

What Does the NPS Staff in Madison Do, Anyway?

By

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A fair question. Many of you have perhaps wondered about this. After all, isn't it the volunteers who are building and maintaining the trail? What is left to be done?

Most of our responsibilities for the North Country National Scenic Trail are stated in the National Trails System (NTS) Act. While we currently cannot acquire lands, there are many other requirements in the Act that we, as the federal administering agency, must carry out. Fortunately, the Act says we can carry out those responsibilities on lands owned by others, if agreeable to them, or assist others in carrying out those responsibilities.

This article begins a series that will attempt to clearly explain what it is that the National Park Service (NPS) staff in Madison, Wisconsin, does for the North Country Trail. The following section-by-section litany of the NTS Act's requirements/authorities provides a good overview of our responsibilities. Subsequent articles will elaborate on these, and requirements found in other legislation, regulations, and policy directives.

Section 5(a)(8)—Establish and administer the North Country National Scenic Trail.

Section 5(f)—Prepare a comprehensive plan for management and use of the trail. This was completed in September 1982.

Section 7(a)(1)(A)—Consult with all affected state and federal agencies. (This is a large and continuing responsibility.)

Section 7(a)(1)(B)—Select the routes for the trail. In doing this, we must “obtain the advice and assistance of the States, local governments, private organizations, and landowners and land users concerned.” (This is the basis for the trail route planning we do and for the trail segment certification process.)

Section 7(c)—Permit or provide for the development of “campsites, shelters, and related-public-use facilities.” Permit other uses along the trail that will not substantially interfere with the nature and purposes of the trail. Make reasonable efforts to provide sufficient access to the trail and, to the extent practicable, avoid activities incompatible with the purposes for which the trail was established. Prohibit the use of motorized vehicles by the general public along the trail. (This is the basis for our involvement in determining appropriate uses.)

Section 7(c)—“Establish a uniform marker, including thereon an appropriate and distinctive symbol for” the trail. Provide the markers to cooperating interests and “require such agencies to erect and maintain them in accordance with the standards established.”

Section 7(c)—“Provide for trail interpretation sites ... in order to present information to the public about the trail, at the lowest possible cost.”

Section 7(e)—“Encourage the States or local governments involved (1) to enter into written cooperative agreements with landowners, private organizations, and individuals to provide the necessary trail right-of-way, or (2) to acquire such lands or interests therein to be utilized as segments of the ... trail: Provided, That if the State or local governments fail to enter into such written cooperative agreements or to acquire such lands or interests therein ... the ... Secretary, may (i) enter into such agreements with landowners, States, local governments, private organizations, and individuals for the use of lands for trail purposes, or (ii) acquire private lands or interests therein by donation, purchase with donated or appropriated funds or exchange.” (However, section 10(c)(1) currently prohibits federal agencies spending funds to purchase lands, except for one interpretive site in each state.)

Section 7(h)—“Cooperate with and encourage the States to operate, develop, and maintain portions of [the] trail which are located outside the boundaries of federally administered areas. When deemed to be in the public interest, ... enter [into] written cooperative agreements with the States or their political subdivisions, landowners, private organizations, or individuals to operate, develop, and maintain any portion of [the] trail either within or outside a federally administered area. Such agreements may include provisions for limited financial assistance to encourage participation in the acquisition, protection, operation, development, or maintenance of [the] trail, provisions providing volunteer in the park ... status ... to individuals, private organizations, or landowners participating in such activities, or provisions of both types.”

Section 7(i)—Issue “regulations ... governing the use, protection, management, development, and administration” of the trail “with the concurrence of the heads of any other Federal agencies administering lands through which [the trail] passes, and after consultation with the States, local governments, and organizations concerned.”

Section 11(a)—“Encourage volunteers and volunteer organizations to plan, develop, maintain, and manage [the trail], where appropriate.”

Section 11(b)—“Assist volunteers and volunteers organizations in planning, developing, maintaining, and managing [the] trail. Volunteer work may include, but need not be limited to ... planning, developing, maintaining, or managing ... [the] trail ..., operating programs to organize and supervise volunteer trail building efforts ..., conducting trail-related research projects, or providing education and training to volunteers on methods of trails planning, construction, and maintenance.” (This is the basis for all of the technical assistance and training we provide to volunteers.)

Section 11(c)—“Make available Federal facilities, equipment, tools, and technical assistance to volunteers and volunteer organizations, subject to such limitations and restrictions as the

appropriate Secretary or the head of any Federal land managing agency deems necessary or desirable.” (An example of an appropriate restriction is requiring users of chainsaws to be trained and certified.)