

WHOSE TRAIL IS IT ANYWAY?

by Robyn Lay

A disturbing recent trend in many states across America has been a closure of horse trails. Another developing trend is the National Forest Service (NFS) charging a yearly fee to ride on public land they manage. These are trails that have historically been used by horses and, in many cases it is likely that horses originally made the trails. Why should the average horse owner and breeder care? When trails are removed it reduces the number of venues all of us have to market and use our horses. It reduces the sum total of what is available for horse owners and enthusiasts to do. If there are no, or few trails in a specific area, chances are there will be fewer people buying horses in that area. Trail riding is an integral part of what horses excel at. Just because you don't trail ride now doesn't mean you won't in the future. If you do arena work or show, it will also possibly affect you because when you are at a different point in your life, you may find you enjoy a peaceful trail ride. If nothing else, when it is time for you to move to a different horse, the chances of you finding a buyer are greater if more trails are out there for everyone to use. If horse enthusiasts don't stick together now and unite our voices against trail closures, there may not be any trails to ride in the distant future or there may be a few if you are willing to pay a steep yearly fee. Even a nominal fee is not acceptable.

The reasoning behind most of these issues are studies citing that horses do much more damage to a trail system. They cite deeper trails and wider trails. There seems to be a hiker movement against horses on the trails also citing these same "detriments" as well as a movement that wants to keep public land free from any trace of man. I find the latter group completely out of touch with why the parks have been set aside in the first place and I have a differing view to the first group because to me these issues aren't detrimental at all. A wider trail is generally safer for everyone. Deeper trails are not a huge negative other than in places where drainage is an issue or trail design is poor and doesn't allow for good drainage. There are generally areas that have to be altered and in some cases buttressed by human intervention in order to make the trail sound, safe and free from mucky or soggy areas. That is a good thing for everyone who uses the trails! Instead of removing horses from trails, we should instead be arguing to fix these trouble spots so everyone will have a better trail experience – including horseback riders. We need to be Inclusive to many rather than Exclusive to only hikers.

Another "fact" cited that I take issue with is that horses do more damage to the trail system. While it is true that one horse does more damage than one hiker, in my area of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park, there are over 400 million users of the park every year. A small fraction of these are on horses. I believe that the sheer numbers of these hikers overall trump what horses do on these trails. If you have less than 1000 horses using a trail system but 400 million hikers there is no way the horse does more damage than all those feet! But horse owners are being made to bear the brunt of funding trail repair in some cases, via yearly fees, simply because they are supposedly "doing more damage" and are therefore, more culpable. One of the most basic ways we can help the overall issue is to introduce more young people to horses in general. If more people love to ride and become addicted to horses like some of us are, there will be a larger group to demand more access in the future.

In an area near me in Virginia the National Forest Service (NFS) recently attempted to close 80% of trails available to horses. These were trails they deemed "user created" trails and not managed or maintained by the NFS. But in fact these trails had been there for over 100 years and were historical trails that people from the area still use along with those who have relocated to the area specifically for the trail riding benefits. The reasons cited were in part, damage to streams and local trout via sedimentation (it was later found that there are no local trout because the streams in that area are not cold enough to support them) and the need to have a "world class trail system". Evidence at a community meeting was produced to show that trails currently managed by the NFS were more heavily damaged than the trails



Robyn Lay is an avid trail rider in her area and has been on the Chief Joseph Trail Ride as well.

*Shown here with her trusted partner,
WA Ulrich Gem F3-2616; aka Siouxie.*

they proposed to close. Also they were less well kept than those the people in the area use and maintain. When asked what they were using as a standard for their "world class trail system" they could not answer. The photograph they used to demonstrate a world class trail system was about a 3 ft. wide lager grain gravel path. They were instituting a \$300.00 fine for riding on trails that were not designated and all the people who bought land and built homes and pour money into the local economy so that they can ride out of their barns and connect to the trail system would now be subject to these fines. In addition the single day parking area is already inadequate for people who travel to these trails for a day ride and there would be no way to accommodate locals who would then have to buy trailers to haul to the trail head or risk themselves and their horses riding along a narrow paved road with little to no shoulder for 10 miles. Even worse, removing 80% of the available (and well used) trails and forcing the same number of horses onto the remaining 20% of trails would definitely cause more wear and tear on those remaining trails.

In this case, the study ostensibly used to make the decision to close the trails was 23 years old and nothing had ever been done in the 23 years since that study had been commissioned to address any problem cited by the study. One man had spent \$300,000 of his own money buying and renovating a horse camp ground. These closures completely cut off all his customers from the National forest lands leaving them to either risk the \$300.00 fine for using the connector trails that were part of the closure or trailer to the trail head where there already is not enough parking space for current use. Any of you who horse camp probably know the first rule is to be able to ride out of camp and pick up a trail. He had less than a month's notice about the closure and already had many people scheduled to camp – had taken their reservation money and could not get any information from the NFS! This was another disturbing aspect of the whole closure – the sly way in which it was being done so that nobody would really know about it until it was already a fact! Luckily, word did get out. A final disturbing aspect of this particular example is that the local Back Country Horsemen were going along with the NFS with these closures. Many were shocked to see this and it sure didn't win the organization any friends in that area. You can't really trust anyone to speak for you where these issues are concerned.

This is but one example that I am familiar with. There are many across the U.S. It is a real threat to the equine industry and one I hoped to bring to your attention. If there is anything similar going on near you please lend your voice and your support to the efforts to thwart it. Once these trails are gone it will be nearly impossible to return horse use to them. We all own public lands and have a right to continue to use them for recreation along with the horses that have been an integral part of the history of this country and blazed many of the trails that are now set aside for our recreation.

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