80.3	108.3	1
Bicycling	77.8	26.0	1	32.5	17.7	3	42.5	43.7	2
Driving for Pleasure	68.0	7.5	4	76.3	27.2	2	74.5	34.7	3
Running/Jogging	34.5	6.7	5	19.6	15.5	4	22.9	22.2	4
Swimming	89.7	8.7	3	44.4	9.3	6	53.4	18.0	5
Riding and OHV/ATV	25.1	2.8	7	17.0	10.4	5	18.7	13.2	6
Fishing	51.2	2.1	8	38.5	6.6	7	41.3	8.7	7
Softball/Baseball	48.8	5.5	6	17.7	3.1	15	24.6	8.6	8
Walking a Nature Trail*	--	1.6	12	--	4.7	10	--	6.3	9
Golfing	21.7	0.8	17	23.7	5.2	8	23.3	6.0	10
Boating	42.9	1.1	14	38.4	4.8	9	39.3	5.9	11
Volleyball	33.0	1.9	9	23.1	3.3	13	25.3	5.2	12
Hunting	20.7	1.3	13	20.1	3.9	11	19.2	5.2	12
Camping	50.7	1.3	13	33.4	3.7	12	37.2	5.0	14
Horseback Riding	31.5	1.9	9	11.9	2.6	16	16.2	4.5	15
Visiting Historic Sites	55.7	1.0	16	45.1	3.1	14	48.4	4.1	16
Tennis	16.7	0.6	18	11.3	2.5	17	12.4	3.1	17
Soccer	22.7	1.8	11	2.1	0.8	19	6.7	2.6	18
Backpacking/Hiking*	--	0.4	19	--	1.0	18	--	1.4	19
Crane-Watching on Platte	12.8	0.1	20	17.2	0.6	20	16.2	0.7	20
Snowmobiling*	--	--	21	--	0.1	21	--	0.1	21

* NASIS - 92 Figures. Items were not surveyed in 1993.

Source: University of Nebraska Bureau of Sociological Research:
Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey, 1993.

These data were collected by the University of Nebraska Bureau of Sociological Research as part of the Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS), a telephone survey of a representative sample of 1,800 Nebraskans conducted in the fall of each year.

- preventing dollars from slipping beyond the boundaries of a community, and
- capturing consumer spending that would not otherwise come to a town.

A statewide trails network, if integrated with other attractions, can encourage Nebraskans to spend vacation and recreation dollars within, rather than outside of, the state. These resources will continue to multiply within Nebraska, ultimately benefitting all of its citizens. Successful trails development can also attract new dollars into a region, adding to the growth of local economies. Finally, trails programs can create valuable new business opportunities by serving visitors to the region.

The recent experience of trails development in the Midwest and elsewhere underscores the effects of trails on rural economic development:

- The 32-mile *Elroy to Sparta State Park Trail* connects two small communities in central Wisconsin and is one of America's first rail-trails -- a conversion of an abandoned railroad right-of-way to trail use. A 1989 study of the trail's impact by the University of Wisconsin estimated that 50,000 people visited the trail annually. Trail users travelled an average of 228 miles to reach the trail, with half of all users coming from out of state. Trail users spent an average of \$25.14 per person, adding over \$1.25 million to the local economy each year.

- Iowa's 26-mile *Heritage Trail* links Dyersville, home of the "Field of Dreams" ballpark, to Dubuque. A 1987 study of trail use estimated visits in 1988 at 60,000 to 65,000 annually. A 1992 study of the trail by the National Park Service counted visits at 135,000 for 1991. The 1987 study projected direct annual expenditures for 1988 at \$168,000 and a total annual economic impact of \$360,000 to \$840,000. However, by 1991, annual direct expenditures by users of the Heritage Trail were \$1,243,350, or about *eight times* the 1988 projections.

- Missouri's *Katy Trail State Park* is developing along a 150-mile abandoned railroad right-of-way between St. Louis and Sedalia. A 1991 study by the University of Missouri evaluated the perceived economic impact of two pilot segments of the trail. Over 38% of the businesses surveyed indicated that an increase in gross revenues was the result of Katy Trail development. Almost 30% of businesses increased investment following the opening of trail; 21% indicated an average investment increase of over 50%. During the year following the survey, about one-third of businesses bordering the trail expected to make significant new investments. About 25% of all businesses suggested that the absence of the trail would have resulted in substantial decline in sales.

- A 1990 study by Michael K. Madden of the University of South Dakota indicates that the development of the *Black Hills Trail* (now the

Top right: The Old Depot Restaurant along Iowa's Raccoon River Valley Trail in the center of Adel. Trails open new and creative uses for historic structures such as railroad depots.

Bottom right: The Walton Trail Co. along the Mo Pac East Trail in Walton. The store combines sales and repair of bicycles with food service to users of the popular trail.

George Mickelson Trail) along an abandoned Burlington Northern right-of-way from Edgemont to Deadwood would generate direct expenditures of \$650,000, plus multiplier effects.

- A 1991 study by the National Park Service projects expected daily per capita expenditures of \$17-50 for bicycle tourists, \$17 for cross-country skiers, \$15 for canoeists, and \$60-133 for river rafters.

The expectation of added consumer spending creates opportunities for new businesses and reuse of historic buildings. In the village of Rocheport, Missouri (population 264) on the Katy Trail, a bed and breakfast operation in an historic school building, a new restaurant, an antique store, and two bicycle shops have opened since the completion of the trail. Development of Iowa's Raccoon River Valley Trail from Waukee to Yale encouraged the conversion of an historic railroad station in Adel to a high quality restaurant. Trail development can also encourage the adaptive reuse and restoration of other historic buildings, including Main Street storefronts and a variety of rural structures. Indeed, trails can reveal aesthetic and economic resources that were otherwise unseen by many. Breathing new life into small communities is a compelling benefit of trails development.

In addition to promoting measurable direct spending by trail users, trails development can help link communities and attractions together



into tourism networks. These networks, which allow cooperative marketing on a regional basis, can increase tourism at individual locations. Trails can be their connecting tissues.

■ Improved Community Image And Quality

While trails development can encourage economic growth, it can also help Nebraska and its communities market themselves in the competition for new residents and investment. Employees' quality of life is a significant factor in business site selection. The development of a statewide trails network, creating stronger relationships between communities and the countryside, can add to the array of features that Nebraska offers to residents. A statewide trails system can be a significant part of the "Good Life" for both current and prospective residents of our state. Local trails development has similar quality of life benefits for cities and towns.

■ Awareness and Interpretation of History

Nebraska's history is reflected in its communities and the people who brought them to life. The Game and Parks Commission's State Historical Parks and the programs of the Nebraska State Historical Society, including its stewardship of historic places and administration of the historic marker program, explain the relationships between people and places. Trails, which were so instrumental in the development of the state, are an ideal mechanism for historic preservation and interpretation. They can help describe themes and experiences of Nebraska history - the relationship between Indians and

their land, the experiences of travellers on the Oregon Trail as they descended Windlass Hill into Ash Hollow, the solitude of the pioneer Kinkaidier in Custer County, and the growth of modern communities. Trails provide an encounter with Nebraska's history that is impossible at highway speeds. Using their interpretive power helps a trails system move beyond recreation to become a *Network of Discovery*.

■ Environmental Education and Preservation

Trails can help Nebraskans become more aware of the state's unique environments. Nebraska's landscapes invite reflection and interaction; trails provide intimacy with the land. Our varied landscapes, consisting of unique river environments, the Sandhills, the valleys and canyons of the Platte and the Republican Rivers, the incomparable Niobrara Valley, and the rock formations that became the landmarks of westward-bound emigrants, all encourage exploration.

Trails provide access to hard-to-reach places in a way that has little impact on the land. Trail corridors can also become living educational laboratories for learning about nature. A trails system's ability to foster a closer relationship and awareness of our natural setting increases our sensitivity to the fragility and beauty of our place and ultimately makes us better stewards of the environment.

THE WALTON TRAIL COMPANY

Walton's main street begins and ends in a cornfield; the post office is considered the hub of activity. So why are 100 people coming to this town almost every day?

To get to the Walton Trail Company.

The Walton Trail Company sits on the corner of Main Street in a 100-year old building. Outside are wooden bike racks; inside is an old-fashioned store where one can get anything from specialty coffees to bike repairs.

In January 1993, Rich Rodenburg and Richard Conradt formed the company to tap some of the potential of the (Mo Pac East) trail.

Money isn't the only thing the bike trail brings to the little town.

"It brings a lot of capital into a little town, but it's also a great way to revive a town that's ailing," Conradt said. "It kind of brings them together and makes them less dependent on other towns."

*- News item,
The Daily Nebraskan,
October 27, 1993.*

TRAILS AND WILDLIFE HABITAT

"Recent studies of bird species utilizing the Mo Pac East Trail being developed by the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District have yielded some very interesting preliminary results. Over 200 species of birds have been documented using the corridor; a significant percentage of nesting birds on this corridor have been neotropical migratory species. While studies on corridors such as railway rights-of-way have only recently started in Nebraska and a number of other states, preliminary findings have shown these often narrow strips of habitat offer high value for many wildlife species, including both mammals and birds."

*- Carl Wolfe
Outdoor Education Specialist
Nebraska Game and Parks
Commission*

Finally, trail corridors protect vital wildlife habitats. They maintain bio-diversity in changing environments. While narrow, the linear corridors of vegetation created by trails become the threads that hold fragile or degraded landscapes together. In some cases, they host threatened plant species, such as the western prairie fringed orchid found along the proposed Norfolk to Chadron Cowboy Trail. Trail corridors provide islands of habitat in farmed areas for songbirds and other wildlife. Reversion of these corridors to adjacent owners frequently results in the loss of these habitats. Finally, the corridors often provide the only connection or travelway for wildlife species between larger blocks of habitat. In a real sense, trail corridors become transportation facilities for animals as well as people.

■ One Nebraska: The Forging Of Unity

"One Nebraska" is more than a slogan - it is a statement of a common purpose and relationship with one another. Yet, Nebraskans occasionally find themselves divided into urban and rural camps, created by lack of understanding and contact. Often, these rifts are healed only in the statewide unity of football Saturdays during the fall.

A statewide trails system encourages more than interaction with history and the environment -- it also helps us learn about one another. In using a trails network, Nebraskans will become familiar with people and towns in previously unfamiliar parts of the state. They

will increasingly see each other as people with similar hopes and goals, leading to greater mutual respect and helping Nebraska realize the dream of a united state, representing the best of American values.

■ Community Development and Local Transportation

Trails development has important community development potential for cities and towns. Open space systems provide form to communities as well as important amenities that help shape development patterns. Local trails systems help promote desirable growth patterns, becoming major elements of the design of new and existing neighborhoods.

Trails systems also increase access within towns and tie neighborhoods together. Many cities are divided by barriers, including major streets, waterways, railroads, and land use conflicts, creating sectional divisions. Trails can help overcome these barriers and produce more physically unified cities. For example, Alliance and Beatrice are using trails planning and development to connect neighborhoods and bridge social and geographic divisions.

Finally, trails play an important transportation role in communities. For example, bicycle commuters reported 11.7 million annual activity occasions in the 1991 SCORP. Taken by itself, this would make bicycle commuting one of the ten most popular recreation activities in the state. In addition, safe access to

parks, schools, shopping, and workplaces helps to reduce the number of routine trips made by automobile, improving air quality, decreasing traffic congestion, and conserving energy. Community trails systems promote commuting methods that combine fitness, environmental responsibility, and fun. Trails should be integrated into balanced transportation and land use planning within cities and towns.

■ Corridor Preservation for Multiple Uses

Like trails, many other public services and utilities such as drainageways, canals, flood control projects such as levees, sewers, electric lines, fiber optics, water mains, and pipelines need linear rights-of-way. Multiple-use trail and utility corridors can reduce the cost of trail development by sharing land acquisition and maintenance costs, by producing revenues through lease arrangements, and by using land efficiently.

Trails acquisition programs, such as railbanking (pursuant to Section 8(d) of the National Trails Act) can help preserve rights-of-way for multiple uses. These programs allow public agencies and other interested groups or individuals to negotiate agreements for interim trails use of corridors, subject to future restoration of railroad service.

Resource Corridors: A Concept for the Network of Discovery

The previous discussion considered the roles and benefits that a trails system can have for Nebraska and its communities. A vision emerges from this discussion of a rich and multi-dimensional resource that provides for recreational needs, creates economic benefits, and educates Nebraskans about their state, their environment, and themselves. A trails system can help people experience Nebraska in a personal and enriching way. The trails system concept must then speak to this vision of a *Network of Discovery*.

Trails system concepts can combine several different approaches, including:

- A service approach
 - An opportunities approach.
 - A network approach.
- *Service Approach.* This planning approach views trails as a recreational resource, to be allocated on the basis of population. It utilizes a service radius concept to distribute trails development. This technique is often used to assess needs for recreational facilities, including the allocation of sports fields, tennis courts, and other facilities. It is most appropriate for a state with a relatively equal distribution of population. However, it does not satisfy the special roles and visions for a statewide trails network.

THE MESSAGE OF LINKAGE

Linkage carries a powerful symbolic message and is, clearly, the philosophic core of the greenways movement. . . The point is that this movement is not merely an aggregation of conservationists undertaking similar projects, but a cadre of civic leaders who believe in the emblematic, as well as the actual, importance of linkage: of recreational and cultural resources, of wildlife populations, and most of all of neighborhoods and towns and cities and people of all colors and stations not only in the use of greenways but also in the making of them.

To make a greenway is to make a community.

*- Charles E. Little
Greenways for America
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
University Press, 1990.*

- *Opportunities Approach.* This approach focuses on potential development opportunities, such as railroad abandonments, and uses these corridors as the basis for trails planning. It effectively concentrates on specific projects. However, it reacts to available corridors, rather than creating a new type of system. As a result, it also only partially satisfies the potential roles for a Nebraska trails system.

- *Network Approach.* A third approach to state trails planning defines cross-state networks that link points together, while making it possible for people to move across an entire state along trails. This approach knits existing trails and potential corridors, including potential railroad abandonments and waterways, into the connected statewide network. This concept uses a transportation model, facilitating long-distance continuous trail trips. It is most appropriate to places that have demonstrated demands for very long distance travel or have potential corridors that produce a relatively fine-grained, linked system.

Each of these approaches is compelling and appropriate for specific situations. This plan presents a trails network concept for Nebraska that combines all three, but adds another idea: that a trail network grows naturally out of the distribution of important features throughout the state.

Nebraska's system should be a complex network that incorporates themes such as recreation, historical, cultural, and environmental interpretation, rural economic development, and family experience. This multi-dimensional approach suggests a system of *resource corridors* that provide clusters of recreational, environmental, and historic features. Trails are the spines of the resource corridors, and become the method by which people move through them. The resource corridor concept provides opportunities for interpretation, recreation, and interaction with communities. It becomes a way to think about the state and its regions -- a canvas for future improvement and elaboration.

What are the characteristics of resource corridors? In general, the corridors should:

- *Represent a rich aggregation of features and resources, including towns, parks and open spaces, historical attractions, and environmental features that reflect the state's geographic and ecological characteristics and the special cultural resources of communities.* The corridors should incorporate clusters of features.

- *Provide experiences that range from day trips to weekend and four-day excursions.* This variety serves local needs and encourages regional weekend tourism, providing alternatives to long, expensive vacation trips.

- *Provide good access to services and towns.* Nebraska's inspiring, austere landscapes, sense

of land and endless sky provide one with a sense of wonder and humility. However, these isolated areas, where services may be far apart, are not friendly for family recreation that may involve small children or people with special needs. Therefore, the corridors should include ample opportunities for service support and for contact with communities.

- *Provide trails development that ties resources together.* An abandoned railroad corridor does not necessarily make a good trail opportunity if it has no other context. The most successful trails will link a variety of special features together. The resource corridors should give users pleasant surprises and places to discover. Trails add new dimensions to these experiences by linking features and attractions with one another and with their environments.
- *Provide opportunities for cooperative marketing and promotion.* The resource corridor approach is development-oriented, suggesting the linkage and packaging of major resources. It invites promotion and marketing through the creation of regional tourism networks. The corridors encourage a cooperative approach to the development of trails. This approach asks businesses and communities to pool resources and talents, building regional spirit and encouraging cooperative efforts.
- *Be linked into a continuous statewide network.* Some Nebraskans are avid long-distance bicyclists, as the success of the annual Bicycle

Ride Across Nebraska (BRAN) indicates, while others enjoy long-distance hiking, trail riding, or snowmobiling. Still others drive across the state for pleasure. The linkage of the corridors into a continuous network accommodates recreational users who travel long distances and gives people who drive for pleasure opportunities for recreation outside of the car. These connections can make the Nebraska trails experience particularly compelling and integrate other communities and features into the trails system.

■ Defining Resource Corridors

The definition of resource corridors is a key part of this plan. The corridors should grow naturally from the distribution of resources and opportunities in the state. The next section of the plan identifies a process for defining the corridors. The process considers a number of important features that determine the shape, theme, and character of individual resource corridors. These corridors, together with the more detailed trails planning components presented in later chapters, distinguish the *Network of Discovery* and the vast potential that trails can have for the state in the twenty-first century.

