

Benefits of Trails & Greenways

National Park Service
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Footpaths and trails have been an integral part of America's landscape. Native Americans hunted animals by following their trails through forests and across open prairies. Over time, these narrow paths became trade routes and established transportation corridors. Later, the western frontier was explored and expanded largely by trail. Canals and towpaths brought settlers and goods across the Appalachian Mountains. Pioneers following Indian pathways opened up the Northwest Territories. The Oregon Trail led wagon trains of pioneers to the Pacific Northwest, while El Camino Real linked Spanish Missionaries to the California coast. America's highway system and streets of towns and cities more often than not follow many of these early trails and footpaths that started as animal track through North America's forests, mountains and prairies.

Today, for millions of Americans, trails are a link to the outdoors, providing opportunities for recreation, exercise and transportation. Many are realizing the benefits from having trails and greenways close to home. The following is an overview of the range of benefits that result from having these amenities woven into the fabric of communities across America.

Recreation

One of the most direct benefits of community trails and greenways is the close to home, accessible recreation opportunities they provide.

- Trails make communities better places to live by preserving and creating open spaces for recreation.
- Trails and greenways provide new opportunities for outdoor recreation and non-motorized transportation.
- Trails also provide a unique facility to serve a diverse population of a community that may otherwise have limited opportunities to access natural areas due to financial or transportation constraints.
- Trails provide affordable exercise and recreational opportunities within the community.

Transportation

In addition to being corridors for recreation, trails and greenways can function as non-motorized transportation corridors for pedestrians and cyclists.

- One-fourth of all trips people make are one mile or less, but three-fourths of these short trips are made by car (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000).
- For school trips one mile or less, only 31% are made by walking; within two miles, only 2% of school trips are made by bike.
- Trails and greenways link neighborhoods with shopping and entertainment districts and provide pleasant transportation alternatives for commuting to work and school.

Healthy Living

Many people realize exercise is important for maintaining good health in all stages of life; however many do not regularly exercise. The U.S. Surgeon General estimates that 60% of American adults are not regularly active and another 25% are not active at all. Trails and greenways provide a safe, inexpensive avenue for regular exercise for people living in rural, urban and suburban areas. There is scientific evidence that supports providing convenient access to places for physical activity, such as trails connecting to parks or other recreational facilities, increases the level of physical activity in a community.

- In California, approximately one out of every two adults is overweight or obese. One out of every three children (ages 9 to 11) and one out of four teens are at risk due to being overweight or obese.
- Obesity and physical inactivity were estimated to cost California nearly \$25 billion in health care costs and lost productivity in 2000.
- People are more likely to be physically active if they have recreational facilities close to their homes.

Economics and Property Appreciation

Trails are becoming common in residential neighborhoods. Development plans for homes, apartments, and townhouses often include footpaths to enhance recreational opportunities and property values. Urban trails are regarded by real estate agents as an amenity that helps to attract buyers and to sell property. Trails are considered lifestyle enhancements and are usually included in the sales package for a property.

- Property adjacent to/nearby trails can be an amenity that attracts buyers and makes the property easier to sell.
- Studies in Denver, Seattle, Minnesota and other communities across the country have consistently found that that proximity to trails increases the value of homes from 1-6.5%.
- In 1990, more than 197,000 hours per day were being lost due to traffic congestion, costing California businesses more than \$2 million a day.

Environment

Most directly, greenways protect important habitat and provide corridors for people and wildlife. However, trail corridors can also assist in providing natural buffer zones from pollution run-off and become important tools for improving water quality. They can also improve air quality by protecting the plants that naturally create oxygen and filter out air pollutants.

- Greenways function as a “buffer” between the built and natural environments.
- The value of open space to the public is enhanced by providing access.
- Greenways function as hands-on environmental classrooms for people of all ages.
- Trails provide enjoyable and safe options for transportation, which reduces air pollution.

Safe and Livable Communities

Trails promote safe and livable communities. The recreation, health, transportation and environmental benefits collectively can contribute to an overall enhanced quality of life in communities. Another variable to consider is the impact of trails and greenways on safety. While many believe that trails promote crime, a review of four separate studies conducted between 1979 and 1997 concluded that rail-trails do not increase crime and that rates of crime on suburban rail-trails is lower than overall suburban crime (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy 1998).

- Trails and greenways can reduce crime and illegal activity through regular use and high visibility of users.
- Trails and greenways provide informal opportunities to meet and interact with neighbors.
- Integrating unique features such as trails and greenways into communities provide a sense of place and community pride.
- Neighborhoods where children can safely walk or bike to a park, school, or to a neighbor’s home are generally also good places to live.

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