Prologue

"It is the expansion of transport without a corresponding growth of perception that threatens us with qualitative bankruptcy of the recreational process."

- Aldo Leopold (1949)

Two of the most important features of being human are our abilities to contemplate the past and to envision a future. The past, we call history. For Americans, at the center stage of our history are men and women with their saddle, pack, and draft stock answering the calls and challenges of wild landscapes.

The irrevocable image of American horsemen in the national psyche stirs, at least for some of us, an unrequited need to reach back to times and places to which we can never return. Larry McMurtry (1985) in his book Lonesome Dove quoted T.K Whipple who may have best captured the phenomenon:

All America lies at the end of the wilderness road. Our past is not a dead past, but still lives within us. Our forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed, we live. What they lived, we dream.

Recreational horse trails on wildlands offer us opportunities to visit the dream. Without these opportunities, the dream becomes a mere fantasy devoid of the realities of horses, soils, rocks, streams, weather, daylight and dark, and the thousands of plants and animals that both aggravate and enhance the pleasure of the experience. On these trails we reenact our history. We seek to preserve these reenactment stages for future generations. Re-creations of who we were likely sharpens our awareness of who we are and where we came from.

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The consummate conservationist, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) proclaimed that progress was a relentless aggressor. While the advancements of civilizations have always been driven by progress that made human lives more comfortable and more secure, too much progress might make us too comfortable, too secure, too unrealistic about our true relationship with nature, too far removed from our origin – the land. As trail horsemen, we reach back in our recent history to rediscover and reinforce certain values. However, we are not alone in our pursuits of being re-created on wild landscapes. Indeed, all Americans have values for these landscapes - even those who never experience them first hand, and they are in the majority.

Progress has brought, in vivid color enhanced by eloquent prose, wild landscapes into every home that has television. Almost every American has ideas of how these landscapes should look "forever." Almost every American has ideas about what constitutes evidence of the desecration of the perceived sanctity of these lands. Yet very few of those with strong perceptions and opinions intimately know land.

In this broad array of values and perceptions lies both the strengths and risks of decision making in our democracy. Thomas Jefferson saw American democracy as a great experiment. Decisions for the common good would be based on the judgment of a plurality. That plurality did not need proof of its correctness or justification for its perceived moral superiority. It only needed to be a plurality. So far our system, as perilous as it may appear, has not only survived, it has prospered for over 200 years. On the other hand, the challenges seem to be increasingly difficult, particularly in the arena of natural resource utilization and conservation.

As trail horsemen we find ourselves immersed in a struggle that may have no end. We seek what is precious to us on public lands owned by an American citizenry that has little first hand experience with wildlands, or horses and mules on wildlands. We are at a crossroads in conflicting public opinions on the compatibility of recreational use of saddle and pack stock with fundamental natural resource conservation. As horsemen, our only hope for preserving the recreational horse trail experience lies within us. That hope is welded to what we are willing to do to make horse trails compatible with other ecosystem components and processes and the values that other people have for them.

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In the most fundamental sense, a recreational horse trail on wildlands is the artifact of a human idea embedded in a matrix of "natural" ecosystem components and processes. The design, construction, maintenance, and regu-

lation of use of this contrivance must be focused on the compatibility of the trail and its use with the ecological integrity, stability, and beauty of the matrix.

The purpose of this book is to guide land managers and equestrian trail users to a fundamental underpinning for design, construction, and maintenance of horse trails in a manner that harmonizes the trail and its use with the rest of the ecosystem and the values others have for the landscape as a whole. Three goals guide all aspects of trail design, construction, and maintenance contained in this book:

1. The trail will be user safe.
2. The trail will be ecologically sound.
3. The trail will be economically sustainable.

These guidelines are based on the best, currently available science, and the experience of knowledgeable trail builders from a broad array of landscapes. This book is not a "cookbook" of blueprints on how to do it. It is a book that educates the trail builder on how to think about trail design, construction, and maintenance tasks, and then tailor their approaches to the accomplishment of these tasks to site specific conditions. The successful completion of such tasks is going to depend on the ingenuity, commitment, intellectual and physical energies, and skills brought to the work by the individual trail builders.

Finally, my deepest hope is that this book will be a significant contribution to efforts to preserve recreational horse trails as a cultural heritage in a natural heritage setting.

- Gene W. Wood