



**MA Department of Conservation and Recreation
Office of Regional Planning
Best Management Practices**

Closing and Restoring Trails

Contact: Paul Jahnige, Greenways & Trails Program Director;
(413) 586-8706 x 20; paul.jahnige@state.ma.us

Goal: Halt resource damage; reduce maintenance costs;
and enhance the trail users' experience.

Guidelines:

All trails impact the natural environment and require on-going maintenance. But some trails, usually as a result of poor layout, illegal use or sensitive soils, cause more environmental damage than others, require excessive maintenance and diminish the users' experience. While 'trail hardening' can solve some problems, rather than try to maintain trouble trails over and over, in many cases, closing and restoring poor condition, 'fall-line' 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 restore problem trails.

General

- Provide a Better Option: The most important component of successfully closing a trail is to make sure there is a more appealing and obvious alternative. This includes ensuring that the new route is well designed and marked, and flows seamlessly from existing trails. See Trails Maintenance BMP and DCR's Trails Guidelines and Best Practices Manual.
- Educate Users: Users who do not understand why a trail is being closed may undo all your efforts. Reach out to key users, post 'what' and 'why' information on trailheads, including contact numbers, and recruit volunteers to assist. Education should focus on the benefits of closing trails including wildlife 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 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 people can see are trails people will use. 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. This technique should not be used in place with a potential for below-ground archaeological resources.
- 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 non invasive plants in your trail reclamation project if possible. If outside materials are used, make sure they are certified weed-free and common to the area. Clean tools and work boots before bringing them from other sites to ensure that invasive seeds are not transported.
- Update your map to reflect the closure;
- In high volume hiker parks like the Blue Hills and Greylock, consider contacting our web manager so that she can post information about the trail closure on the parks' main page.



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!
- Adapt your methods to the site and the community.
- If an Adopt-a-Trail Program is active in the park, consider marking the closed trails part of the program so that they are routinely checked.

Resources

- 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.
- DCR Trails Dataviewer: (<https://maps.massgis.state.ma.us/dcr/trails/>) (username: dcr_trails password: dcr_trails) Please note that the Dataviewer works in Explorer not Chrome.