

NAVAJO TRAILS INITIATIVE

Benefits of Trails

Trails are beneficial to our physical, emotional and spiritual health and wellbeing. In addition, trail systems open to the public have been well documented economic development engines.

Physical Health

"For parents like us, this isn't just a public health threat. It's not just some abstract issue that we read about in the newspaper. This is personal. This is emotional. It's one of those things that keeps us lying awake at night."

–First Lady Michelle Obama, on childhood obesity

In the United States, youth obesity has become epidemic. Children now growing up have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Computer games, texting and social media have to a large degree replaced physical activities for children.

Physical activity is one of the most cost-effective tactics in diabetes prevention and treatment. Trails for bicycling, hiking and running serve as passive encouragement for exercise. Numerous studies have shown that proximity to neighborhoods is critical for trail usage; people who live within a 5-10 minute walk of a trailhead are much more likely to use trails than people who live farther away.

A considerable body of research has demonstrated that trails can play a significant role in improving community health. Websites, from government agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and National Institutes of Health to organizations such as KidsHealth.org document the benefits of – and critical need for – more exercise (and better diet habits) among our children.

But trails are not just for children. Adults, too, benefit from regular exercise, and something as simple as walking for 30 minutes a day can help stave off, or minimize the impact of, a multitude of health problems, including cancer, heart disease and pulmonary disease.

Emotional Health

"The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside... amidst the simple beauty of Nature."

–Anne Frank

While many studies document the benefits to our emotional health by spending time in Nature, it doesn't take a research document to show us the good that comes from being outdoors. All one needs to do is walk, ride a bike or horse in a natural setting, free of the "right angles" and structures of civilization. The soothing effect on us, helping restore balance and reduce stress, is all but irresistible.

By providing access and encouraging people to get out into the healing embrace of Nature, the Navajo Nation can create a drug-free approach to treating depression, and help reduce the suicide

rate in the Nation. A trail system can help create more engaged, healthy and positive communities, and encourage a trend toward belief in ourselves and each other.

Spiritual Health

"Man's heart, away from Nature, becomes hard."

–Oglala Lakota Chief Luther Standing Bear

It is difficult, spending time in a natural environment, not to feel a deeper contact with the spiritual realm, regardless of one's religious beliefs (or lack of same). The connection with something bigger surrounds us, and the beauty and simplicity of Nature opens our hearts to greater appreciation for the gifts that surround us.

Natural/Cultural Resource Benefits

"We need to haunt the house of history and listen anew to the ancestors' wisdom."

–Maya Angelou

With thoughtful planning, trail systems can serve as tools for protecting natural and cultural resources. By guiding trail users away from critical habitat and important cultural sites they help ensure that these places stay untouched. Interpretive signage can also increase awareness of the need to protect these resources. In addition, if a trail system provides what people want, the temptation to develop "social," or wildcat trails, is lessened.

Economic Benefits

"Trails and greenways positively impact individuals and improve communities by providing not only recreation and transportation opportunities, but also by influencing economic and community development."

–Trails and Greenways Clearinghouse

Within the Navajo Nation are some of the most stunning landscapes in the world. As a tourism destination, the economic benefits of trails can be significant, and while not a miracle cure-all, certainly a contributor to improved economic health. Many research documents detail the financial gains communities experience as a result of developing trails. However, these benefits need to be carefully balanced against impacts that can come with bringing visitors into the Navajo Nation. Careful planning is essential to maximize benefits while minimizing unwanted impacts.

Summary

Trails have proven to be valuable community assets. They can, as part of a broad approach to health and livability issues in the Nation, make a significant contribution to a more positive

future. They can also be powerful economic development engines. With proper planning, design and construction trails have minimal impacts on natural and cultural resources.

While this document focuses on the benefits of trails, it's important to note that trails are not a panacea. Trails are not free of management issues, but careful planning and execution, along with meaningful community involvement and participation, can reduce those issues to easily manageable levels.