



American Discovery Trail Society

Making connections coast-to-coast

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Statement of the American Discovery Trail Society

Submitted to the House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee
National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee

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The American Discovery Trail Society strongly urges the National Parks Subcommittee and the Natural Resources Committee to support H.R. 4878, “The National Discovery Trails Act,” en route to full House passage.

The American Discovery Trail Society is a national membership-based and volunteer-based nonprofit organization formed to develop and manage the American Discovery Trail, America’s only coast-to-coast, multi-use hiking trail. Over the past 30 years, the Society has developed the American Discovery Trail in cooperation with countless local and regional trails groups, corporations, local, and state governments.

The American Discovery Trail exists from coast-to-coast and has been in use by travelers for many years. There is no need to buy or acquire any new land. The American Discovery Trail provides a unique, transcontinental trail experience, exposing the traveler to not only some of the country’s most scenic areas, but also some its most historic areas. By incorporating major urban greenway systems and wilderness trails, it bring trails to communities, beckoning citizens to get outdoors. It also offers travelers with an opportunity to meet and interact with their fellow Americans that is unique among long-distance trails, as well as bringing attention and economic benefits to many small towns and cities. The National Trails System lacks any trail of this important and diverse nature.

This legislation remedies this deficit in the National Trails System by adding a new category of trail to the National Trails System—National Discovery Trails—and names the American Discovery Trail as the first of these new trails. The legislation implements the recommendations of a National Park Service study that examined the feasibility of adding the American Discovery Trail to the National Trails System.

Why add a new category of trail to the National Trails System? Because the new category meets the primary purpose—and an unmet need—in the National Trails System that the other categories of long-distance national trails cannot meet by definition. The National Trails System Act’s “Statement of Policy” clearly specifies that “in order to provide for the ever-increasing outdoor recreation needs of an expanding population ... trails should be established (i) primarily, near the urban areas of the Nation, and (ii) secondarily,

within scenic areas and along historic travel routes of the Nation which are often more remotely located.”

The existing long-distance trail categories—National Scenic Trails and National Historic Trails—are clearly defined in the Act as designed to meet the “secondary” purposes of the Act. National Scenic Trails avoid urban areas by design. National Historic Trails are interpretive resources, and not meant to be continuous, walkable routes. In contrast, National Discovery Trails are designed to pass through the urban areas mentioned in the Act, and by connecting the urban areas to other trails in the National Trails System, National Discovery Trails would at long last meet the primary purpose of the founding act.

The 6800-mile American Discovery Trail is not only the first coast-to-coast trail, but is also the first long-distance trail consciously designed to provide connections in the National Trails System. The United States is blessed with a number of irreplaceable long-distance trails, such as the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, and the Continental Divide Trail. However, no official trail links these jewels or connects the entire nation from coast to coast. The American Discovery Trail fills that gap and helps to unify the country physically, geographically, and spiritually in people’s imaginations. The ADT is a network of routes and trails that links the Pacific coast, where Sir Francis Drake touched land in California, with the Atlantic coast, where early Dutch and Swedish colonists settled in Delaware. The ADT links five National Scenic Trails, 12 National Historic Trails, and 36 National Recreation Trails with urban areas, such as San Francisco, Denver, St. Louis, and Cincinnati, as well as many small towns and cities. It visits 10,000 sites of historic, cultural, and natural interest as it provides a true backbone to the National Trails System.

The route of the ADT was developed through the cooperative efforts of citizens working with federal, state, and local land managers; state and local planning and transportation departments; state departments of natural resources; and citizens’ trail groups. The route is entirely on publicly accessible land. It incorporates existing hiking trails, towpaths, rail-trails, country roads, small town sidewalks, and big city greenways in a cooperative effort that leaves the management and maintenance of these segments in the hands of the existing local organizations and governments. The ADT does not add to the management or maintenance tasks of federal agencies.

The American Discovery Trail has stood the test of time. It is now more than 25 years old and has been traveled continuously since its inception. The ADT Society has published complete guidebooks, turn-by-turn directions, and electronic GPS guides for the entire route for many years. Recognition and use of the ADT continue to increase—each spring adventurers aspiring to travel coast to coast depart from the Atlantic or the Pacific. But more importantly, thousands of citizens have hiked smaller parts of the trail, many with the goal of sampling different sections of the trail through diverse areas of America.

Passage of H.R. 4878 would help overcome one issue that is holding back greater use of the trail: a lack of signage in many areas. The Congress has already taken a significant, but partial, step in this direction. In Section 2503 of PL 116-9, the John D. Dingell, Jr, Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act, Congress overwhelmingly directed the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture, overseeing the National Park Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Forest Service, “to place the signage on federal

lands.” Great progress in installing signage has been made, as the American Discovery Trail Society has successfully cooperated with the National Park Service to install signs in heavily visited units such as the C&O Canal National Historic Park in Maryland and Gateway Arch National Park in Missouri. ADT signs have been installed along the Tahoe Rim Trail in Tahoe National Forest in California and Nevada, on the River-to-River Trail in Shawnee National Forest in Illinois, and on BLM lands in Nevada.

It is time to complete this effort. To help nudge non-federal jurisdictions, Congress needs to implement the final recommendation of the 1996 NPS Study and make the American Discovery Trail an official part of the U.S. National Trails System. Designation of the trail as a part of the National Trails System would facilitate the ability of the ADT Society and interested civic groups to mark the trail across the country.

As the American Discovery Trail has developed across the country, the vision it offers of a cross-country trail has inspired many trail-building efforts. One trail success story that was inspired by the American Discovery Trail is the River to River Trail in Southern Illinois. Although the River to River Trail existed in theory through the Shawnee National Forest, it was not a continuous, usable trail, and there was with little hope for improvement. When the possibility was raised that it could become a part of the American Discovery Trail, within months local trail activists organized the River to River Trail Society. This organization quickly defined and marked the trail, wrote a detailed guidebook, and created maps for the 146-mile trail from the Ohio River to the Mississippi River that has since garnered recognition for being one of the premier trails in the Midwest. These efforts continue to this day.

The ADT has been supported by a wide variety of groups like the River to River Trail Society. The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission petitioned the ADT Society to reroute the trail onto the northwest Indiana regional trail system through several towns to take advantage of several new trails in the area. In the Quad Cities area of Iowa and Illinois, a popular bicycle and pedestrian crossing of the Mississippi River came about in large part because it could become a part of the coast-to-coast ADT, and it was known as the “ADT Connection.” The success of the ADT depends on the support of such localities.

As an example of state participation in the trail, Delaware’s Department of Transportation put up signage to mark the trail through the state and Cape Henlopen State Park installed a beautifully illustrated “trailhead” sign to mark the eastern terminus at the Atlantic Ocean. The Nevada State Parks have partnered several times to support ADT Society-sponsored events on the trail, such as trail runs, bike rides, and an equestrian ride. The ADT passes through several state parks, and the agency recognizes that the American Discovery Trail brings much-wanted and much-deserved attention to the state’s many scenic and natural assets.

State departments of transportation that have published printed maps showing the route of the ADT include West Virginia Official State Highway Map, Kansas Bicycle Map, and Discover Colorado: Bicycle and Scenic Byways Map. The Indiana Statewide Trails Plan includes the ADT as a “Priority Visionary Trail” and the Iowa Department of Transportation lists the ADT as a “Trail of Statewide Significance.” In its scoring process to decide which trails will be given development funds, Iowa gives priority to trails that can become a part of or connect to the ADT.

Many localities support the American Discovery Trail because they recognize that trails benefit local economies. Because its route passes through many small towns and cities, the American Discovery Trail benefits local economies in ways that trails that avoid these areas do not. As just one example, the attached letter from the Coon Rapids, Iowa, community coordinator voices support for this bill because the ADT “is already boosting tourism and bringing economic growth to nearby communities.” The letter from the Ripley County (Indiana) Economic Development Corporation notes that the designation of the ADT will not only attract tourist dollars, but it will also help in “attracting talent to Indiana” because “trail projects are high on the list” that “younger talent seeks” in choosing where to live. The Franklin County (Indiana) Economic Development Commission agrees that “trails are transformative projects that offer tangible quality of place benefits that enhance our ability to compete for jobs and talent.” (More letters of support can be found at <https://discoverytrail.org/legislation/support-letters/>.)

In a letter of support, the mayor of Woodland Park, Colorado, notes that “many studies have found that trails and greenways positively affect property values, small business revenues, and even corporate relocations.” Trails have shown again and again that they can be engines stimulating economic activity as shown by the bike shops and inns along the North Bend Rail Trail in West Virginia and the Katy Trail in Missouri. Many studies have found that having a trail near one’s home is an amenity that adds to property values.

Recognizing the need for more trails near the places where people live, the National Park Service first proposed this new category of National Discovery Trail in its feasibility study of the American Discovery Trail. As the National Park Service has stated in testimony on previous versions of this legislation: “Currently, there are no trails that are primarily intended to tie together existing trails and urban areas into the national network envisioned by the National Trails System Act.” It is time to rectify this unmet need by designating the American Discovery Trail as the first of the category of National Discovery Trails.

The National Park Service study of the American Discovery Trail emphasized the efficiency of this model when it proposed this new category of trail: “The national discovery trail alternative would place fewer new demands on the federal agencies because a nonprofit group would have primary responsibility for the trail’s general management.” Another factor that lessens any overall administrative burden on federal agencies is that the route ties together existing trails, and every one of these trails already has a government entity or private group that is providing its maintenance and upkeep. The American Discovery Trail overlays these trails without shifting any control from state and local jurisdictions or imposing new maintenance obligations on federal agencies.

Just as citizens look back on the start of the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s as a great national achievement, so decades from now citizens will look back on the coast-to-coast American Discovery Trail as a remarkable achievement that benefits the entire nation in countless ways. Decades from now Americans will laud the establishment of the American Discovery Trail and thank the congressional leaders who had the vision to realize the magic and grandeur of a national trail. As the NPS stated: “National Discovery Trails would be intended to link existing national, regional, and local trails into an integrated system, much like the way the interstate highway system functions.” This kind

of trails system has been a goal at least since President Reagan's Commission on Americans Outdoors called for the creation of a vast network of hiking and jogging trails, bikeways, and bridle paths. The Commission envisioned a nationwide system of trails that would "tie this country together with threads of green," linking communities and providing access to the natural world. American Trails and the National Park Service followed up this Commission's recommendations with the "Trails for All Americans" report calling for just such a network of trails.

Even though H.R. 4878 would take us closer to these long-stated goals by making the ADT official as a national discovery trail, it is a simple bill:

- It does not ask for any appropriations or federal funds;
- It does not spend any tax dollars or budgetary outlays;
- It does not expand federal control over public or private lands;
- It does not seek to acquire any lands; in fact, it prohibits doing so;
- It does not shift control of land or routes from existing state and local jurisdictions to federal agencies;
- It does not impose any restraints or restrictions on future development of adjacent lands;
- It does not call for any buffer zones;
- It does not affect hunting rights or zones;
- It does not alter the current maintenance responsibilities of federal, state, or local jurisdictions;
- It does not require the level of NPS management required by the national scenic and national historic trail categories.

The National Discovery Trails Act has a history of bipartisan support. The Senate has already passed unanimously a similar bill three times: S. 1069 in 1998; S. 734 in 1999; and S. 498 in 2001. Presently H.R. 4878 has 62 cosponsors, demonstrating widespread, coast-to-coast, and bipartisan support.

In conclusion, we ask for your support for H.R. 4878 because it helps to fulfill the goals of the National Trails System Act. The National Discovery Trails Act would make the ADT an official part of the National Trails System, and thereby help boost tourism and bring economic growth to nearby communities. Designating the American Discovery Trail would promote physical health and exercise by bringing national trails closer to urban centers and rural communities. Finally, as a coast-to-coast trail, the American Discovery Trail would psychologically help to unify the nation and bring us closer together.

Eric Seaborg
President
American Discovery Trail Society
April 28, 2022

PDF attachment contains letters quoted from above and two additional sample letters of support:

Letter from City of Coon Rapids, Iowa
Letter Ripley County (Indiana) Economic Development Corporation
Letter from Franklin County (Indiana) Economic Development Commission
Letter from Mayor of Woodland Park, Colorado

Letter from Delaware Department of Natural Resources
Letter from Adventure Cycling Association