



RTCA FAQs for NPS Staff

1. What is the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program?

The Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program is the community assistance branch of the National Park Service. RTCA staff work collaboratively, by invitation, to assist interested community partners from across the United States in conserving rivers, restoring natural areas, enhancing recreation opportunities, or developing trails or greenways. RTCA measures its success by its ability to achieve on-the-ground results. On average, RTCA helps project partners protect more than 700 miles of rivers, create over 1,400 miles of trails, and conserve more than 63,700 acres of open space annually.

2. How does working with RTCA benefit my park?

National park units benefit from the collaborative partnerships that RTCA works to build between parks and their surrounding communities, public, private and non-profit entities. Often, these strong relationships lead to greater park support and sustained community commitment to public lands. The program serves as a catalyst able to convene and facilitate meetings, coordinate partnership efforts, identify resources, and allow park units to participate in a project as a partner or stakeholder.

RTCA helps build the capacity of its community partners, giving them the knowledge and tools necessary to work more effectively with NPS administered areas to conserve important lands, establish trails and create greater conservation and recreation opportunities. Through RTCA's promotion of outdoor engagement, communities and park units alike are reconnecting with their surrounding landscape, exploring and appreciating their local trails and park systems, and fostering a conservation ethic, with the next generation of conservation stewards and a more diverse public.

3. What types of assistance does the RTCA program provide?

The RTCA program provides assistance to its project partners by: building partner relationships; increasing the viability of partner organizations, helping partners define goals through consensus; developing conceptual, strategic and workable project plans; helping the public participate in defining community goals; identifying potential sources of funding for project implementation; and teaching "hands-on" conservation and other technical skills necessary to successfully realize conservation and outdoor recreation projects.

In the case of a collaborative initiative between a national park unit and a local community, RTCA helps to develop the strong and lasting relationships and long term management frameworks necessary to achieve mutual project goals now and in the future. For example, in the case of a community that wants to construct a trail to its neighboring national park, RTCA can facilitate the initial community-park dialogue, help create a consensus vision between the two parties, assist in navigating the planning process for the community, help identify funding sources for the trail, and provide recommendations for trail design and management.

4. What are the skills/specialties of RTCA staff?

As diverse professionals, RTCA staff have backgrounds in: outdoor recreation planning, community planning, landscape architecture, trail planning and construction, natural resource management, environmental engineering, and more. An active communication network among all RTCA staff around the country helps facilitate access to the best known skills and knowledge available for each project. Individual staff background and skill sets aside, there are a number of core competencies that typify the collective work of the RTCA staff, including:

- Partnership development and viability
- Public outreach and engagement
- Meeting facilitation
- Organizational development
- Capacity building and resource leveraging
- Project planning and design

5. How are RTCA projects typically organized?

Individual project needs guide how projects are organized. Typical RTCA efforts span a two-year period and include several steps:

- Recruitment of a strong local group of project leaders and stakeholders
- Identification of a group decision-making process
- Establishment of a group mission, vision and goals by consensus
- Definition of strong partner roles and responsibilities
- Implementation of a small-scale, highly visible on-the-ground demonstration projects
- Setting of achievable goals, recording of progress, and building momentum with small steps

When a project is accepted, RTCA works with park staff and community partners to identify project goals and outline individual roles and responsibilities with sensitivity to park unit's need to comply with federal agreements, management policies, NEPA and FACA. Depending on the complexity of a project, RTCA may recommend developing a project agreement between parties.

6. RTCA stresses partnerships in our projects. Why?

RTCA defines partnerships as any group of individuals, communities, parks, governments, or organizations that collaborate and work together toward a common goal. Generally, the more partners involved in a project, the more perspectives, ideas, interests and resources are available for a successful final result. Dissenting opinions and perspectives are especially important to consider and resolve, as RTCA staff have found community consensus to produce the most successful outcomes.

7. What is RTCA's role and authority regarding project assistance?

When working with a NPS unit, RTCA's role is to facilitate a successful collaboration between community partners and park staff, giving them the tools, assistance, and resources necessary to define and achieve a shared outdoor recreation or conservation vision. RTCA staff will avoid the role of a park planner or exercise decision-making authority over a project, these responsibilities and project oversight remain with park personnel.

The RTCA program cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of the NPS mission throughout the country. The Outdoor Recreation Act (PL 88-29), the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (PL 90-542) and the National Trails System Act (PL 90-543) authorize the Park Service to assist, advise, and cooperate with states and local communities.

8. Does the RTCA program provide funding?

No, RTCA does not award monetary grants or loans. Instead, RTCA supplies a staff person with experience in community-based outdoor recreation and conservation to work with partners and parks. If funding is necessary to achieve project goals, RTCA can often assist partners in identifying and securing sources of financial assistance. RTCA can and has worked with parks in sharing resources and staff in specific situations.

9. What does the RTCA application process entail?

Prospective applicants should discuss their project idea with [RTCA staff](#) before applying for assistance. at least two weeks prior to applying for assistance to start the dialogue about a potential project application. RTCA provides an [online application](#) and [guidelines](#) on the RTCA national [application page](#). Project applications are due annually on August 1st.

NPS units are encouraged to participate in the application process for RTCA assistance as long as the primary applicant is a non-federal partner. NPS units may assist their partners with the application process, submit letters of project support, and are encouraged to be fully integrated collaborators from the project outset. Letters of support should identify the type of commitment, cooperation, and cost-sharing that each partner will offer the project.

10. What RTCA work is happening near my NPS unit?

RTCA staff work in communities across the country. You can learn more about current efforts in your state on the [RTCA national website](#).