Wide Open Spaces

The campaign urging equestrians to help preserve open land for riding continues.

Patrice D. Bucciarelli

Percy Warner Park in Nashville, Tenn., has been a destination for outdoor enthusiasts since the 1930s. Throughout the park, miles of bridle trails are reserved for equestrians. Another trail network is reserved for walkers, hikers and bicyclists. Recently, non-equestrians began lobbying park administrators for the right to share bridle trails with horses and riders. Now park managers are challenged with creating a plan for trail use that preserves the park’s long equestrian history and still accommodates growing ranks of non-equestrian users.

“There are about 40 miles of horse trails in the park, and there is a huge demand from runners, mountain bikers, and people who want to walk their dogs on those trails,” says Tommy Lynch, interim director of the Nashville Metropolitan Board of Parks and Recreation.

In February 2011, park administrators launched a survey intended to gauge exactly who uses the park’s bridle trails, where those equestrian trail users live and how frequently they ride in Percy Warner Park. Within two months, 389 riders had participated in the survey.

Losing Ground
The trail access issues at Percy Warner Park are among the latest to challenge the thousands of equestrians who ride on public and private trails every year. With land resources dwindling daily, it is critical that equestrians step up to preserve and protect the open spaces that remain, says Deb Balliet, chief executive officer of the Equine Land Conservation Resource (ELCR) based in Lexington, Ky.

The ELCR is a national organization that educates individual landowners, community groups and equestrian organizations about community land-use issues and helps them develop ways to conserve private and public lands for equine-related agriculture, equestrian training and competition sites, and trail access. According to the organization’s estimates, 6,000 acres of agricultural, forest and other undeveloped lands nationwide are lost every day. This can be due to policy and funding changes that affect access to public lands; community zoning amendments that redefine land-use regulations; and private property ownership transfers.

Private lands frequently become vulnerable when poor economic times force farmers and other owners of large properties to sell their land, Balliet says.

“Residential and commercial development is also an issue, even in this economy,” Balliet says. “Seasoned developers expect economic fluctuations, and right now prices are low. A lot of farmers can’t afford to keep their land, so many developers are buying property for future use.”

Economic conditions also figure in significantly when it comes to space for equestrians who do most of their riding on public trails located within local, state and national park systems. As a result of increased competition from non-equestrian outdoor enthusiasts, fewer trails are being set aside exclusively for equestrian use. Public lands such as those managed by local, state and federal authorities become at risk whenever state, local and federal governments grapple with budgetary shortfalls. At the same time, opportunities for developing new public trails for equestrians and other outdoor enthusiasts is finite.

Time to Speak Up
Concern over land conservation is not new. These days, riders are collaborating with one another and with non-equestrian outdoor enthusiasts to keep the trails they all use open and accessible. Some are using their organizational resources to build new trails. Some are developing relationships with members of non-equestrian groups. Others are sponsoring educational and hands-on conservation projects across the United States.

Through its Stewards for Trails, Education and Partnerships (STEP) program, the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) encourages its members and other horse owners to get involved in public land conservation and preservation, says AQHA Manager of Partnerships and Recreational Activities Stephanie McCommon.

The AQHA established the STEP program in 2007 to promote land conservation awareness, encourage equestrian groups
to participate in trail maintenance and restoration projects, and to cultivate relationships with local public and private land managers in their communities, McCommon says.

A partnership with Tractor Supply Company allows the program to award grants to groups that participate in conservation projects. Recently, STEP grants helped members of a 4-H group participate in a Leave No Trace conservation education program, and contributed to a trail loop construction project initiated by a chapter of the Back Country Horsemen of America (BCHA).

The STEP program also networks on conservation issues with other organizations, including the ELCR and the U.S. Park Service.

“The response has been wonderful,” McCommon says. "People are very passionate about these issues."

Members of the BCHA have long been passionate about public trail conservation, says Peg Greiwe, the organization’s executive secretary. For 35 years, the group’s 175 nationwide chapters have used membership dues and grants such as those awarded by the STEP program to underwrite the costs of trail construction and repair projects at local, state and national parks. Members also attend meetings with public land managers to advocate for continued trail access for equestrians.

Working Together
Cooperation between riders and some non-equestrian outdoor enthusiasts is on the rise, says Peter Olsen, senior director of operations and membership for the American Hiking Society (AHS).

The AHS works with several equestrian groups to advocate for public trail preservation, maintenance and development, and to promote easement development on private lands, Olsen says. The coalition is key to letting land managers know that conservation is a concern for all outdoor enthusiasts.

“We try to show that it’s not just one group of people, but all types of people who use these trails,” says Olsen. “Sometimes [equestrian and non-equestrian trail users] disagree. But we all have more in common than not.”

This collective enthusiasm for land conservation issues could not be more timely, says Ben Pendergrass, legislative director of the American Horse Council (AHC).

In 2009, the AHC began asking trail riders to report equestrian trail closures or other access issues on federal lands, including at national forests and national parks. The AHC annually shares results of the ongoing survey with the public, as well as with agencies that manage public lands.

Federal Assistance in Jeopardy
In response to constituents’ calls to rein in federal spending, some congressional lawmakers sought deep reductions in revenue for land conservation programs, including those that fund trail development and maintenance at national parks and forests.

One bill, H.R. 1, a continuing resolution introduced in the spring to fund the government through Sept. 30, 2011, would have stripped a total of $100 billion from government agencies and programs, including the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The fund provides federal, state and local governments with revenue to acquire land for conservation and recreational purposes. The bill also called for deep cuts in funding that could be used to improve or develop trails in national forests and national parks.

Although the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 1, the continuing resolution (legislation passed by Congress to allow operations to continue until regular appropriations are enacted) failed to gather support in the Senate. In April 2011, the debate over federal spending was still ongoing. Whenever a budget agreement is reached, Pendergrass believes it will probably contain cuts in funding for land conservation programs and public land management. "We just don’t know how large the cuts will be and how agencies would respond to the cuts,” he says.

Even so, Pendergrass believes major cuts in funding for public land programs would almost certainly require that equestrians and groups representing other outdoor enthusiasts play a larger role in preserving and maintaining the public trails they use. "In the end, that might be a good thing,” he says. "First, it gives people a stake in public land preservation. Secondly, park managers may be less likely to close a trail if they know there is private support for it.”

The U.S. Park Service welcomes the support, says agency spokesman Joe Walsh. According to Walsh, the U.S. Park
Service has long partnered with equestrians and other outdoor recreational enthusiasts to improve facilities, develop new trails and resolve maintenance and access issues.

"Those projects happen on an individual park basis," says Walsh. "In many cases, equestrians have always been involved in helping to make those decisions by bringing their concerns to their park managers and by attending public meetings about park operations and policies. Those partnerships are very important to us."

States Take a Stand
In California, members of the California State Horseman’s Association (CSHA) have a long history of working with local, state and national park administrators to improve trails and address other land-use issues. The group advocates for equestrians on local zoning issues. It also compiles trail condition and accessibility information and shares it with public land managers throughout the state.

According to Regional President Carolyn Hendricks, the CSHA’s Trail Rider Program is a critical component of the organization’s conservation awareness effort. The program recognizes members who have logged the most trail hours within a single year, but its other important function is to fill a database with trail condition and accessibility information, Hendricks says.

To be considered for the award, riders must provide the names of the parks and condition of the trails they’ve used. That information is stored in a statewide database that allows riders to locate public trails in their regions and to assess the condition of those trails. The information also allows members to advocate for trail improvement within their own regions and, when necessary, to demonstrate that equestrians do use specific public facilities.

In one case, the information contained in the database played a major role in the development of a horse-friendly improvement at a Richmond, Calif., park.

"We pulled up the data, demonstrated that equestrians do use the facilities, and we got a parking lot that’s more accessible to horse trailers," says Hendricks. "Sometimes big things come from keeping tabs on the little things."

Further Reading
Help Preserve America's Public Riding Trails
Seven Tips to Save Horseback Riding Trails

Patrice D. Bucciarelli is a freelance writer based in Kentucky.

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