

Understanding National Water Trails



From Application to Designation



National Water Trails

What are they?

- National Trails System (NTS) Act of 1968.
- National Recreation Trails - Existing land-based and water-based trails that provide close to home recreation opportunities on Federal, State, Tribal, and local lands, and connect to NTS trail networks.
- Secretarial Order 3319 - "Establishment of a National Water Trail System" (2012).
- Recognized and designated by either the **Secretary of Interior** or **Secretary of Agriculture**.



National Water Trails

Goals

- To create a distinctive national network of exemplary water trails that expand access to water-based recreation for healthy recreation and tourism.
- To protect and restore waterways across the country.
- To improve user safety on our water trails.
- To establish a network of practitioners that promotes the development of water trails and shares best management practices.



Designated NWT's

- 35 National Water Trails have been designated as of 2022
- NWT's currently range in length from 4.2 miles to 631 miles
- Lakes, swamps, ocean, canals, rivers of all kinds



Trail Eligibility

- The trail must be open to public use, have no gaps, and be designed, constructed, and maintained according to best management practices, in keeping with the use anticipated.
- Trails that demonstrate state-of-the-art design and management are especially encouraged to apply for NWT or NRT designation.



Trail Eligibility

- The trail should be in compliance with applicable land use plans and environmental laws.
- The trail is in existence, complete and will be available for public use for at least 10 years.
- All public and private property owners of trail lands or waters have been notified and have given their written consent and support for designations (river access).
- Trails on state, local government, or private land (anything other than federal) must have a letter of support from their appropriate State Trail Administrator.





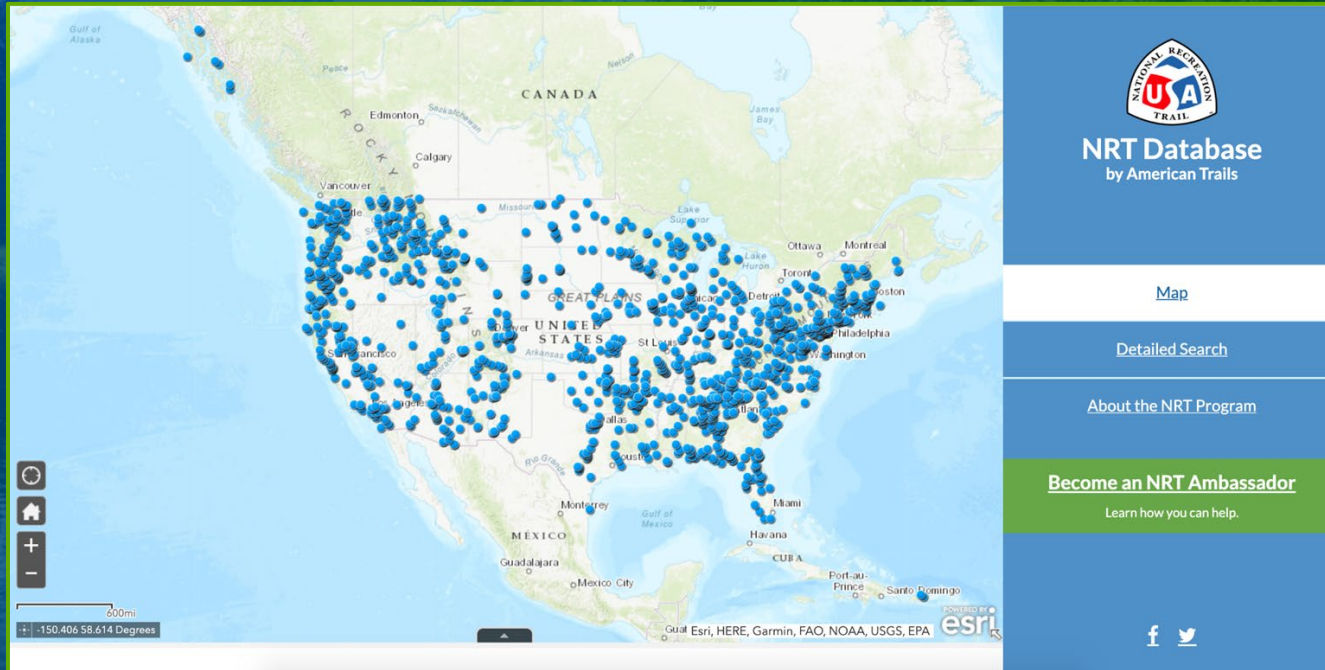
Benefits of the NRT & NWT Program

Recognition, Legitimacy, Partnerships






NRT Database

Database of over 1,300 searchable trails



The screenshot displays the NRT Database website interface. On the left, a map of the United States is shown with numerous blue circular pins indicating trail locations across the country. The map includes labels for major cities and geographical features. In the bottom left corner of the map area, there are navigation controls: a home icon, a plus sign for zooming in, and a minus sign for zooming out. Below these is a scale bar for 500 miles and a coordinate display showing -150.406 longitude and 58.614 latitude. The bottom right corner of the map area features the Esri logo and a list of data sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, and EPA.

On the right side of the interface, there is a blue sidebar with the following elements:

-  **NRT Database**
by American Trails
- [Map](#)
- [Detailed Search](#)
- [About the NRT Program](#)
- [Become an NRT Ambassador](#)
Learn how you can help.
-  

Signage

Free signs for all current NWTs

- Free plastic signs (3.5" and 8")
- Low cost metal signs (3.5" and 8")

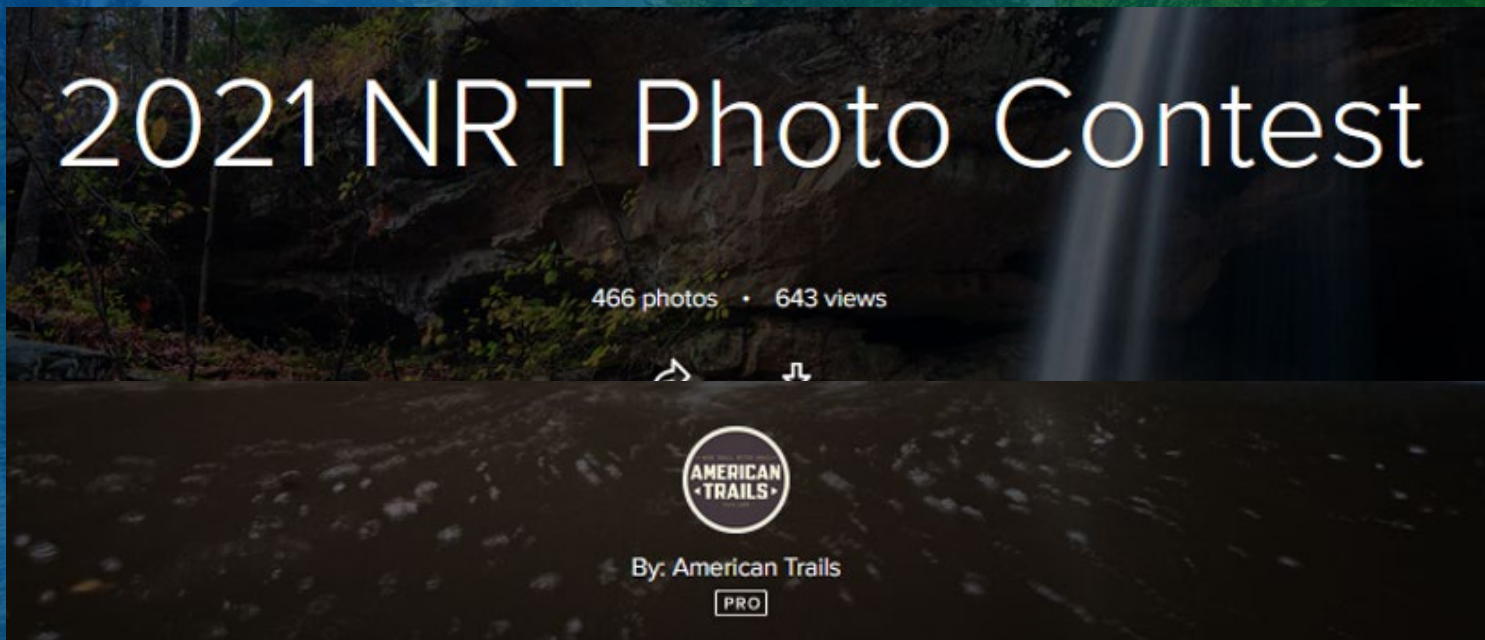
Future Plans...

- Signage programs that provide free signs and sponsorship to support ongoing maintenance through Smart Outdoor.



Annual NRT Photo Contest

Recognition for your trail through great photography



NRT Ambassador Program

300+ Individuals in all 50 states committed to improving NRTs

NRT Ambassadors are:

- Trained for safety and consistency of data gathering.
- Tasked with reaching out to trail managers and agency staff to build understanding of the NRT Program and ensure the trail meets standards of quality.
- Help to identify centerline GPS tracks and ensure quality information on each NRT

Future Plans...

- American Trails is working with app developers to create an app that streamlines ambassador tasks and connects land managers with the public.



Improved Funding Opportunities

While there is no direct funding for NRTs,
being an NRT can improve your fundraising opportunities

- Many State Recreational Trails Program funding provides priority to trails that are a part of the National Trails System.
- NWT/NRT status provides outside acknowledgement of trail quality and legitimizes your trail in a very tangible way, which can improve your fundraising story.

Future Plans...

- American Trails is building a national “Trail Fund” that will prioritize funding for diverse NRTs



How to Become a NWT

How the process varies from NRT



NWT Applications

- Proposed NWTs on Federal, State, Tribal and local lands are nominated and approved following a public application with specific criteria.

nps.gov/watertrails



NWT Applications

Deadline to submit application is November 1

Designation Process:

- 1) Trail Information
- 2) Best Management Practices Narratives and Documentation
- 3) Contact Information
- 4) Owner Consent & State Support
- 5) Trail Photos, Map & Logo
- 6) Additional Support Materials
- 7) Signed Signature Page
- 8) Application Reviewed by an Interagency Review Team
- 9) Approved applications, along with additional NRT applications, submitted to the Secretary of the Interior for official designation



NWT Best Management Practices

NATIONAL WATER TRAIL DESIGNATION REQUIREMENTS



More information about the National Water Trail designation can be found at www.nps.gov/WaterTrails.



7

BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

An applicant must demonstrate these seven best-management practices to achieve National Water Trail Designation.

1

RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

The water trail route has established public access points that accommodate a diversity of trip lengths and provide access to a variety of opportunities for recreation and education.

2

EDUCATION

The water trail provides opportunities to learn about the value of water resources, cultural heritage, boating skills and outdoor ethics.

3

CONSERVATION

The water trail provides opportunities for communities to develop and implement strategies that enhance and restore the health of local waterways and surrounding lands.

4

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Local communities provide support and advocacy for maintenance and stewardship of the water trail.

5

PUBLIC INFORMATION

The public is provided with accessible and understandable water trail information, including details for identifying access and trail routes; cultural, historic and natural features; hazards; and water quality. The water trail is promoted to the community and a broad national audience.

6

TRAIL MAINTENANCE

There is a demonstrated ability to support routine and long-term maintenance investments on the water trail. Facilities are designed, constructed and maintained by incorporating sustainability principles.

7

PLANNING

An applicant must also incorporate and maintain a water trail plan that describes a vision, desired future conditions, and strategies to strengthen best-management practices.

1. Recreation Opportunities

- Established public access points that accommodate a diversity of trip lengths and provide access to a variety of opportunities for recreation and education.



2. Education

- **Education** is integral to the program's success by providing learning opportunities about the value of water resources, cultural heritage, boating skills, safety and outdoor ethics.



3. Conservation

Water trails provide opportunities for communities to develop and implement strategies that enhance and restore the health of local waterways and surrounding lands.



Salt Marsh Restoration at Concrete Plant Park, Bronx River



River Cleanup, Tuckasegee River



Fisheries Restoration on the Alabama River



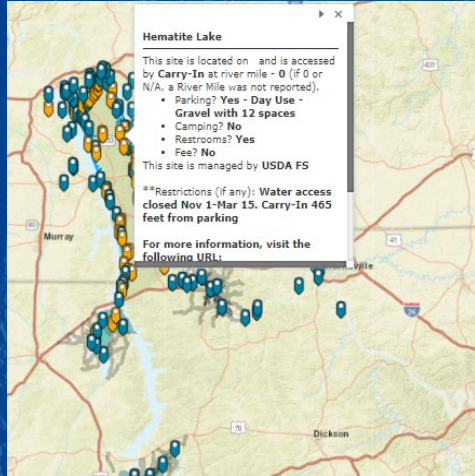
4. Community Support

Local communities provide support and advocacy for maintenance and stewardship of the water trail.



5. Public Information

The public is provided with accessible and understandable water trail information, including details for identifying access and trail routes; cultural, historic, and natural features; hazards; and water quality. The water trail is promoted to the community and broad national audience.



Regional Water Trails



Land Between the Lakes
Regional Water Trails are being developed to provide a series



6. Trail Maintenance

Demonstrated ability to support routine and long-term maintenance investments on the water trail. Facilities are designed, constructed, and maintained by incorporating sustainability principles.



7. Planning

Maintain a water trail plan that describes a vision, desired future conditions, and strategies to strengthen best management practices. [a.k.a. ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY]



Answers to Frequently Asked NWT Questions

- There is no minimum or maximum length for a NWT.
- Designation is only provided for the section of waterway that meets the 7 BMP's. Maps provided in the application should reflect only the section of waterway being applied for designation.
- Trails that are already NRT's can apply to have their designation changed to NWT.
- Distance between access points should be reasonable for a new paddler to travel in a day's time (or less). Distance varies depending on type of water and rate of flow.
- Access points should be available to the general public with suitable parking.
- Any type of water can be designated, but we do look at water quality for public health safety.
- NPS does not provide oversight or maintain the trail upon designation.



Common Issues with NWT Applications

You may not be ready to apply if...

- Trail doesn't meet all BMP's.
- Trail doesn't have signage, maps or online information needed to aid users in trip planning, orienting and identification of safety hazards.
- Trail is incomplete without suitable point-to-point access.
- Application lacks information about access point ownership and permissions.
- An individual is applying, rather than a robust, proven organization.
- Trail designation is being sought by a rather new entity, or an entity that doesn't manage lands, without long-term plans for how it will be maintained.



Thank You!

For More Information and Details about How to
Become an NWT

Visit the NWT website

www.nps.gov/watertrails

You can also email
nrt@americantrails.org

