



Research Paper

Trails on tribal lands in the United States



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Trail systems aid economic development, public health, and safe transportation in Indian Country.
- Trail systems help protect American Indian cultural identity and natural heritage.
- Trail systems restore physical and spatial connectivity in Indian Country.
- Land tenure patterns and obstacles to funding impede trail development.

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the status of trails on American Indian lands in the United States and their contribution to quality of life in Indian Country. Although American Indians have been using trails for centuries and trails have been the subject of considerable scholarly inquiry, very little research explores community trails on American Indian land. However, such research could serve an important purpose: American Indian communities, and reservations in particular, face a suite of social challenges related to land tenure, economic disparity, health epidemics, and transportation safety. Meanwhile, the social benefits of community trails have been well documented. This paper seeks to fill this knowledge gap by describing the current existence and uses of trails on American Indian land; the benefits they bring to tribal and non-tribal users; the potential benefits of expanding trails; and potential obstacles to trail development. To develop this understanding, we conducted informational interviews with 21 tribal representatives and resource managers from across the United States. Our results shed light on the important role that trails can play in strengthening American Indian communities. We find that trails (1) help strengthen and preserve cultural identity and natural heritage; (2) directly address some of the most pervasive social challenges that American Indian communities face; and (3) spur the creation of constructive partnerships with individuals, organizations, and various levels of government. These results provide strong incentive for continued and improved funding and development of trails not only in American Indian communities but also on indigenous lands across the globe.

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1. Introduction

American Indians have used foot trails for millennia. Over time, these paths have been used for travel, trade, war-making, and venturing to sacred places. The continent was crisscrossed by an extensive network of trails made by American Indians at the time of first contact with Europeans (Blakeslee, 2006). However, as the influence of Western technology and worldviews began to transform traditional American Indian lifestyles, and as processes of dispossession separated Indians from their historical land bases,

these traditional trail networks began to fade or were converted to roads and highways that are not conducive for walking. In fact, the current transportation infrastructure follows historic American Indian trails closely (Vogel, 1985).

Notwithstanding the disappearance of traditional routes, trails continue to exist in Indian Country, a term that describes all land, on a reservation or otherwise, under federal jurisdiction and designated for Indian use (Pevar, 2004). In addition to the informal paths and routes, Indian Country also has professionally designed and planned trail systems. However, little research exists describing the characteristics, uses, benefits, planning, or development of contemporary trails on American Indian lands. Such research could serve an important purpose. Trails systems have been shown to improve quality of life in areas including resident health and fitness, access to natural areas, land use, transportation, and community physical and social connectivity (Erickson, 2006; Shafer, Lee, & Turner, 2000). Simultaneously, American Indian communities, and reservations in particular, face a suite of social challenges related to land tenure, economic disparity, health epidemics, and transportation safety. A question that remains unaddressed is how trails on and near tribal lands can help lessen these social challenges. Accordingly, this research is an initial investigation of the quality of life benefits conferred by trails in Indian Country. Quality of life (QOL) has been defined and conceptualized in numerous different ways (van Kamp, Leidelmeijer, Marsman, & de Hollander, 2003). We follow Machlis, Force, and Burch (1997) and Shafer et al. (2000) in conceptualizing QOL through the lens of human ecology. A human ecological approach to QOL articulates the interconnectedness of the essential components of quality of life, as well as the interconnectedness of the natural, built, and social environments that are relevant to developing high quality of life in a given place (Bubolz, Eicher, Evers, & Sontag, 1980; Machlis et al., 1997). While the components of quality of life under consideration vary from analysis to analysis, interconnection and interdependence of these components is consistent across studies, underscoring the utility of the human ecological perspective (van Kamp et al., 2003).

A human ecological perspective on QOL is relevant to an investigation of trails because trails inherently integrate elements of natural, physical, and social environments. The integration of these environments is a common characteristic of greenways, which are multi-purpose corridors of ecological, recreational, cultural, and historical significance (Ahern, 1995; Fábos, 2004; Searns, 1995). In urban or built environments, greenways help establish ecological connectivity or provide recreation and green spaces (Jongman, Kùlvik, & Kristiansen, 2004; Shafer et al., 2000). In rural environments, greenways serve similar functions while incorporating context-specific elements such as agricultural land, conservation of undeveloped land, and historical sites and artifacts (Yahner, Korostoff, Johnson, Battaglia, & Jones, 1995). Trails and trail systems are often recognized as greenways in both urban (e.g., Shafer et al., 2000) and rural settings (e.g., Yahner et al., 1995). In both settings, they serve multiple purposes in the realms of public health, recreation, economic development, and environmental conservation (Corning, Mowatt, & Chancellor, 2012). Greenways, and trails that serve as greenways, are thus elements of both ecological and cultural landscapes (Fábos, 2004; Searns, 1995; Yahner et al., 1995).

This research contributes to the perspective that trails are elements of cultural landscapes that confer important QOL benefits to users and communities. In an urban setting, Shafer et al. (2000) evaluated trail users' perceptions of the economic, environmental, and social QOL benefits of trail systems, finding that health and fitness, accessible natural environments, recreational opportunities, land use patterns, pride in the community, and community identity were the most important benefits identified by users. In a more rural setting, Yahner et al. (1995) identify trails as important opportunities to educate users about local history, culture and

landscapes. However, very little research explicitly investigates the QOL benefits conferred by trails in truly rural settings, much less rural Indian Country settings. This absence is significant, because quality of life is culturally relative (Marsella, Levi, & Ekblad, 1997). As such, the QOL benefits conferred by trails in one location cannot be assumed to be identical to the benefits conferred by trails in a culturally different location. In this paper, we develop the first review of contemporary trails in Indian Country and their contributions to residents' quality of life. Our research is grounded in the major social challenges facing American Indians and the role that trails play in ameliorating those challenges. Given the current lack of research on trails in Indian Country, we take an exploratory approach to document (1) the status of existing trails; (2) the benefits those trails bring to tribal users; and (3) the opportunities and challenges associated with expanding trail systems. We begin with an overview of the major social challenges that negatively impact QOL in Indian Country communities.

1.1. The reservation system and modern land tenure

The reservation system has left an indelible mark on American Indian communities, substantially impacting economic development, the organization of land ownership, and behavior patterns and lifestyle choices. Beginning in the 1770s and extending beyond the 1860s, westward expansion by Euro-Americans forced American Indians to negotiate treaties that reduced their former territories, thereby confining their sovereignty to a system of reservations. This significant reduction in tribal lands was exacerbated by allotment policies, which began via treaties in the 1850s and were cemented in the General Allotment Act of 1887 (also called the Dawes Act, after its congressional sponsor). The Dawes Act divided collectively owned reservations into individual allotments. Under the provisions of the Dawes Act, lands not allotted to individual Indians were deemed "surplus lands" and sold to white settlers to build the US Treasury. Due to allotment policies, Indians were forced to cede almost 90 million acres—approximately two-thirds of their total land base—to non-Indian control (ILTF, 2012). The Dawes Act and other policies of dispossession have resulted in modern land tenure characterized by a mosaic of ownership types. This mosaic, known as checkerboarding, describes how reservation land is divided into a variety of ownership classes including individual Indian trust lands (i.e., allotments), non-Indian fee lands, and tribal trust and fee lands. While trust lands are under American Indian ownership, approval from the Secretary of the Interior is required to make any land use change decisions. This interferes with a tribe's ability to make autonomous management decisions and impedes opportunities for economic development.

Allotted lands also suffer from fractured ownership, which results when ownership of a parcel is divided among the heirs of an original allottee without subdividing the land. As generations pass, ownership of a parcel is fractured repeatedly. For example, a single 80-acre parcel on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation in Wisconsin had 2285 owners. Fractured ownership requires the consent of the majority of owners before land is developed in any way, making it difficult to make use of these properties (ILTF, 2012).

1.2. Economic conditions

Reservations have historically offered very few economic opportunities to community members. As a result, American Indians have often been forced to move away from their communities to find work. By the 1980s, over 60 percent of American Indians lived off-reservation, often away from their land and culture (Lewis, 1995). Today, per-capita income for American Indians is significantly lower for those living on reservations than those not, and the per capita incomes of both American Indian groups are lower than

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