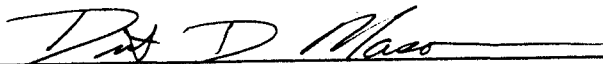


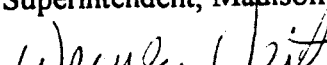



NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL FINAL TRAILWAY PLAN

Analysis of Alternatives and Environmental Assessment Northwest Wisconsin and Adjoining Minnesota Region

Prepared by

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Ice Age, North Country, and Lewis and Clark National Trails
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Recommended By:	<u></u> Recreation Planner, North Country Trail Association	<u>12/18/97</u> Date
Recommended By:	<u></u> Manager, North Country NST	<u>12-18-97</u> Date
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Approved By:	<u></u> Regional Director, Midwest Region	<u>12/19/97</u> Date

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

Analysis of Alternatives
and
Environmental Assessment
Northwest Wisconsin and Adjoining Minnesota Region

Executive Summary

This document analyzes six alternatives, including the no action alternative, regarding the question of routing and developing the North Country National Scenic Trail across Bayfield, Burnett, and Douglas Counties, Wisconsin, and Carlton County, Minnesota.

In March 1980, Federal legislation authorized the establishment of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NST) as a component of the National Trails System (16 U.S.C. 1241 *et seq.*). To date, Congress has authorized the establishment of eight National Scenic Trails--long distance, non motorized trails that follow major geographic features or pass through scenic areas. National Scenic Trails are patterned after the renowned Appalachian NST.

The Comprehensive Plan for Management and Use of The North Country Trail - 1982 used a very broad approach for identifying a potential corridor of opportunity in Northwest Wisconsin. Meetings in Wisconsin and Minnesota over the last few years have identified some concerns about the 1982 route. These concerns led to the need to rethink the route from the western edge of the Chequamegon National Forest (Wisconsin) to the Jay Cooke State Park/ Duluth area in Minnesota. A planning team was formed to investigate alternatives and conduct a public involvement process. Five alternatives plus the no action alternative resulted from the scoping and evaluation process. The preferred alternative, Alternative 2, totals 109 miles across Bayfield and Douglas Counties, Wisconsin and Carlton County, Minnesota. Of this total, approximately 88 miles traverse public lands, and 22 miles cross private property.

Since there are private holdings that the North Country NST must cross in Douglas County, Wisconsin and Carlton County, Minnesota and because of the general philosophy and purpose of a NST, the planning team is recommending a trail for foot travel only. This would include such winter uses as snowshoeing, and limited, ungroomed cross-country skiing. Development of a low impact, foot travel only trail using the careful design and construction techniques discussed herein will result in only minimal impacts.

Locating and constructing a new trail across the planning area may produce both positive benefits and negative consequences. Negative impacts on the human environment are generally limited to a perceived, slight increase in what are collectively called nuisance impacts. Adjoining landowners typically have fears about loss of privacy, vandalism, and littering when a new trail is being planned. Past experience and formal studies have shown these fears to be groundless as the perceived impacts do not develop after the trail is constructed. What trail users and neighboring landowners normally experience as the most important benefits of a trail are health, fitness, and recreation opportunities. Other advantages include aesthetic beauty, open space, natural resource protection, and in some instances, higher property resale values. Also, local communities may even experience bolstered economies and increased local pride. The new trail is predicted to have a minimum impact on the natural and cultural environments. These slight impacts are further discussed in Section VIII--Affected Environment and Impacts.

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NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

**Analysis of Alternatives
and
Environmental Assessment
Northwest Wisconsin and Adjoining Minnesota Region**

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I. Introduction and Background Information

In March 1980, Federal legislation authorized the establishment of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NST) as a component of the National Trails System (16 U.S.C. 1241 et seq.). It is one of only eight trails authorized by Congress to be National Scenic Trails. Patterned after the renowned Appalachian Trail, NSTs are long distance, non-motorized trails that follow major geographic features or pass through scenic areas.

In many ways, the North Country NST is similar in concept to the Appalachian NST. Yet in other ways, it is uniquely different as it takes the visitor through a diverse series of landscapes rather than following a mountain range or other distinct geographic feature. When completed, the North Country NST will extend from the vicinity of Crown Point, New York, to Lake Sakakawea State Park, on the Missouri River, in North Dakota (Attachment 1), where it joins the route of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. While it was originally thought that the distance required to span these two extremities was about 3,200 miles, as work progresses to complete the trail, a total length of about 4,175 miles is now anticipated. Currently, more than 1,344 miles of the trail are in place and certified as meeting the standards of a NST. Another 800-1,000 miles, some of which are on roads, are walkable but not yet certified.

The National Park Service is responsible for overall administration of the North Country NST. However it is a partnership project where the actual development and management of the trail is intended to be accomplished through many cooperating Federal, State, and local agencies, and private trail organizations. When viewed in this manner, the North Country NST is truly a cooperative endeavor.

When Congress established the trail, a very general route was delineated. A slightly more refined, but still general route was shown in *The Comprehensive Plan for Management and Use of The North Country Trail - 1982* which envisioned approximately 143 miles of the trail route passing through Bayfield, Burnett, and Douglas Counties, Wisconsin, and into Pine and Carlton Counties, Minnesota--from the western edge of the Chequamegon National Forest to Jay Cooke State Park (Attachment 3).

From the west boundary of the Chequamegon National Forest, a long established and certified portion of the trail extends easterly for 60 miles. Within the planning area itself, 4.2 miles of trail within Brule River State Forest was certified as North Country Trail NST in February of 1997. This includes the entire 2.1 miles of the Historic Portage Trail. The balance of the route across all of the counties is located primarily on county and state owned properties with scattered private properties dispersed among the public lands. The purpose of this plan is to identify a specific corridor of opportunity within which a permanent trail can be established, and thereby guide agencies and private volunteer organizations to secure a route for the trail.

II. Purpose of the Environmental Assessment

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) requires consideration of the environmental effects of proposed Federal actions, in this case the National Park Service's proposal to select a specific alignment for a North Country NST route across northwest Wisconsin and the adjoining Minnesota region.

This assessment serves to:

- A. Comply with all provisions regarding environmental considerations and public involvement required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) by carrying out an open, public planning process to determine the ideal location for the trail and to identify and address public issues and concerns.
- B. Comply with 36 CFR Part 800: Protection of Historic Properties, the regulations of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation governing the section 106 review process and the Programmatic Agreement as implemented by the National Park Service, the National Conference on State Historic Preservation Officers and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.
- C. Comply with consultation requirements established in the Endangered Species Act of 1973.
- D. Comply with Executive Order 11988--Floodplain Management and Executive Order 11990--Protection of Wetlands.
- E. Provide information on the physical and social environment through which the trail passes for the local trail clubs and the counties to use as they plan the physical location, construction, and subsequent maintenance of the trail.
- F. Foster public involvement in developing and managing the trail, including recognition and possibly adoption of the trail by public and private land use planning groups.

III. Description of Northwest Wisconsin and Adjoining Minnesota Region

Bayfield, Burnett, and Douglas Counties, Wisconsin, and Pine and Carlton Counties, Minnesota are located in the northwest portion of Wisconsin and the adjoining northeastern portion of Minnesota within a short drive of the "Twin Ports" of Superior, Wisconsin and Duluth, Minnesota (Attachment 2).

The terrain and soil change from gently rolling and sandy in the east to steep, rocky and broken in the west. In the middle of the planning area are vast expanses of remote wetlands. The landscape

offers scenic overlooks and rugged near-wilderness areas. Ice Age glaciers left their mark on the land, along with ancient volcanoes and earthquakes. Reminders of the area's logging past are found in abandoned logging roads and railroad grades. Forest management and the associated manufacturing of forest products remain a major industry in the area. Tourism/recreation is another major industry fueling the local economy throughout the planning area.

Northwest Wisconsin and the adjoining Minnesota region is rich in natural beauty as well as recreational opportunities. Except for the high degree of development adjoining Lake Superior, principally in the Duluth/Superior greater metropolitan area, the planning area is still largely rural in character with small towns dotting the countryside. The planning area is home to permanent populations of Eastern Timber Wolf (*Canus lupis*)--an indication of its wild character.

Water is an abundant resource within the planning area. There are literally hundreds of small, inland lakes, ponds, and streams. As an example, there are 966 inland lakes in Bayfield County and 431 in Douglas County. Most are inhabited by a variety of fish including: several species of trout, bass, perch, walleye, northern pike, muskellunge, various sunfish and others. Lake Superior is the largest, deepest fresh water lake in the world, encompassing 3,200 square miles. It is over 160 miles wide at the widest point with a maximum depth of 1,290 feet.

There are three State Parks (S.P.) and two National Parks in the area; Amnicon Falls S. P. (825 acres), Pattison S. P. (1,374 acres), Jay Cooke S. P. (9,000 acres), Saint Croix National Scenic Riverway (NSR) (39,041 acres), and Apostle Islands National Lakeshore (16,321 land acres). Vast State and County forests cover much of the planning area and account for the bulk of the public land. They are perhaps the biggest reason for the still undeveloped, natural appearing landscape. Public areas include Bayfield County Forest (177,000 acres), Brule River State Forest (40,467 acres), Douglas County Forest (267,000 acres), Douglas County Wildlife area (3,990 acres), St. Croix S.F. (26,000 acres), and Nemadji State Forest (93,300 acres).

IV. Planning Background in Northwest Wisconsin and Adjoining Minnesota Region

A Final Environmental Impact Statement (FES 75-85 dated October 3, 1975) was prepared by the former Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. This FES titled *The North Country Trail--A Potential Addition to the National Trails System* shows the trail passing through northwest Wisconsin and the adjoining Minnesota Region and describes a very general route on pages 61- 69 of the FES.

As mentioned in Section I, *The Comprehensive Plan for Management and Use of The North Country Trail - 1982* also indicates the trail route as passing through northwest Wisconsin and the adjoining Minnesota Region (Attachment 3). This plan used a very broad approach for identifying a potential corridor of opportunity. Within the last several years, discussions and meetings with St. Croix NSR staff, Burnett County Forestry staff, Minnesota DNR, and others (in both Wisconsin and Minnesota) identified a number of concerns about the 1982 route. Some of these concerns are: 1) When the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway worked on an Environmental Assessment to locate a route for the trail within the park it became obvious that the park is

essentially a narrow, water-based band along the river. Adjoining the river are many wetlands that are not conducive to trail building. In addition, eagle nests are located in several locations within the ownership. These nests and their necessary zones of protection serve as trail barriers. The result of these various factors was a route that was partially on roads. A road route as a permanent solution was unsatisfactory to the Superintendent and Manager of the North Country NST who asked St. Croix's Superintendent to defer any further work until a detailed county-wide planning process could be accomplished. 2) Because of the limited NPS ownership, there were many places where the route had to leave NPS property and enter Burnett County Forestry land. County officials strongly felt that the North Country Trail should follow existing snowmobile and ATV routes. While following a motorized route may temporarily serve as the trail, such a location could never become an officially certified segment of the trail. 3) The 1982 route entered Minnesota west of Danbury, WI. It then turned north following the Minnesota-Wisconsin Boundary Trail to Jay Cooke S.P. After the 1982 plan was written, Minnesota officials pointed out that the Minnesota-Wisconsin Boundary Trail was a snowmobile route and further, it was passable only during the winter months when the extensive wetlands were frozen.

These concerns pointed out the need to rethink the route's Wisconsin/Minnesota connection--essentially from the western edge of the Chequamegon National Forest (WI) to Jay Cooke State Park (MN). A planning team was formed to investigate alternatives and conduct a public involvement process. Five alternatives plus the no action alternative resulted from the scoping and evaluation process.

V. Implementation of the Planning Process

In December 1995, a planning team comprised of representatives of the NPS-Madison Trails Office, North Country Trail Association, Douglas County Forestry Department, Bayfield County Forestry Department, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources initiated a comprehensive planning process for the North Country NST in northwest Wisconsin and the adjoining Minnesota region. The purpose of this process was to determine the ideal location for the trail, and to comply with Federal and State environmental laws.

Each planning team member was asked to provide a list of their organizations goals and objectives for the North Country Trail. The following list was the National Park Service's Goals and Objectives. The selected route and planning should:

- Pass through the most scenic, feasible terrain.
- Connect scenic highlights such as long vistas, waterfalls, points of interest, historically interesting areas, and other attractions.
- Incorporate existing recreation features such as parks, other trails, etc. whenever compatible with the above statements.

