

Teacher Background:

National Trails System

There is no universal legal definition of a trail in the United States. One of the best, used for national recreation trails, is: *... a travel way established either through construction or use which is passable by at least one or more of the following, including but not limited to: foot traffic, stock, watercraft, bicycles, in-line skates, wheelchairs, cross-country skis, off-road recreation vehicles such as motorcycles, snowmobiles, ATVs, and 4-wheel drive vehicles.*

Each trail will have regulations that indicate what mode of travel is allowed on that particular trail. Not all trails allow all types of travel.

National trails are officially established under the authorities of the **National Trails System Act** (16 USC 1241-51). There are several types:

- **National scenic trails** are usually 100 miles or longer, continuous, primarily non-motorized routes of outstanding recreation opportunity. Such trails are established by Act of Congress. The Natchez Trace Parkway has a Scenic Trail system that is not continuous. In 1983 Congress authorized 95 miles of National Scenic Trail along the Natchez Trace Parkway. The entire Natchez Trace Parkway is considered part of the National Trail System.
- **National historic trails** commemorate historic (and prehistoric) routes of travel that are of significance to the entire Nation. They must meet all three criteria listed in Section 5(b)(11) of the National Trails System Act. Such trails are established by Act of Congress.
- **National recreation trails**, also authorized in the National Trails System Act, are existing regional and local trails recognized by either the Secretary of Agriculture or the Secretary of the Interior upon application.

Until 1968, the only Federal role in trails was to build and maintain those on Federal lands. The National Trails System Act of 1968 made it Federal policy to recognize and promote trails by providing financial assistance, support of volunteers, coordination with States, and other authorities. As a result, 11 national scenic trails (NSTs) and 19 national historic trails (NHTs) have been established by law (and are administered by the National Park Service, the USDA Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management, depending on the trail); over 1000 national recreation trails have been recognized by the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior; and 2 side-and-connecting trails have also been certified. In addition, other Federal statutes support and fund trails through programs such as FHWA's Recreational Trails Program and Transportation Enhancements programs, HUD block grants, and the NPS Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program.