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#### ***Forward Together: A Culture-Nature Journey Towards More Effective Conservation in a Changing World***

November 13-14, 2018

The Presidio

San Francisco, California

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Editors: Nora Mitchell, Archer St. Clair, Jessica Brown, Brenda Barrett, and Anabelle Rodríguez

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2018 US/ICOMOS Symposium

*Forward Together: A Culture-Nature Journey Towards More Effective Conservation in a Changing World*  
13-14 November 2018, The Presidio, San Francisco, California

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**Cultural Landscapes and Historic Trails: Examples from the United States**

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**Abstract**

The United States recognizes the importance of long-distance routes through the National Trails System Act, which turned 50 years old this year. Under this act, congress so far has designated nineteen long-distance historic trails that are significant in the history of the United States. This paper describes some of these national historic trails and ways the federal government and partners have worked together to preserve and protect the linkages of our cultural and natural heritage. Examples are drawn from the Santa Fe National Historic Trail, Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, and El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (a transboundary route with Mexico).

***Keywords***

cultural routes, historic trails, culture/nature

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## Cultural Landscapes and Historic Trails: Examples from the United States

### Introduction

In the United States, historic trails are typically long-distance routes that figured significantly in the trends and events of our nation's history. Some were early exploration, trade, and communications routes, connecting tribes, settlements, and nations. Some were emigration routes, developed by the passage of hooves, boots, and wheels. Some were routes of conquest, carrying armies to distant battlefields. Some were routes of pursuit and injustice, by which our society forced more vulnerable others to flee their homes.

The United States recognizes the importance of such trails through the National Trails System Act, which turned 50 years old this year. Under this act, congress so far has designated nineteen historic trails that are significant in the history of the United States. The National Park Service (NPS) administers fifteen of them and co-administers two others with its sister agency, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). National Trails Intermountain Region (NTIR), the NPS office where I have worked as a cultural resources specialist for eighteen years, is tasked by the National Park Service to administer nine of the fifteen (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

My work has focused extensively on documenting and protecting the resources of the Santa Fe, Trail of Tears, and El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trails. It entails working with universities, tribes, trails advocates, city, state, and federal agencies, and others in voluntary partnerships to achieve shared goals. In this presentation I will explain what National Historic Trails are intended to be and highlight some examples of the preservations successes and challenges involving *culture/nature*.

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<sup>2</sup> "National Trails Intermountain Region" Accessed November 7, 2018. <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1453/index.htm>.



**Figure 1.** Map of the National Trails Intermountain Region showing the nine national historical trails that it administers. *Map courtesy of NPS.*

### National Historic Trails

National historic trails were introduced when Congress amended the National Trails Act in 1978, to allow nationally significant (but not particularly scenic) routes into the system. National historic trails can include both land and water routes, but must follow “as closely as possible and practicable the original trails or routes of travel of national historic significance.” Their purpose is “the identification and protection of the historic route and its historic remnants and artifacts for public use and enjoyment.” To qualify for designation as a national historic trail, a route must:

1. be a trail or route established by historic use and must be historically significant as a result of that use.
2. be of national significance with respect to any of several broad facets of American history ... [with] a far reaching effect on broad patterns of American culture.

3. have significant potential for public recreational use or historical interest based on historic interpretation and appreciation.

Although they are congressionally designated historic cultural routes of national importance, national historic trails—unlike national scenic trails—are not linear paths that are protected by boundaries. Rather, they are open alignments—lines on maps—that cross many federal, state, tribal, and private jurisdictions.

Much of the land traversed by the national historical trails is private property. On some private land, historic remnants of the trail have been destroyed by development, highways, and agricultural activities. On other private property, historic trail remnants might exist, their presence sometimes unknown to the landowner. Wherever it might occur, national historic trail on private land is accessible to public visitation *only* with the explicit consent of the landowner. Congressional designation of a national historic trail does not convey authority over private land to federal trail administrators.

Many routes cross municipal, state, and tribal lands, as well as federal lands, including national parks, national forests, and wildlife refuges. On publicly accessible federal lands, agencies must balance many competing interests, such as oil and gas extraction, mining, timber harvests, public utilities rights of way, wind and solar “farms,” grazing, endangered species, recreation, preservation, and much more. While federal agencies are required to protect national historic trails within their jurisdictions, those competing interests heavily influence just how that protection is implemented.



**Figure 2.** Santa Fe National Historic Trail. Archaeologists recording trail segment on Comanche National Grassland, Colorado. *Photograph courtesy of NPS.*

### **Administration vs. Management**

Administering the trails is not the same as managing them. Management, the on-the-ground decision-making, is the responsibility of the individuals, organizations, and agencies that own or control the physical trail. NTIR's administrative role is to coordinate route mapping and marking, signing, interpretation, and resource protection across the end-to-end lengths of the all the trails we administer. We have no legal authority to impose rules, demand participation, or require trail access from private landowners, tribes, or any government agency. But we *can* foster good relationships with landowners, agencies, and trails advocates, and try to persuade them to partner with us for the benefit of the public.

NTIR's staff of 17 is made up of interpreters, historians, planners, landscape architects, GIS specialists, and cultural resources specialists (but no natural resource specialists as yet). We reach out to community groups, private landowners, nonprofit organizations, American Indian tribes, and federal, state, county, and local agencies who share interest in the trails we administer. Together, we research, map, develop, interpret, and protect the historic routes and their historic remnants and artifacts and setting for visitor use and enjoyment. We also engage with willing private landowners to help them preserve and, if they choose, interpret and provide for public access to their sites. Through Comprehensive Management Plans completed with public input, trail administrators work with partners to achieve common goals. We accomplish this work together through the partners' expertise and connections, federal and private funding sources, landowner engagement, and NPS financial support and technical assistance.

My own interest in the national historic trails lies in preserving and protecting them—the trail remnants, related cultural landscapes, and all the other physical characteristics that help visitors understand the historical experience of those who once passed that way.

### **Qualities Worth Protecting**

Long-distance historic trails are pipelines for cultural diffusion, conduits for the exchange of traditions, technology, and ideas. As such, these routes are fundamental in the ways cultures develop and evolve, and in the ways people interact with landscape and environment—the *culture/nature* of historic trails. Key defining characteristics of a cultural landscape are its setting and views, which provide the physical context of the track itself. Feng (2005) writes:

[A]...a concept of significance in defining cultural sites is their context and setting, and the extent of their significance in direct relationship to a Cultural Route, could be *shakkei* or 'borrowed scenery'. *Shakkei* is used in the Japanese garden design as a technique for enlarging the visual scale of the garden beyond its actual physical boundaries by incorporating a distant view as an integral part of

the garden... it was not only scenery that could be borrowed, but forms, sounds, colours and fragrances were also incorporated....<sup>3</sup>

Protection of setting and views associated with cultural routes is increasingly threatened by development. The type of viewshed analysis used by U.S. land management agencies focuses on identifying visual impacts to scenic and historic values caused by large-scale energy developments, transmission line corridors, fluid mineral wells and pipelines, mines that literally remove mountains, and even smaller-scale range improvements such as fences, water tanks, and roads. Views from key points on the trail are analyzed to determine how much of the proposed development would be visible from that location, and how intrusive it would be to the visitor experience. Sometimes measures can be taken to eliminate or diminish the visual impacts; for example, moving a pipeline or transmission line behind intervening topography. However, we realize that protection and appreciation of culture/nature is much more than just protecting viewsheds.



**Figure 3.**  
Oregon –  
California National  
Historic Trails.  
Hastings Cutoff.  
*Photograph  
courtesy of NPS.*

<sup>3</sup> Feng, J. 2005. 'UNESCO's Efforts in Identifying the World Heritage Significance of the Silk Road', ICOMOS – 15th General Assembly and Scientific Symposium, Monuments and Sites in their setting – Conserving cultural heritage in changing townscapes and landscapes, Section IV. Xi'an, China.

Other aspects of setting include air, sounds, forms, and fragrances. The freshness of the air after a rain squall; sounds of thunder, running water, native birdsong, and coyote cacophonies; the forms of buildings, prairie, desert, and mountains; and the scent of sagebrush all were mentioned by travelers along our national historic trails. All of these *culture/nature* characteristics—not just the physical ruts, swales, roads, and paths themselves—are qualities worth protecting. The challenge is persuading landowners and managers to see things that way, too.

An important aspect of cultural landscapes that is usually overlooked is the night sky, which (besides being a sight of awesome beauty) for thousands of years has served as a navigational and inspirational guide for caravans, armies, pilgrims, and flotillas. An example of identifying the night sky as important to cultural heritage took place in 1999 in the United States, when the state of New Mexico listed its night sky as an endangered cultural property (New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance, 1999).

### **Some Protection Successes and Disappointments**

#### ***The Santa Fe National Historic Trail National Register Initiative***

The Santa Fe Trail is imbedded in America's psyche through song, film and literature. Between 1821 and 1880, heavily laden freight wagons and pack mules traversed this commercial highway between Missouri and Santa Fe, New Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Designated in 1987, the Santa Fe National Historic Trail is significant for its role in the Anglo westward expansion of the United States, and for more than half a century it was an important two-way avenue for commerce and cultural exchanges between the Anglo centers of the east and the Hispanic centers in the southwest. NTIR and its partners carried out a successful National Register project in Kansas to nominate significant sections of the trail, a state that boasts 847 miles of the Santa Fe National Historic Trail, mostly across privately owned property. The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the Nation's historic places worthy of preservation. Authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Park Service's National Register of Historic

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<sup>4</sup> "NPS Santa Fe National Historic Trail" Accessed October 4, 2018. <https://www.nps.gov/safe/learn/historyculture/index.htm>.

Places is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect America's historic and archeological resources. Properties listed or determined eligible can be afforded some level of protection from federally funded, licensed projects, or if a proposed project is on federal land.

Local members of the Santa Fe Trail Association approached private property owners about the honorific benefits of having their property listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In many instances, these landowners were friends or relatives of the association members, and in some cases the owners were, themselves, association members. The Kansas State Historical Society then obtained permission from the owners to survey and photograph the property, and complete the nomination forms. NTIR supported the effort financially and with technical expertise. As a result of this partnership, over 20 segments of the Santa Fe NHT on private land have been listed that traverse rural hills and grasslands, recognizing the important relationship of culture/nature. An example of how the national register initiative did not work unfolded in another Santa Fe Trail state where government representatives approached the local owners directly. The distrust of the government in this particular state literally closed the door on the project.

### ***El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro NHT and Spaceport America***

Tying Spain's colonial capital at Mexico City to its northern frontier in distant New Mexico, El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro spans three centuries, two nations, and 1,600 miles. Four hundred miles of that distance lie within the U.S., which designated its section as a national historic trail in 2000. Congress instructed U.S. trails administrators to work collaboratively with Mexico in preserving and telling the story of the trans-boundary trail. In 2010, portions of the trail in Mexico were designated a World Heritage site through a serial nomination.

The *camino* is part of the intercontinental *camino real* system that existed during the Spanish colonial period and extended (via maritime and terrestrial routes) from Spain to Mexico, throughout Latin America, and to the Philippines. Carried north along the route during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were various Spanish, Indian, and Mexican agricultural and ranching

traditions and products, music, literature, architecture, and community government, many of which today are aspects of contemporary American life.



**Figure 4.** El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail. Archaeologist recording trail segment at La Bajada near Santa Fe, New Mexico. *Photograph courtesy of NPS.*

In the early 2000s, a development proposal arose along a particularly intact segment of trail called the Jornada del Muerto (Journey of the Dead One), located in a 90-mile austere stretch of desert 90 miles north of El Paso, Texas, where one can see for miles. The proposal was construction of Spaceport America, a facility for launching commercial spaceflight vehicles. The facility would incur direct disturbance to historic trail remnants and visual and audible impact to trail setting, including night sky.

Because of the direct involvement of two federal agencies, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Bureau of Land Management, federal cultural and environmental laws were triggered. Through a public process, the two co-administrators of the national historic trail, along with

many other stakeholders, recommended ways to minimize and mitigate those impacts. The resulting mitigation that was agreed upon in 2010, including a hydrological and landform study of trail setting within the project area, has been fairly positive; and design aspects of the Spaceport facilities were incorporated to minimize visual intrusions to the landscape and minimize light pollution to protect the night sky.

### ***The Santa Fe and Trail of Tears NHTs and Conservation Easements***

There has been some success in protecting significant sites and segments associated with national historic trails by private landowners working directly with conservation organizations. An example is on the Santa Fe National Historic Trail in New Mexico. The 9,000-acre Tecolote Ranch located in northern New Mexico includes three miles of the mountain route of the Santa Fe Trail. The ruts start at a natural break in a ridge and cross a large meadow toward Tecolote Peak, a prominent landmark on the ranch and an essential guidepost for travelers on the Santa Fe Trail. The property contains remnants of an old stagecoach stop, sheep pens and an engineered section of the trail that the U.S. Army most likely improved. The conservation easement was donated to Santa Fe Conservation Trust in 1999. Conservation easements of this type help ensure continued protection of the culture/nature attributes of these wide open spaces in the American West.

### ***The Trail of Tears NHT and Unintended Impacts***

Many times cultural values of a trail and its associated landscapes are known only to traditional groups associated with those places. An example is provided by the Trail of Tears NHT. In 1830, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, which required various Indian tribes in today's southeastern United States to surrender their lands in exchange for unfamiliar territory located west of the Mississippi River. In 1838, U.S. Army troops, and various state militia forcibly evicted more than 16,000 Cherokee Indian people from their homes in Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina, and Georgia. Several thousand perished during and shortly after the march. Today's descendants hold handed-down memories of the trail and the places where their loved ones suffered and died. They regard the entire length of the trail, as well as its surrounding

landscapes, as sacred and inviolate.



**Figure 5.** Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. Village Creek State Park, Arkansas.  
*Photograph courtesy of NPS.*

A few years ago, personnel with the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee excavated over forty trenches across the Trail of Tears to help control erosion. The project should have been treated as a federal undertaking, subject to review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, but due to an administrative slip-up it was not; nor were the Cherokee Nation, Eastern Band of the Cherokee, and other affected tribes consulted beforehand, as required. As compensatory mitigation worked out with the affected tribes, the Forest has agreed to conduct multi-year studies on the trail-related cultural landscape, to include botanical, geological, soil, and fauna inventories, along with oral histories. These studies are being conducted in part by specialists from the affected tribes and include a much larger buffer zone than the trail trace.

## **Key insights**

### ***Identification and documentation***

The first steps for any preservation/protection program is to identify the cultural and natural resources on the ground and then to document and monitor their condition. This has been an on-going process for NTIR, but the effort is not complete. Trail administrators and managers need to systematically inventory, assess, and protect significant **natural** resources associated with these linear cultural resources. The obvious need for natural resource specialists on NTIR staff to balance the cultural has been identified by our office.

### ***Threats, preservation, protection***

What are acceptable levels of change for a national historic trail? When does too much change cause the route to lose its integrity, authenticity, and meaning? In the U.S., laws require any project that is federally funded, federally licensed, or taking place on federal land undergo the National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 process. That public process requires the affected federal agency to assess potential threats to national register-eligible historic properties, and then try to avoid, minimize, or mitigate the adverse impacts that are identified. Whereas government agencies and cultural resource specialists who work for them are well trained in identifying individual archaeological sites and historic buildings, the concept of cultural landscapes has still not been fully recognized and appreciated. Therefore, those contextual resources are susceptible to incremental change that ultimately can lead to loss of historical integrity. The challenge is to instill the importance of historic trails and the culture/nature they embody into the minds of the public and decision-makers.

Once threats to trail trace and setting/cultural landscapes are fully recognized, a number of tools are available to avoid, minimize, or mitigate physical, visual, and aural impacts. Avoidance is always the preferred choice, where feasible. Can the project be redesigned so that it is not visible or audible from the trail, and does not affect air quality or the night sky? Minimizing is next: if impacts cannot be eliminated, can the project be designed, relocated, or realigned to reduce its

impacts to trails and cultural landscapes? Interpretation, education outreach (teacher workshops, youth activities, etc.), and government assistance and funding are often used to mitigate impacts.

### *Other steps*

Among steps that can be taken to further the concept of *culture/nature* as they relate to historic trails are:

- Conduct more inventories and analysis with prescribed preservation treatments along cultural routes that involve principles contained in Cultural Landscape Reports methodologies.
- Continue interaction with partners and learn from partners outside of our normal circles (for example Landscape Character Assessment guidance for England and Scotland)<sup>5</sup>
- Learn more about and use conservation easements as tools to protect *culture/nature* values
- More effectively integrate intangible qualities of *culture/nature* into the narratives
- Encourage organizations to balance staffing and field work with cultural **and** natural specialists
- Engage the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in conversations to better integrate natural values with cultural as well as to explore boundary issues.

It is hopefully becoming clearer to government agencies in the United States that we need to better integrate *culture/nature* awareness into day-to-day decision making that affects nationally significant historic resources.

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<sup>5</sup> “Landscape Character Assessment guidance for England and Scotland” Accessed October 4, 2018. <https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/2018-02/Publication%202002%20-%20Landscape%20Character%20Assessment%20guidance%20for%20England%20and%20Scotland.pdf>

## **Biographical Notes**

**Lee Ann Kreutzer** has worked for 26 years as an archaeologist, cultural resource program manager, and cultural resources specialist for the National Park Service. For the past 16 years she has been Michael Taylor's colleague at NPS National Trails Intermountain Region, with particular interest in 19<sup>th</sup> century wagon trails and associated landscapes in the American West. She holds a PhD in archaeology from the University of Washington, where she specialized in taphonomic analysis of prehistoric bison remains.

**Michael Romero Taylor** has been working for the last 40 years in historic preservation. His experience includes historic site management, architectural conservation, administration of cultural routes, museum/visitor center management and archaeological site preservation. He currently works as a National Park Service cultural resource specialist for nine congressionally designated historic trails in the United States. Mr. Taylor's research interests include international approaches to preservation, protection and management of cultural routes and cultural landscapes. He has been an active member of ICOMOS for twenty-eight years in the specialized committees of earthen architecture, cultural routes, and most recently cultural landscapes.