

## **ACHIEVING SUCCESS IN TRAIL RELATED PARTNERSHIPS: THE MICHIGAN STATE FOREST EXPERIENCE**

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Abstract: Management of trails has become challenging as funding for their operation and administration has decreased. To contend with shortfalls, resources managers are forming partnerships with stakeholders to meet these challenges. An investigation of two trail programs in Michigan is used to illustrate the benefits of partnerships, key elements related to success, and challenges associated with partnerships.

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### **Introduction**

Federal and state lands support an extensive system of trails for hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, cross country skiing, snowmobiling, and off-road vehicle riding. These trails are also used by birdwatchers, photographers, hunters, anglers, and others to access resources. Yet, beyond just facilitating recreational activities, trails provide benefits to both the users and the communities which surround them. For the users, trails offer contact with nature, as well as opportunities for socializing and solitude. Moreover, participation in trail based activities can improve the physical fitness of an individual. Trail users also contribute to local and state economies.

On the whole, trail based recreation activities are among American's most popular outdoor recreational pursuits (Hardt, 1995). Nationwide, participation in trail activities has increased over the past two decades (Hardt, 1995) across all types of settings (Moore and Roberds, 1995). Hiking, walking, and backpacking are considered to be some of the fastest growing outdoor recreational activities nationwide (Cordell et al., 1995). These national trends are mirrored in the northeastern United States. Participation in hiking, backpacking, and cross country skiing has increased from 1979 to 1993 and will likely continue to increase (Warnick, 1995). Mountain biking has also grown in popularity (Ruff and Mellors, 1993) with an increasing number of enthusiasts riding on trails.

With the increased participation in trail based activities, management of trails has become increasingly more challenging. In a 1993 nationwide survey, State Trail Administrators considered adjacent landowners opposition, conflicts among users and uses, and fiscal constraints as some

of the most significant trail issues (Moore and Roberds, 1995). In particular, shrinking recreation budgets compound these and other challenges trail managers face such as maintaining adequate safety levels and facilities and protecting resources. As a result, public land managers have increasingly turned to cooperative alliances, referred to as "partnerships," with various stakeholders (Warnick, 1995; Selin and Darrow, 1995).

### **Partnerships**

While the purpose and type of partnerships in natural resource management vary considerably (Selin and Myers, 1994), they are often described as a cooperative arrangements between an agency and group(s) to achieve a collective goal (Uhlik, 1995). The groups may range from profit driven businesses to non-profit organizations and may involve one or more organizations. Partnerships have been formed at national, state, community, and site levels in a wide variety of recreation resource settings (Selin, 1995). The purposes of partnership arrangements in natural resources are extremely broad, including development and maintenance of facilities, fundraising, gathering data, marketing activities, and many others (Selin and Myers, 1994).

Trails have been one of the many recreational programs that have benefited from the development of partnerships (Selin, 1995). The types of trail related partnerships formed range from conflict resolution to construction, development, maintenance, and planning of trails (Moore and Roberds, 1995). As a result of these partnerships, Selin and Darrow (1995) assert that operational efficiency has been greatly improved, services have been expanded to meet constituents' needs, safety standards have been met, and many other benefits have been realized.

While partnerships have proven to be a beneficial and effective mechanism for improving recreational situations, there are many challenges associated with forming and maintaining successful partnerships. Many researchers have explored the characteristics of a successful partnership and have offered a number of principle elements associated with success. However, few of these studies focus specifically on trail related partnerships. Consequently, the goal of this paper is to illustrate some of the benefits, challenges, and elements of successful trail related partnerships. A recent assessment of the Off-Road Vehicle and Non-Motorized Trail Programs on Michigan's State Forests conducted by the authors will be used to illustrate these points.

### **Michigan State Forest ORV Trail Programs and Non-Motorized Pathways**

The Michigan state forest system encompasses 3.9 million acres. It is also the largest provider of trail based recreational opportunities in the State. Within the state forest system, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Forest Management Division (FMD) maintains 3,600 miles of ORV trails for motorcycles, three and four-wheeled all terrain vehicles (ATV), four-wheeled drive trucks and sport utility vehicles, and specialty vehicles such as dune buggies. There are also 1,100 miles of non-motorized pathways managed for hiking, cross country skiing, horseback riding, and mountain

biking. While not a focus of this paper, the state forests also provide almost 5,000 miles of snowmobile trails.

In 1990, Michigan Public Act 319 of 1976, commonly referred to as the ORV Act, was amended by Public Act 71. This new act required all ORVs to be licensed annually. The revenue collected from the sale of these licenses is deposited in the restricted ORV Trail Improvement Fund (ORV Fund) created by Public Act 17 of 1991. In addition, PA 17 authorized the distribution of funds in the form of grants to public agencies, non-profit clubs, and organizations for environmental restoration, general trail improvements, maintenance, sign replacement, and law enforcement. This ORV Fund and grant process effectively created a partnership between trail stakeholders, environmental interests and the DNR.

Since the initial year of the ORV Fund, 160 grants totaling over \$3.6 million have been awarded (personnel communication, Steve Kubisiak, 1997). Of this total, \$2.5 million has gone towards maintenance of the ORV system. In addition, \$630,000 has been granted to county sheriff departments across the state for local law enforcement patrols on public lands, and \$500,000 has been used to restore damage caused by ORVs, mostly in off-trail locations. Since 1991 the ORV Fund and the partnerships between grant recipients and the DNR have considerably improved the ORV trail system.

In contrast, the non-motorized pathways have no similar legislatively-sanctioned partnership to maintain the 1,100 miles of state forest pathways. As a result, managers of that system face many challenges. An inadequate funding base has contributed to deteriorating conditions of the pathway system (Michigan State Forest Advisory Committee, 1995; DNR, Recreation Division, 1992). An investigation of these two programs by the authors has shown five principles that have led to a more successful situation for ORV trails and their management.

#### **Key to Elements to Successful Trail Related Partnerships** *Program Funding*

Funding for the ORV Program is paid directly by the users through an annual \$16.25 ORV license fee and a miniscule portion of state gasoline taxes. This results in an annual program budget of \$1.5 million, of which an average of 70% is used in the grants program. In its initial year, \$350,000 was distributed, while in the most recent year (1996), \$870,000 was awarded to public agencies and non-profit organizations for maintenance, degraded site restoration, operation, and law enforcement. The ORV license fees are generally supported by ORV users and trail organizations, because of the direct visible improvements that have been made to the ORV system since the initiation of the ORV Fund. For instance, virtually all trail miles are brushed annually and safety signs checked. Furthermore, maps have also been developed for all trails, and most recently six trailheads are scheduled for construction in 1997/98.

By contrast, the non-motorized pathways currently have no earmarked funds for maintenance or operation and users pay

nothing towards the program except in sporadic voluntary contributions mostly related to cross country ski grooming (DNR, Recreation Division, 1992). Nevertheless, the pathways program has expenditures of \$0.4 million annually (Lynch and Nelson, 1995). Funding for maintenance and operation has been provided primarily by user fees from state forest campground campers and state general fund dollars (Michigan State Forest Advisory Committee, 1995). In addition, non-profit organizations such as the North Country Trail Association, Michigan Trail Riders (equestrian), Michigan Mountain Biking Association, local cross country ski clubs, and others volunteer time and contribute money in developing and maintaining pathways. Lastly, funding for the pathway program also comes from the Recreation Improvement Fund whose source is the state gasoline tax. Most of the money from this fund, however, is for capital improvements and is devoted to major projects such as pathway and bridge construction. It is rarely used for annual maintenance and operation of the system.

#### *Advisory Committee*

One formal link between agency and constituents is a recognized citizen advisory committee. The committees may be constituted by statute or agency policy. Typically, such a committee is an on-going effort to act as a sounding board concerning agency policies and initiatives. Members are generally appointed by the director of the managing agency and the membership makeup is often specified to include representatives of certain user groups or organizations.

The Michigan ORV Advisory Committee has 7 members and was created by PA 71 of 1990. The members represent the major ORV organizations in the state, ORV dealers and environmental interests. Many of these organizations are also the recipients of ORV Fund grants. Their sole focus is on ORV issues and the ORV trail and route system.

The pathway system has no comparable advisory committee. The Michigan Trailways Committee has 5 members and was created by statute in 1994 (PA 451). While the membership is composed of non-motorized trail advocates, it is focused on the conversion of abandoned railroad rights of way to trails. Hence their focus is in a different direction than the pathway system, as very little of that is former railroad right of way. Further, much of their effort relates to capital improvement, not maintenance and operations. Second, the Michigan State Forest Recreation Advisory Committee was also statutorily created (PA 115 of 1991). The committee's scope includes state forest pathways, but it goes far beyond that to include all 3.9 million acres of state forest and a host of recreation facilities and opportunities. To date it has focused the major share of its energies on the restoration of the state forest campground system and development of a strategic plan for forest recreation entitled Forest Recreation 2000 (State Forest Recreation Advisory Committee, 1995).

#### *Grant Process*

The Forest Management Division of the DNR is responsible for the administration of the ORV Fund. Distribution of these funds is accomplished through a grant process. Each

year public agencies and non-profit clubs and organizations submit applications to the DNR to conduct annual maintenance on designated trails, restore areas damaged by ORVs and develop facilities such as trailheads. In addition, public agencies submit applications to conduct law enforcement on trails. The FMD and the ORV Advisory Board review these applications and make recommendations and modifications if necessary. Once approved, the application becomes a legally binding contract. Of all the activities performed by grant cooperators, annual maintenance (involving trail clearing, sign replacement and grading) has been the largest component.

Maintenance activities are guided by established maintenance standards. These specifications also serve as a basis to allow DNR ORV Specialists and field staff to inspect all work conducted by grant cooperators. Areas not complying with standards need to be revisited by the cooperators and brought up to such. Failure to meet standards may result in the organization being placed on probation or the termination of the grant.

In comparison, almost all activities conducted on the non-motorized pathways by an individual or organization are neither legally bound by a contract and accountability is lessened. Additionally, there are no standards of maintenance to guide volunteers. Typically most efforts involve "handshake" agreements. While these individuals and groups have contributed a great deal towards the pathway system, this effort is not consistent across the state, with great efforts occurring on one pathway and nothing on another 20 miles away.

#### *Reimbursement*

Presently, organizations conducting work on the non-motorized pathways are not reimbursed for any expenses. On ORV trails, work on restoration, law enforcement, or development projects conducted by the grant recipients is either partially or entirely compensated by the ORV Fund. Cooperators conducting maintenance receive \$45 per mile as reimbursement to help defray out of pocket expenses (tools, vehicle operation, telephone, etc.). In addition, each grant sponsor must have their own liability insurance, which is reimbursed up to a maximum of \$500 per year.

In November 1996, a workshop involving ORV grant recipients and FMD personnel was conducted to determine typical work procedures, their frequency, and expenses associated with meeting maintenance specifications (Lynch and Nelson, 1997). One objective of this workshop was to estimate average per mile maintenance costs. According to workshop participants, it takes an estimated \$128 per mile to maintain at existing specifications all designated motorcycle and ATV trails and \$ 77 per mile for truck routes. This per mile expense includes a \$6/hour nominal wage for volunteer time as suggested by the cooperating groups in the workshop. This is conservative as employee costs per hour for state employees would be \$18-\$24 per hour considering wages and benefits. Even at this conservative figure, \$45 per mile is a savings for the DNR of \$83/mile for motorcycle and ATV trails and \$32/mile for truck routes.

From the cooperating groups point of view, a total of \$99 of the \$128 per mile maintenance cost for motorcycle and ATV trails is attributed to labor (\$6/hour volunteer wage), while labor amounted to \$55 of the \$77 per mile on all truck routes. Hence, \$45 per mile appears generous to the cooperators if the labor is considered truly volunteer.

#### *Cooperative Organizations*

While, the majority of ORV and pathway users are not members of organized trail/pathway clubs (State Forest Recreation Advisory Committee, 1995), it is the membership and leadership of these organizations that promote the cause of users in the executive and legislative branches of state government. For ORV users, the Michigan Cycle Conservation Club (CCC) has been instrumental in both initiating the ORV Fund as well as in maintaining and improving the ORV trail system. The CCC is the largest trail related organization in Michigan and is relatively well organized with many chapters and a sizeable membership. The assessment of ORV trails found that over 75% of the designated ORV trails were maintained by this organization (Lynch and Nelson, 1997). In contrast, non-motorized pathway users are more diverse and less organized, with the exception of mountain bikers (Michigan Mountain Biking Association) and equestrian (Michigan Trail Riders) users. Hikers, backpackers and cross country skiers lack a strong statewide organization.

#### **Pitfall of Partnerships**

The benefits that the ORV partnership has created for the DNR and trail system are certainly notable. However, there are still pitfalls. For example, different ORV organizations have different objectives for the trails they maintain. Those oriented to a two-wheel cycle membership want to keep trails challenging, narrow, and twisting for skilled cycle riders. Those with ties to ATV enthusiasts want trails that are wider, straighter and suitable for lower skill, family riders. A second challenge is that coordination with diverse groups is time consuming for DNR program managers.

Lastly, the grant administration is an involved and detailed process that can also be time consuming. However, even with these challenges, the formal structure of the ORV program has resulted in a trail system in better condition and with broader based user support and satisfaction than the pathway system. This is especially important for an activity that does not enjoy broad based public acceptance, but does have a committed constituency. Non-motorized pathway users, especially those that enjoy the widest range of public acceptance (hikers, cross county skiers and backpackers), have been unable to convert that favorable but unorganized public opinion into the program funds necessary to have a higher quality, better maintained pathway system.

#### **Conclusions**

The success of the ORV trail program can be traced to the partnership arrangement between the DNR/FMD and various ORV stakeholders. The ORV Fund was legislatively mandated and is a restricted fund, solely dedicated to the operation and maintenance of the ORV system. Funding for

the ORV Program is paid directly by the users through ORV licenses and state gasoline taxes. This money is then used via grants to financially support ORV stakeholders in their maintenance of designated trails, restoration of areas damaged by ORVs and development of facilities such as trailheads. In addition, it allows other empowered governmental agencies to conduct law enforcement on trails.

Essentially, this support amounts to generously covering the out-of-pocket expenses in most cases and full reimbursement in the case of law enforcement. The stakeholder partners supply the labor, on a voluntary basis, necessary to accomplish the work. The grant process legally binds cooperators to proposed work which is guided by established maintenance standards that promote accountability through inspections. The Michigan Cycle Conservation Club is the largest statewide trail user organizations in Michigan. It was instrumental in the establishment of the ORV fund and continues to play an important part in the operation and maintenance of the ORV trail system.

In comparison, no similar legislatively-sanctioned partnership program exists in the non-motorized pathways program. However, a proposed Forest Recreation Act, which would establish a user fee for state forest pathways and deposit the money in a restricted Forest Recreation Fund, was introduced in the Michigan legislature in 1996 at the behest of the State Forest Recreation Advisory Committee. While it received favorable consideration in the House, amendments in the Senate so drastically altered the bill that it was withdrawn. Its reintroduction with modifications to garner the needed legislative and gubernatorial support is currently under consideration.

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