

Public Lands and Trail Use
By the Horsemen's Council of Illinois

The tremendous growth of recreational and organized trail riding is a positive impact on the equine industry. Public lands offer the best opportunity for equestrian use and enjoyment. However, along with the increasing number of horses on the trail come increased pressures on the resources of our national trail systems. Even with the increasing numbers, horseback riders are only a small portion of the total number of people enjoying trails. Trail use by all types of users is reaching numbers that were not considered when most of our public recreation areas were planned, nor was the variety of ways to enjoy a trail.

Sharing the trail. ATV's, motorcycles, bicycles, hikers, cross-country skiers, hunters horseback riders and a variety of others often compete for space on the same trails which creates the potential for conflict between the different uses. While some conflict will exist between every user group, the conflicts between equestrians and other users seem to be the greatest. Designated use trails had been utilized to minimize potential conflicts but separate use trails tend to breed ill will among the trail community and aggravate the use/conflict issue. This trail management technique is no longer being used for creating new trails as there is simply not enough land to provide a separate trail for each use and user group. Trail managers attempt to provide quality experiences for all users and to best serve the tremendous increase in demand.

Change is the only constant. Our familiar and existing trails are subject to periodic review with updates of local, state and federal recreation plans. These plans are written, evaluated and revised to provide for better facilities and trail layout, minimize impacts on soil and water and protect rare and/or endangered species. Monitoring the impacts of people and horses using the trail/forest resources is the main source of data for "put on any pending revisions to recreation plans that may affect equestrian use of an area. How our trail habits and actions are perceived will directly impact future use in our favorite riding area

Education is paramount. If equestrian use is to be permitted, or even allowed to continue, in a given area all trail users of that area must understand the problems associated with litter, erosion, short cutting turns, tying to trees and the general damage caused to the environment. The entire trail community must become better educated about, and respectful of; their riding areas and what that land must provide for people, plants and animals. Education will always be the primary way to solve problems. Work to become the "best" horse group that your manager has.

Participate. Participation by equestrian trail users in the planning of new trail systems and the management of existing areas is vital in determining how use of public lands will be allocated. Horseback riders are presently among the least involved of the user groups. The lack of involvement is being felt by the lack of consideration given to their needs. The creation of user group councils comprised of members from all use groups has proven valuable in many areas. User input is the key to providing a quality trail system for all that seek to use it. Incorporating trail users into the overall planning and management process assists land managers in the development and revision of recreation plans and serves to develop a tolerance of others who wish to use the trails in a reasonable but different manner. Increased user-manager cooperation will be necessary and horseback riders must make an effort to be a part of the process.

Paying for the trails. Long ago hunters recognized the need to purchase or lease lands on which to hunt. They also provide funding to purchase and maintain public hunting lands through a "user pay" system with the purchase of hunting

licenses and excise taxes on sporting arms and ammunition. Some public land managers are now recognizing the need to fund trail systems through similar fees assessed on trail users. This trend has become more apparent recently with snowmobilers, ATVers and bicyclists (in some areas) are obtaining dedicated funding in much the same manner. Volunteering to work on trail creation or maintenance projects will help to defer this type of fee schedule use on our public lands. Inquiries can be made on the local level with the recreation officer or ranger regarding volunteer opportunities.

Shared Effort - Shared Vision. "It's our land and we want to use it is still the prevailing attitude. By nature we tend to be single-minded about our own interests and closed minded to the interests of others. With the increase in use of public lands by all trail users, sharing the trails is inevitable. Along with education, working to build and maintain trails and holding joint trail events will build trail community and encourage equestrians and others to enjoy trails together. By working with managers and other user groups equestrians can show consideration for one another and ride more trails.

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