

# **A Vision for Future Equestrian Trails Conferencing<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Conferencing History**

**The first major conference on recreational horse trails was held at Clemson University October 18-21, 1998. The conference name, “National Symposium on Horse Trails in Forest Ecosystems,” got the attention of agencies, non-government organizations, and individuals with a wide array of perspectives on the topic. That conference was heavily weighted to speakers other than horsemen. The goal was to have horsemen listen and think “outside of the box.” How do others perceive us? What are our ecological impacts on the lands where we ride? Where do we fit in the recreation and conservation agendas for the nation’s public lands?**

**The 1998 Symposium was attended by 175 people from 37 states. While it received national attention and widespread praise, the degree of success in meeting its goals was not quantified, and may not be quantifiable.**

**The Southeastern Equestrian Trails Conference (SETC) was an outgrowth of the 1998 Symposium. The idea for SETC had two fundamental components: a) developing guidance towards “Preserving a cultural heritage in a natural heritage setting,” and b) a prototype for regional conferences that would compose the second tier of a three tiered hierarchy of equestrian trail conferencing – state, regional, and national.**

**SETC originated at Clemson University in 2000 and also met there in 2001 and 2002. The original design was for the Conference to circulate through the states of the USDA-Forest Service Region 8 (Southern Region). However, only six of the 13 states in the region have become sufficiently active in SETC to sponsor it.**

**The SETC slogan was chosen because it directly addressed the legislative mandates for conservation of natural resources and cultural resources of historic value on all federal lands and most state lands open to recreational horse use. However, the value of that language in dealing with horse trail issues appears to have diminished over the years as it is rarely seen outside of conference marketing materials.**

**SETC has been highly successful as a regional conference in large part because of the dedication and commitment of individual workers. However, the kinds of financial support and agency level speakers that it can attract are regionally limited. Of the several other regional conferences that have been attempted over the years, only the Ohio Valley Equestrian Trails Symposium (OVETS) has met with any notable success. The shortfalls of the others may in large part be attributable to**

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<sup>1</sup> A presentation given at the 2007 Southeastern Equestrian Trails Conference, Knoxville, TN, July 18-20, 2007.

decisions to combine them with state or regional horse expos which have provided distractions in abundance.

To date, individual state trail conferences are rare, and a periodically held national conference does not exist. Two sources for individual state horse trails meetings are state horse councils and state level organizations of Back Country Horsemen of America (BCHA). State horse council interests in trails vary widely, and rarely have they been sufficient to culminate in a state horse trails conference. BCHA currently has state chapters and affiliates in at least 22 states, including at least eight eastern states. However, its primary issues of interest, leadership, and membership are in the western mountain and West Coast regions.

While a national level equestrian trails conference has been mentioned in several venues, including among members of the BCHA Board of Directors, no entity has stepped forward to assume the leadership for such an endeavor. This would be a major undertaking, particularly if it is to be a continuing effort.

#### **Justifying Future Conferencing Efforts**

Given the paucity of past successes in equestrian trails conferencing around the nation, why should meaningful efforts be made to change the status quo in the future? First, at least in my opinion, the long term future for recreational horse trails on public lands is in great jeopardy. Public agencies draw their employees from the nation's general population of which 80% lives in urban environments, and of which only about 0.6% (American Horse Council 2005 data) own a horse. (Some fraction of this number own a trail horse.) Furthermore, among all trail recreationists, only about 8% are involved in horse use (USDA-Forest Service data). It seems intuitively obvious that agency personnel with no horse experience and seeing their primary responsibility as serving the majority of the citizens will naturally give priority to the values of the 92% of trail users that are not horse users and the more than 99.4% of citizens that are not trail horse owners. *High profile conferencing that establishes and confirms the idea of recreational trail horse use as cultural heritage important to the nation is critical to a sustainable future for this recreational pursuit.*

Second, to what extent we are a part of "the problem" needs debate in an open forum that requires deep introspection by horsemen. Several years ago, USDA-Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth (now Chief Emeritus) began giving his "Four Threats" speech to the nation. He identified the fourth threat to the National Forest System as unmanaged recreation. Horsemen should debate in open forum our place in unmanaged recreation as we pursue "Right to Ride" legislation and litigation against designated trail rules. *High profile conferencing will open such matters to full debate of our objectives and how best to achieve them.*

Third, trail horsemen in general, continue to fail to understand the basic necessity of making an argument to themselves to protect natural and cultural resources. All of the federal and most of the state managed lands on which we ride, or hope to ride,

are under legislative mandates to prevent natural resource degradation. Unquestionably, natural and cultural resource conservation is the nation's highest priority for its federal, non-military lands. And yet, where in the recreational horse trails literature, including conference proceedings, do we find any but mundane mention of conservation concerns.<sup>2</sup> *Conferencing is a means of addressing this deficiency with efficiency and efficacy.*

**Fourth, there is a great need to address equestrian trails issues in detail at three levels. State conferences should deal with specific trails, specific management agency situations, and legislation specific to each state. Regional conferences should deal with issues common to the states within the region, and be seen as the link connecting individual state problems with national issues. The national conference should deal with the general issues including legislation and agency policies that have direct and indirect effects on recreational stock use.**

**And finally, a national conference will carry with it the prestige and venue level that will attract speakers from the highest levels within the federal land management agencies, members of Congress, and politicians seeking high office in election years. When we reach a point where such people seek to speak to us, we will have a profile meaningful to the people who will be making decisions about future opportunities for recreational trail horse use.**

#### **Possibilities for the Vision**

**How might we achieve the vision or some modification of it that achieves the same goals? I suggest that trail horsemen in definable regions, possibly commensurate with USDA-Forest Service regions, develop annual regional conferences based on the SETC model. Like SETC, the regional conferences should focus on regional issues, but it will be critically important for them to also develop the connectivity between state, regional, and national issues.**

**Individual states need to either use existing organizations or create new organizations to address specific state issues in a conference format. Organization development should exert maximal efforts to represent, effectively communicate with, and involve as many of the state's trail horsemen as possible. This is in contrast with a self-appointed group calling itself the voice of the state's trail horsemen. State organizations should develop a strong relationship with the regional conference. Representatives of state organizations should be the leaders that develop the regional conferences. However, as the regional conference must rotate among states, the host state must be given maximum latitude to put on the conference according to its abilities to do so.**

**Finally, regional leaders should lead the organization and development of the national conference which should be held at least once every two years, preferably**

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<sup>2</sup> I take the position that, in its current literature and mode of teaching, Leave No Trace education, including Leave No Trace with Pack and Saddle Stock, is about outdoor etiquette and not about fundamental conservation concerns.

annually. National meetings should involve the full array of organizations concerned with recreational trail horse use. In addition, thought might be given to making the national conference an international conference that might be called the North American Equestrian Trails Conference and would involve Canada and Mexico. A further step that could be considered would be an international conference that included all of the Americas as well as other nations such as Australia where recreational trail horse use is a major issue.

Combining state, regional, or national meetings with other meetings, e. g., horse expos, other trail conferences, etc., should be avoided to the extent possible. Combined meetings have participants “dining” at a smorgasbord as opposed to being focused on a single entrée. The latter will be far more efficient and efficacious in addressing trail issues.

#### **A Unifying Organization**

As the vision for equestrian trails conferencing has been presented here, it would appear that I believe these things will just happen more or less spontaneously across the nation. Just as the National Trails Conference would not happen without coordination by American Trails, an organization with broad perspectives, the vision offered here will need guidance from a broad perspective horse trails organization.

In my opinion, an equestrian organization that can separate itself from pure advocacy of recreational horse use to broader thinking at the national landscape level does not currently exist. The closest to such an entity is BCHA. However, BCHA is focused on back country use with pack stock, particularly in designated Wilderness, and largely in the far West. It is the nation’s unequalled advocate for the preservation of this western America heritage. Without its efforts, it is difficult to believe that this heritage will not be soon lost. However, in short, BCHA is narrowly focused, by choice and perhaps as it should be, while a nationally unifying organization must have a broad perspective and national landscape agenda.

What is needed in the recreational trail horse arena is an organization that can emulate for horsemen what Trout Unlimited (TU, [www.tu.org](http://www.tu.org)) does for trout fishermen and the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF, [www.nwtf.org](http://www.nwtf.org)) does for turkey hunters. Members of these organizations want to catch trout and harvest turkeys, but the organizations think and act far beyond these limited goals. These organizations realized long ago that the key to a sustainable future for their recreation was to define themselves in the larger natural resource picture. Doing so has led them to high levels of success and respect among land management agencies as well as that of numerous environmental organizations. TU, founded in 1959, has 152,000 “volunteer workers” in 450 chapters throughout the nation. The NWTF, founded in 1973, has “545,000 members in 50 states, Canada, Mexico, and 14 other foreign countries,” and a multi-million dollar annual budget. These organizations have a high profile in almost every natural resource conservation venue in the nation. NWTF may provide a good example for us as not only has it hugely expanded opportunities for turkey hunting recreation across the nation, it has come

to be seen as some of the good guys in sport hunting – a desperately needed contribution.

**Can recreational horsemen rise to the challenge recognized and met by trout fishermen and turkey hunters? Can such an organization unify trail horsemen across the national landscape? Can such an organization bring us respect among land management agencies that might come to see us as less of the problem and more of the solution?**

#### **Summary**

**Recreational trail horsemen should develop and maintain a formal, high profile means of communicating and debating issues in open forum among themselves, with land management agencies, non-government organizations, and others that make or influence land management decisions. Conferencing at state, regional, and national levels would create such forums for discussions of issues that directly or indirectly affect opportunities for recreational trail horse use. Guidance for formally structured conferencing across the nation will require the development of an organization devoted to preserving and enhancing widespread opportunities for recreational trail horse use. However, to be effective, such an organization must have a national landscape perspective as well as the ability to offer ecological, historical, and policy arguments for integrating recreational horse use into the nation's agendas for recreation and natural and cultural resource conservation on its public lands.**