

Water Trail Planning 101

A water trail, or blueway, is a stretch of river, a shoreline, or an ocean that has been mapped out with the intent to create an educational, scenic, and challenging experience for recreational canoers and kayakers. The trails are organized by local volunteers with the help of public officials and private landowners, all of whom promote its proper use and maintenance.

For communities across the country, water trails are a flexible and responsive tool for promoting a healthy economy and a high quality of life while preserving our natural and cultural heritage. Water trails, such as the Tennessee River Blueway and the Kentucky River Water Trail, can energize individuals and unify communities.

Planning Phase

Before you launch your project, take time to create your team, establish partnerships and get everyone on the same boat.

- Develop a vision
- Select a route (starting and end point)
- Identified trail users (motorized or non)
- Assemble a team
- Develop organizational structure and budget
- Prepare one-page overview
- Identify possible funding sources
- Establish stewardship goals and a sustainability plan to minimize impacts

Inventory Phase

Grab your paddle and PFD and evaluate your proposed trail route. Don't forget to take that GPS along to inventory key points along the way.

- Map the trail (quad sheets, navigational charts, GPS) and GPS points identified below
- Identify publicly accessible lands and existing launches
- Identify points of interest and services
- Identify known hazards
- Quantify mileage between amenities (rest areas, campsites, and take-out for slowest experienced users)
- Identify information gaps and infrastructure needs (campsites, rest areas, launches)
- Ground truth inventory

Access Phase

It's time to talk to the landowners and develop legal access points. Work with local, state and federal agencies on improvements and funding sources.

- Target low hanging fruit first – areas with existing access or easiest to establish
- Determine permit or permission needs for land access (parking, camping)
- Negotiate/develop land use agreements (MOU's, site licenses, etc.) for 24/7 access
- Assess potential liabilities (take note of recreational use statutes)
- Develop plan for infrastructure improvements (launches, camping areas)
- Address any portages and consider accessibility needs for those with disabilities
- Acquire any permits needed to complete project and comply with local, state and federal laws

Implementation Phase

It's time to make it happen!

- Obtain funding for needed acquisition and infrastructure projects.
- Acquire rights to lands needed for access and camping if needed.
 - This may include fee simple acquisition, easements, or permit agreements with other entities.
- Minimize environmental impacts and utilize Leave No Trace principles
- Implement physical structure projects such as launches, portages, signage and parking areas
- Obtain equipment if possible (kayaks, PFD's, paddles, trailers, dry bags)

Promotion Phase

Often the most important phase of the project is letting people know about it and getting the word out.

- Develop logo/branding
- Assess need for signage (typically only at launch sites and parking areas).
- Design and launch website
- Develop printed material (e.g. brochures, guidebooks, postcards)
- Understand and promote user safety in all outreach materials (on the water and off)
- Plan grand opening and other promotional events (e.g., races, regattas, river trips, river clean-ups)
- Outreach to potential user groups (paddling organizations, Scouts, park and recreation entities, colleges, YMCA's)

Operation and Maintenance Phase

A long-term commitment to keep the trail open and safe.

- Identify an organizational "owner" or coordinator
- Develop a management plan (e.g. are fires allowed, waste disposal)
- Assemble a corps of volunteers
- Determine maintenance equipment needs (boats, loppers, gloves, garbage bags)
- Schedule periodic maintenance events (river sweeps and river clean-ups)
- Maintain website with current information and linkages

Resources

- [Logical, Lasting Launches Guide](#)
- [American Rivers: Blue Trails](#)
- Your State Greenways & Trails Coordinator
- Your State Fish & Wildlife/Game Agency



The **National Park Service – Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance** program (NPS-RTCA) supports locally-led conservation and outdoor recreation projects across the United States. NPS-RTCA assists communities and public land managers in developing or restoring parks, conservation areas, rivers, and wildlife habitats, as well as creating outdoor recreation opportunities and programs that engage future generations in the outdoors.

[nps.gov/RTCA](https://www.nps.gov/RTCA)