



connections

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Greenways and Trails Program

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Closing and Restoring Trails

All trails impact the natural environment and require on-going maintenance. But some trails, usually as a result of poor layout and design, are more damaging than others, require excessive maintenance, and diminish the user's experience. Rather than try to maintain trouble trails over and over, in many cases, closing and restoring poor condition and redundant trails is the best solution for your trail system – environmentally, economically, and socially.



However, as anyone who has tried to close a trail knows, simply putting up a sign or piling brush at the trail entrance does not work. The compacted soils of the trail tread can resist naturalization for many years, and as long as open sight lines persist, users will continue to use the trail.

In most cases, successfully closing and restoring trails takes as much planning and effort as constructing new trails. The following Best Practices can help successfully close problem trails.

Provide a Better Option

The most important component of successfully closing a trail is to provide a more appealing alternative. This includes ensuring that the new route is well designed and marked, and *flows seamlessly* from existing trails. This may require redesigning trail intersections to take away open sight lines and create smooth transitions that keep users on the preferred route.



Educate Users

Users who do not understand why a trail is being closed may undo all your efforts. When closing trails it is important to let users know that you are closing trails, and more importantly, why. Post information on trailheads, recruit volunteers to assist and encourage users to spread the word. *Focus on the benefits* of closing trails including habitat and water quality protection, along with a better trail experience.

Halt Ongoing Erosion

Some trails requiring closure will be fall-line trails that channelize water and experience continuing erosion. In order to close and naturalize these trails, active, on-going erosion must be

stopped. *Check dams and slash* should be used to stem water flow and stabilize soils while naturalization occurs.



Close Sight Lines

Trails you can see are trails you will use. In the photos (top and left), even though barriers, signs and slash have been used to close the trail, the open sight lines still invite users to explore. The most effective way to close off sight lines is to *transplant native vegetation* in the trail corridor, especially any place a trail is visible from another trail. In other places along the closed trail, slash can be used to disguise the trail tread.

Consider Breaking Up Tread and Re-contouring the Land

Compacted trail tread will likely resist naturalization. Have you ever come across an old road in the woods that has not been used for years? Breaking up the soil with pulaskis and pick-mattocks, and scarifying the soil will allow natural regeneration to take hold. Re-contouring the land, particularly for eroded trails, will help remove evidence of old trails.

Block the Corridor

As a last resort, you can block the beginning and end of the trail with a fence and signs. The fence will look out of place, and could draw more attention to the closure. Be prepared to answer questions by posting signage explaining the closure on, or near, the fence. When the trail has been closed for a while the fence can be removed. This strategy may be needed especially at locations where users are looking for views and water access.

Don't Introduce or Spread Exotic Plants

Use local soils and plants in your trail reclamation project if possible. If outside materials are used, make sure they are certified weed-free and native. Clean tools and work boots before bringing them from other sites to ensure that invasive seeds are not transported.

Monitor Your Closure

Return periodically to monitor the success of your closure. Ascribe to the “broken window” theory of trail maintenance. If your closure is vandalized or damaged, fix it immediately.

Tips and Tools (Mattock and McLeod)

Closing and Reclaiming Damaged Trails webpage by IMBA is at http://www.imba.com/resources/trail_building/reclaiming_trail.html

Naturalizing Abandoned Trail from the FHWA Trail Maintenance and Construction Notebook is at: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/fspubs/00232839/page12.htm>

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources “Trail Planning, Design and Development Guidelines” (http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/publications/trails_waterways/index.html) includes a section of decommissioning and restoring unsustainable trails.

On the Path Ahead

Northeast Trail Symposium, June 10-12, 2010 in Great Barrington, at the Berkshire South Regional Community Center.

Trail Builders! Don't miss this amazing learning event for volunteers and professionals. This 3 day symposium features Trail Building experts versed in making projects happen. Workshops will address planning for a wide variety of trail projects and skills training for fieldwork. Visit our web page at www.bnrc.net/TrailSymposium.htm for the complete 3 day schedule and registration information. You may register for 1 to 3 days. Learn how to plan a project, build a bridge, construct accessible trails or put in stone cribbing. There will be plenty of doing, seeing, and listening - for all skill levels - led by locally, regionally, and nationally known experts in the trails field.

Funding support available: let us help you attend this event! We encourage trail volunteers and nonprofit organizations with trail building projects in the Housatonic Heritage area to submit scholarship applications to offset the cost of attending the Trail Symposium. Scholarships are awarded on a first come first serve basis, please don't wait to apply for this funding support. For more information on this event go to www.bnrc.net/TrailSymposium.htm or email us at wnetrailbuildersinfo@gmail.com.

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Please forward to others who might be interested in Massachusetts Greenways and Trails.



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