

Recreational Horse Camps and Trailrides



as Alternative Sources of Income

Clemson Forest Riders. All photos courtesy of the author.

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According to surveys done by the American Horse Council in the late 1990s, approximately 6.9 million Americans own 7.1 million horses. Of these, about 3.8 million are used for trail riding. The Council is currently doing a new survey that is likely to show an increase in these numbers.

The increase in popularity of trail horse recreation is reflected in the substantial increase in the number of trail horse camps throughout the nation in the past 20 years, particularly in the South and Mid-West. Trail Rider magazine alone lists approximately 600 recreational horse trails, camps and trailrides nationwide. The trend also is reflected in a large increase in the number of magazines, magazine articles, and catalogs that target recreational trail horse riders.

Until recently, practically all recreational horse trail opportunities were on public lands. While demand for recreational horse trail opportunities have been increasing, public agency capacities to deal with that demand have been decreasing due to down sizing. This situation is opening possibilities for small private ownerships located near or adjacent to public lands that either have or could have equestrian trails.

Increasingly, farm and forest landowners are seeing recreational trails as a possible alternative source of income with the owner choosing from a range of investment scales depending upon level of services to be provided. Possibilities range from operations completely on private lands, including multiple ownerships, to operations that mesh private and public lands. In addition, this use is compatible with other alternative uses, such as fee hunting.

In South Carolina, Lakeview Plantation (see www.lakeviewplantation.com) is one example of combining a very successful fee hunting operation with a great recreational horse camp and trail system, all on private lands. Forest product company lands that adjoin Lakeview are leased for both hunting and trailride purposes. The Lakeview operation requires clients to bring their own horses. Most guests camp in their horse trailers. Rides are unsupervised.

In Wisconsin, the Kickapoo Valley Ranch (see www.kvranch.com) lies adjacent to the state-owned Kickapoo Valley Reserve. The Ranch has an agreement with the Reserve to access the public trails during the summer months and in turn the Ranch assists in trail maintenance. The rest of the year rides are restricted to the 30 acres owned by the ranch. Accommodations are "high

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end" cabins. The owner/operators restrict riding to the use of horses owned by them. Riders are restricted to rides organized and led under their supervision.

Another high-end operation is The Natural Gait in northern Iowa (see www.thenaturalgait.com). The current trail system is on state and private lands. Totally furnished log cabins that sleep 6-10 people have adjacent covered stalls for horses. There are also electric hookup campsites. Good trout and smallmouth bass fishing as well as canoeing, kayaking or tubing on the Yellow River are additional amenities. In this operation, the owners have combined a highly successful wildflower seed production business with a recreational horse business on the same acres.

Midwest Trailride in Indiana (see www.midwesttrailride.com) accommodates recreational trail horse enthusiasts that camp on private land and ride entirely on the adjoining Hoosier National Forest. The owner/operator of Midwest agrees to establish and maintain access trails to USDA-Forest Service expectations, but the Forest Service maintains the rest of the trail system. This operation requires all clients to bring their own horses. Excellent cabin and bunkhouse accommodations are available, but most of the client camping

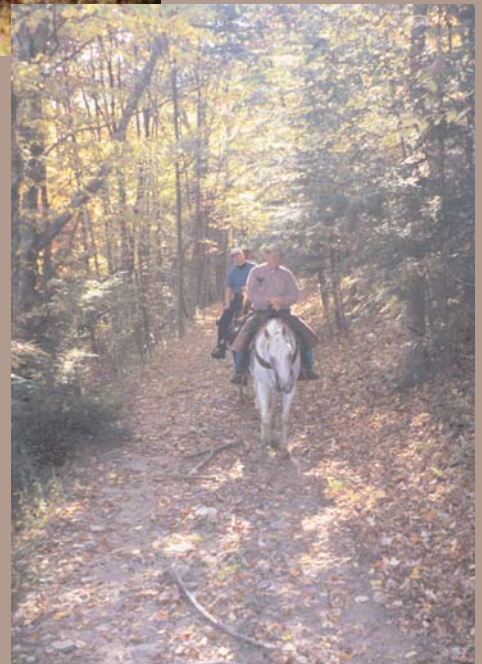
is in their own horse trailers. Clients may prepare their own food at their campsites or take advantage of the camp mess hall.

I have personally visited and worked with each of the operations used as examples above, but there are numerous other configurations that can

Another configuration may be in partnering with federal and state agencies. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations sought increased federal agency-private enterprise partnerships to accomplish what down sized agencies could not do alone. Landowners with lands adjacent to or near public lands, particularly National Forest System lands, should explore opportunities for these partnerships. Economic configurations for these partnerships are numerous and primarily limited by imagination and the will to make something happen that will be both environmentally and economically sound. The private entities in these partnerships must keep in mind that the public entities will be held to high standards for



work. For instance while I was in Iowa last spring, I spoke with farmers interested in the possibilities of forming "trail cooperatives." In such a situation, by combining acreages, a substantial trail system could be pieced together. The individual farmers could then offer cabin or camping accommodations and access to a trail system that they cooperatively owned and regulated. In a failing agricultural economy, they were searching for ways to hold on to their lands. In addition, horse use on those lands constitutes a cultural heritage and traditional use.



Top and Bottom: Mt. Rogers Trail Riders.

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user safety and environmental protection, usually by statutory mandate.

Limited equine liability laws in most states have tremendously improved the economics of liability concerns, particularly where the operator does not supply horses. However, insurance remains a major issue. Economic down-turns appear to have had little effect on recreational horse camps, but the current large increases in fuel prices may be discouraging some of the long

distance trailering of recreational saddle stock that has been popular to this point.

Trail systems can be managed toward a complete outdoor recreational experience that includes improved understanding of conservation practices and economic land-use. Trail and trail-head designs, construction and maintenance can be aimed at ensuring user safety, and environmental and economic soundness.

Left photo: Clemson forest riders.

Right photo: Wisconsin sugar maple ride.

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