



# PLANNING FOR RESPONSIBLE RECREATION: AN ATV TRAIL CASE STUDY

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## Planning for Responsible Recreation: An ATV Trail Case Study

### Introduction

Currently, there is increasing pressure to provide recreation opportunities to a growing population and a growing diversity of recreational interests. From hiking to cycling to horseback riding to snowmobiling, there is an expanding list of activities that can take place on the landscape and on trail systems at any given time of the year. Given these pressures, land managers have had to respond with management planning and administrative processes that can balance the capacities of the resource with the demands of trail users and their various styles of recreation.<sup>1</sup>

Since 2007, a project in northern Minnesota, the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System, has provided an example of a thoughtful and effective approach to responsible recreation trail design, development, monitoring, promotion, and management. This report summarizes the planning and public engagement process and describes on-going responsible land management systems used to support the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail. Also discussed are key considerations in the management of responsible recreation trails and services in order to optimize economic, social, and environmental benefits.

### Background

Recreation management is an important consideration for land managers in the United States. Citizens, residents, and visitors expect to have access to lands for consumptive forms of recreation (e.g., hunting and fishing) as well as non-consumptive recreation (e.g., camping, trail use, wildlife watching). Federal, state, county and other types of public land provide important opportunities for recreation. Trail systems and other forms of recreation also frequently rely on the participation of private landowners to provide access and corridors (e.g., easements for trails and permitted uses). In many cases, expectations for specific recreation opportunities will have little to do with the realities of the land's capacity to support that activity. For instance, recreational land near an urban population center is likely to experience high usage rates that have more to do with human population in the area than with the available acres, miles of trails, or camping sites. For example, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages more than 65 state parks distributed statewide. In 2012, the state parks hosted nearly 8 million total visitors. The most visited park, with more than 950,000 annual visitors, was Fort Snelling about 3,700 acres in size and located within the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Itasca State Park, about 4 hours drive from the Twin Cities is over 30,000 acres in size and had about half as many visitors.<sup>2</sup>

As important as recreation is, it is only one of the many considerations that land managers must address. At a minimum, land managers must also consider forest and ecosystem health issues, wildfire risks, forest productivity, wildlife habitats, cultural and historical resources, and water resource protection. Balancing these considerations is especially important for land managers that have responsibilities for public lands, including federal, state and county-managed properties, and that have obligations to address public interests.

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<sup>1</sup> For information and discussion of recreation trends, see conference proceedings of the Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals, available at: <http://www.recpro.org/conference-proceedings>

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that either park has a visitor rate that exceeds its capacity. This simply illustrates the likelihood that an urban recreation area will experience higher visitor rates. For more information, see:

[http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/faq/mnfacts/state\\_parks.html](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/faq/mnfacts/state_parks.html)

In response to the growing need to manage recreation interests, a number of resources have been developed; a few examples are listed in Table 1. Along with the diverse tools and techniques that are available to support effective recreation planning and management, there is also a significant amount of on-the-ground experience. The following description of the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System development in northern Minnesota beginning in 2007 illustrates several key strategies used in effective recreation management, including methods of public engagement and accountability, use of environmental information and assessments, and consideration of socio-economic impacts.

**Table 1. Examples of Recreation Management Resources**

Name	Description
Framework for Sustainable Recreation	The Forest Services' approach helps shape recreation's role in promoting forest and grassland health and in advancing and strengthening the vitality of communities that are adjacent to National Forests. <a href="http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5346549.pdf">http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5346549.pdf</a>
Tourism Center – University of Minnesota	Provides training, education, and research to inform decisions related to tourism and to sustain the economy, environment, and social well-being of an organization or area. Research categories include visitor reports, market segments and the tourism industry. <a href="http://www.tourism.umn.edu/">http://www.tourism.umn.edu/</a>
Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)	The Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans (SCORPs) provide priorities and suggested actions to guide decisions about outdoor recreation. The National Park Service requires this plan to maintain eligibility to participate in the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LAWCON or LWCF) program. <a href="http://www.recpro.org/scorps">http://www.recpro.org/scorps</a>
Wilderness.net <sup>3</sup>	Provides comprehensive information and tools for monitoring and managing current issues in wilderness management, including cultural resources, accessibility, recreation sites, trail impacts and resource protection. <a href="http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=toolboxes">http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=toolboxes</a>

### The Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System

As in other parts of the country, the early-2000s included a period of conflict in Minnesota as a result of emerging interest in diverse forms of motorized recreation, namely All-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and Off-highway vehicles (OHVs). Although other forms of motorized recreation such as snowmobiles had a well-established usage pattern in the region, the increased use of ATVs raised new challenges and concerns.<sup>4</sup> New ATV designs facilitated their ability to be used in various conditions and throughout much of the year, including during the growing season and wet ground conditions. Furthermore, the interest in ATV recreation grew faster than the rate of trail development, designation, and enforcement capacity.

<sup>3</sup> This online search tool is based on research results published in the following publication: Cole, David N.; Petersen, Margaret E.; Lucas, Robert C. 1987. [Managing wilderness recreation use: common problems and potential solutions](#). Gen. Tech. Rep. INT-GTR-230. Ogden, UT: USDA For. Serv., Intermountain Research Station.

<sup>4</sup> It may be worth noting that recreation conflicts are not unique to ATV riding. For example there was, and still is an ongoing potential for conflict between skiers and snowmobiling, and as bicycles with wide tires for use on snow continue to be developed, conflicts may expand. While this report focuses on a case study of an ATV trail, the overall consideration of effective ways for land managers to address diverse recreation pressures has more widespread application.

The use of ATVs on forest access roads, ditches, and right-of-ways created further conflicts between various user groups and raised concern about trail deterioration, dust, noise, and safety. As shown in Table 2, a 2008 survey found ATV trail use in Minnesota to be greater than snowmobile use on a statewide basis and ranked as one of the top five recreational trail activities in the state by person-days of use (Table 2). The same survey found consumer spending on ATV trail use to be significant in all regions, ranging from a low of \$22.2 million to a high of \$30.1 million except in the metro area (only \$3.4 million). Spending on ATV activities in 2008 was ranked fifth in the state among the ten trail uses that were researched.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2. Total Trail Use in Minnesota, by activity and by region (2008)**

Total trail use in Minnesota, by activity and by region, 2008 UMN Survey (thousand-person-days)						
	Northwest	Northeast	Central	Metro area	South	State
Walking/hiking	16,003.6	22,521.0	15,461.8	53,157.5	26,417.0	133,560.9
Bicycle riding	2,163.8	3,614.8	4,045.3	13,793.2	6,475.5	30,092.8
Running	1,321.4	2,484.6	2,077.6	15,116.2	5,668.7	26,668.4
In-line skating	353.9	515.3	587.5	3,852.2	573.2	5,882.1
ATV	1,015.7	1,228.9	825.7	130.0	886.2	4,086.5
Snowmobile	1,053.7	1,440.5	497.2	306.7	696.6	3,994.6
Cross-country skiing	180.8	491.6	181.8	862.7	124.2	1,841.2
Horseback riding	156.9	142.5	621.2	280.3	507.6	1,708.4
OHM	59.6	78.6	62.3	30.2	42.8	273.7
ORV	32.0	42.2	12.0	6.3	20.4	112.9
Total	22,341.4	32,560.0	24,372.3	87,535.3	41,412.2	208,221.5

Source: *Economic Impacts of Recreational Trail Use in Different Regions of Minnesota*, prepared for the University of Minnesota Tourism Center by Ernesto C. Venegas, Ph.D., Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, November 2009.

In 2003, in response to the growing interest in ATV recreation and rising concerns about its management,<sup>6</sup> the Minnesota legislature appropriated funds for the development of a new ATV trail. Land managers were invited to submit proposals for trail plans that could qualify for the funding. Initially, a trail planning proposal in northwestern Minnesota was accepted and preliminary planning began. However, a few months later it became clear that the proposal could not succeed in the face of significant opposition. The project was discontinued and a request for new proposals was announced.

<sup>5</sup> For the full research results, see "Economic Impacts of Recreational Trail Use in Different Regions of Minnesota", prepared for the University of Minnesota Tourism Center by Ernesto C. Venegas, Ph.D., Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, November 2009.

<sup>6</sup> For examples, see: StarTribune, 2002 <http://www.startribune.com/sports/outdoors/11655746.html> *Inside DNR, memos warned of ATV damage*; Mille Lacs County Times 2002 *ATVs present environmental problems in state forests* <http://millelacscountytimes.com/2002/march/21ATVs.html>, *Motorized trail user conflict: origin, attribution & coping* Ingrid Schneider, Ph.D., Andrea Schuweiler, M.S., & Sierra Schroeder, M.S. University of Minnesota, [http://www.tourism.umn.edu/prod/groups/cfans/@pub/@cfans/@tourism/documents/asset/cfans\\_asset\\_29472\\_0.pdf](http://www.tourism.umn.edu/prod/groups/cfans/@pub/@cfans/@tourism/documents/asset/cfans_asset_29472_0.pdf)

In 2006, the Aitkin County Land Department in north-central Minnesota collaborated with adjacent Itasca County on a proposal for a 70-Mile Trail<sup>7</sup> project and was subsequently awarded funding to begin project development work in 2007.

From the beginning, the project initiated in 2007 was noteworthy for several reasons, including the overall structure and approach of the project, which leveraged existing trail corridors in the region. Also, the Aitkin County Land Department that led project proposal development had an interest in creating the opportunity to reduce the environmental impacts associated with off-trail and cross-country ATV travel by moving ATV use to a designed, managed, and enforced trail system. Key features of the project design are listed below and provide a starting point for understanding the project development process.

#### **Key Features of the 70-Mile Trail (Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System) Project**

- The project was a collaboration between multiple public land managers (*Aitkin County Land Department, Itasca County Land Department, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources*)
- It engaged independent third-party consultants to provide environmental review, project management and public engagement services (*Applied Ecological Services and Dovetail Partners*)
- It established a local, diversified oversight committee representing social, environmental and economic interests with a shared commitment to designing an environmentally-responsible, community-supported and economically beneficial trail systems
- It identified possible alternative trail routes in collaboration with local decision-makers (e.g., Township Supervisors), residents and citizens

A defining characteristic of the project was that the vision for the process was: *“to design an environmentally-responsible, community-supported and economically beneficial trail system.”* This vision was articulated in an agreement document that the members of the oversight committee signed, and by the third-year of the project this phrase became a mantra that was repeated several times at every meeting – either by members of the committee or by the public!

**A defining characteristic of the project was that the vision for the process was *“to design an environmentally-responsible, community-supported and economically beneficial trail system”***

The significance of this agreement is that the clearly stated and shared vision of the project was not to design a particular trail in a particular place but to have whatever trail ended up being developed provide specific agreed upon outcomes and address objectives related to sustainability of the trail system. Alignment behind a clear vision helped the planning process remain flexible and open to possibilities. As a result, the decision-makers and stakeholders were able to share common benchmarks of success for the project that were essential to overcoming new and emerging challenges throughout the project process.

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<sup>7</sup> Based upon the supporting legislation, the original proposal and project had the name “70-Mile Trail”. As the project developed and multiple trail routes were designed, constructed, and made available for recreational use the name “Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System” was adopted.



## Project Timeline and Milestones

The Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System resulted from a planning, design, development, and management process that required more than five years of commitment from local project partners, land managers, decision-makers, stakeholders and citizens. From the initial proposal in 2006 to the opening of Phase II trails in 2012, many important events occurred, as listed in the sidebar and described below.

### Key Elements – Project Structure

#### *Oversight Committee*

The oversight committee included 20 individuals representing diverse interests across the two counties where trail development was being proposed. Committee members included township representatives, motorized and non-motorized recreation enthusiasts, county staff and natural resource professionals, business and property owners, county commissioners, and economic development professionals. The oversight committee met periodically throughout the project to review proposed trail alignments, consider needs for environmental review, and host public meetings to gather project input.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Land Managers*

Throughout the project, natural resource professionals and land managers from the project area had responsibility for evaluating natural resource conditions and proposing trail routes that would be compatible with the lands' capacities. The process included the use of GIS (Geographic Information System) mapping systems, evaluations of soil characteristics, and extensive fieldwork to survey alternative routes.<sup>9</sup> The county staff collaborated with state agency staff as well as those agencies with authority for wetland permitting and other applicable regulations to ensure an open, participatory, and fully compliant process. The selection of potential, alternative, and preferred trail routes was based on extensive environmental reviews. The project partners recognized that this review was important for protecting natural resources and also ensuring that the final trails would be economically efficient to construct and maintain.

#### Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System – Project Events, 2006-2012

11/06 – Proposal for 70-mile trail project  
 1/07 – Grant approved  
 2/07 – Meeting with Townships (draft 1 alignment)  
 5/07 – Meeting with SE Townships (draft 2 alignment)  
 7/07 – Meeting with NW Townships (draft 2 alignment)  
 8/07 – Oversight committee formed  
 8/07 – Request for proposals for project coordinator services  
 9/07 – Project coordinator contracted (Dovetail Partners)  
 11/07 – Public “kick-off” meetings  
 12/07 – Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) process starts for Phase I  
 1/08 – Survey of residents to assess noise impacts of trail use  
 8/08 – EAW review for Phase I trails  
 9/08 – Additional grant received  
 10/08 – EAW approved for Phase I  
 12/08 – Monitoring and Enforcement plan finalized  
 1/09 – Phase I trail construction begins  
 7/09 – Landowner survey for preferred route alternatives  
 9/09 – Trail Tour with Legislative leaders and decision makers  
 11/09 – Adoption of new name – Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System  
 1/10 – Parks & Trails Legacy Grant  
 3/10 – Bonding funds approved  
 7/10 – Phase I Grand Opening  
 8/10 – Trail Tour with local soil, water and wetland protection agencies  
 8/10 – Phase 2 public open house  
 11/10 – Phase 2 EAW review  
 1/11 – Phase 2 EAW approval  
 2/11 – Phase 2 construction begins  
 5/11 – Grant for trail bridge construction  
 6/12 – Phase 2 Grand Opening  
 8/12 – Loop trails open

<sup>8</sup> The list of committee meetings, including agendas and minutes, from 2007-2013 is available at:

[http://www.dovetailinc.org/programs/land\\_use/northwoods\\_atv\\_trail](http://www.dovetailinc.org/programs/land_use/northwoods_atv_trail)

<sup>9</sup> The analysis was supported by the development of a GIS data sharing plan which describes the information to be reviewed and the oversight of a GIS advisory committee. The GIS plan is available here:

[http://www.dovetailinc.org/land\\_use\\_pdfs/gisplan11oct07.pdf](http://www.dovetailinc.org/land_use_pdfs/gisplan11oct07.pdf)

### *Consultants*

To assist with project development, two consulting groups were engaged in the project. One group, Dovetail Partners, had primary responsibility for project management and public engagement. The second group, Applied Ecological Services (AES), had primary responsibility for providing environmental assessment services and providing additional natural resource and ecological impact expertise. The original project proposal recognized that providing multiple opportunities for public input throughout the term of the project would be important to the project's success given the degree of concern associated with ATV trail development. The use of independent consultants helped support objective stakeholder consultation and ensure a consistent project management process (e.g., public notices of meetings, maintenance of project website, management of project contact lists, etc).

## **Key Elements – Project Design**

### *Public Engagement*

Effective and consistent public engagement was a key strategy throughout the project. Before the project even began, meetings were held with each township that would potentially be impacted by the trail project to gather feedback, discuss concerns, and identify possible trail opportunities. The official start of the project included two “kick-off” meetings, which more than 150 people attended.<sup>10</sup> The agenda included sharing an overview of the project, introducing the members of the oversight committee, and inviting the attendees to review potential alternative trail routes. Large, table-sized maps of various different trail routes were displayed at the kick-off meetings. Attendees were asked to use markers, post-it notes, and comment cards to identify concerns, make suggestions for improvements, and provide feedback on the various trail ideas. In many instances the maps did not display a specific trail route, but instead identified a general region where a trail connection was being explored (e.g., start and end points were identified or a general corridor area was circled or highlighted).



**Reviewing maps at a kick-off meeting**

Public engagement continued throughout the project with committee meetings open to the public, inclusion of time on the agenda of each meeting for public comment, and scheduling of additional open houses during key decision making points throughout the project. A project contact list was developed to share project news, meeting notices, and other information. A printed progress report newsletter was prepared periodically, and local media contacts were engaged to report on project developments and support public awareness. Copies of the progress reports and news headlines are available online at: [http://www.dovetailinc.org/programs/land\\_use/northwoods\\_atv\\_trail](http://www.dovetailinc.org/programs/land_use/northwoods_atv_trail)

### *Trail System and Linkages*

At the time of the project proposal, there was debate about how to best develop an ATV trail system in the state. The original legislation called for “a 70-mile trail.” While some advocates pictured a distinct trail system of this length, others imagined a “trail system,” more like Minnesota’s snowmobile routes that allow for travel between communities and day or multi-day excursions. The project proposal attempted to recognize and consider the full spectrum of possible trail development

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.dovetailinc.org/land\\_use\\_pdfs/progressreport0108final.pdf](http://www.dovetailinc.org/land_use_pdfs/progressreport0108final.pdf)

approaches and ended-up including several types of trail riding opportunities. The Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System includes long-distance community-connecting routes that follow old railroad grades, linkages between these main trails, and loop-trails that allow for scenic side-trips. This approach has resulted in a regional trail system that provides more than 500 miles of designated routes.

*Effective use of existing systems and public lands and innovative solutions to access*

The Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System benefited from some preexisting routes, including old railroad grades that had been converted to trail uses for snowmobiles and other forms of motorized and non-motorized recreation. The trail system is also located in a region of Minnesota with significant amounts of public land (state and county), which minimized the need to acquire private easements for trail access. However, even with existing trails to build from and available public lands, the oversight committee faced some specific sites where innovative solutions to developing trail connections and trail access were needed. After exploring options for private land easements or acquisition, one of the solutions settled on was a county road permitting process. In Itasca County, a process was established to allow specific county road segments to be opened to ATV use where there was a specific benefit to trail access or route connections. The permitted “Corridor Access Trails” provided a process for application, review and approval of specific routes that fit the county’s goals and requirements. This solution helped address the need to have effective trail access while avoiding the potential public conflict associated with a decision to open all county roads to ATV use.<sup>11</sup>

### **Key Elements – Project Goals and Measures of Success**

The development of the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System relied upon having shared project goals and clear measures of success. The overall vision “*to design an environmentally-responsible, community-supported and economically beneficial trail system*” was central as was the use of a balanced approach with a focus on solutions and use of specific strategies for addressing key environmental and social concerns.

*Balanced Approach, Solutions-Focused Participants*

The project design and the structure of the oversight committee helped support a balanced approach and a focus on solutions. Each member of the committee had a slightly different perspective, area of interest, or expertise – but all shared a commitment to a project that would be environmentally responsible, community-supported and economically beneficial. When challenges arose during the project that threatened this vision, committee members used many different approaches to solve and overcome them. For example, at various times when there was a sense of possible public concerns (i.e., a risk to the goal of being community-supported), the oversight committee decided public surveys were needed. One such survey resulted in a greater understanding of public concerns about the noise impacts of ATV trails.<sup>12</sup> Another survey aided in identifying the public’s preferred trail alignment.<sup>13</sup> At various times the committee also decided additional public meetings, open houses, trail tours, etc. were necessary to openly explore emerging questions or project development needs.

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<sup>11</sup> The Itasca County policy is available at:

<http://www.co.itasca.mn.us/Home/Departments/Administrative%20Services/Documents/Policy%20Manual/Est%20ATV%20Corridor%20Access%20Trails.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Final survey report available at: [http://www.dovetailinc.org/land\\_use\\_pdfs/redtopreport0408.pdf](http://www.dovetailinc.org/land_use_pdfs/redtopreport0408.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Final survey report available at: [http://www.dovetailinc.org/land\\_use\\_pdfs/trailsurveyresults81509b.pdf](http://www.dovetailinc.org/land_use_pdfs/trailsurveyresults81509b.pdf)



### *Addressing Environmental and Social Impacts*

To ensure that the project adequately addressed some of the existing key public concerns, two main activities were undertaken. To fully explore environmental impacts, beyond the natural resource and GIS evaluations previously mentioned, comprehensive Environmental Assessment Worksheets (EAWs) were completed for Phase I and Phase II of the project. The EAWs evaluated alternative trail alignments and assessed potential environmental impacts that included noise, traffic, dust, wildlife habitat, water resources, and many other considerations.<sup>14</sup> To address social impact concerns regarding public safety and law enforcement needs with the new trail system, a *Monitoring, Maintenance and Enforcement Plan* was developed in partnership with local law enforcement agencies (i.e., sheriff, conservation officers, etc), county staff and natural resource professionals, and ATV clubs and volunteer trail ambassadors.<sup>15</sup>

### *Providing Economic and Community Benefit*

A stated goal of the project was to be “economically beneficial”. In the course of project design and development, this goal was addressed by collaborating with local community leaders, business owners, and others to evaluate trail routes in terms of broad user appeal, proximity to service providers and businesses, and community interests. As the project was completed, the concept of “Trail Towns” was developed and economic development staff began working directly with local communities to establish consistent signage, designate town access routes, and provide information to trail riders about available services and amenities.<sup>16</sup>



Then, in 2014, after most trail routes had been open for at least one complete season, a business survey was conducted to measure perceptions of economic and community benefit. In February 2014, a survey and phone interviews were conducted to evaluate the impact of the new ATV trail system, including economic impact on local businesses. A total of 15 local businesses were identified in close proximity to the new trail routes and 12 agreed to participate and complete the survey. The businesses included lodging services (hotel, motel, B&B), food services, resorts, and other categories. The survey included 21 questions concerning personal knowledge of the trail system, the economic effects of the trails to their business, and ideas for trail improvements. Appendix A includes a full summary of the survey results as well as a full copy of the survey questions.

Regarding business activity linked to the trails, one hundred percent of the survey participants said their business activity has increased since the development of the ATV trails (Figure 1). The largest percentage (42%) reported a modest increase, while 33% reported either a significant or very significant increase, and 25% of the businesses indicated they had a minimal increase. Businesses also reported experiencing new visitors from throughout the state, region and from other parts of the country.

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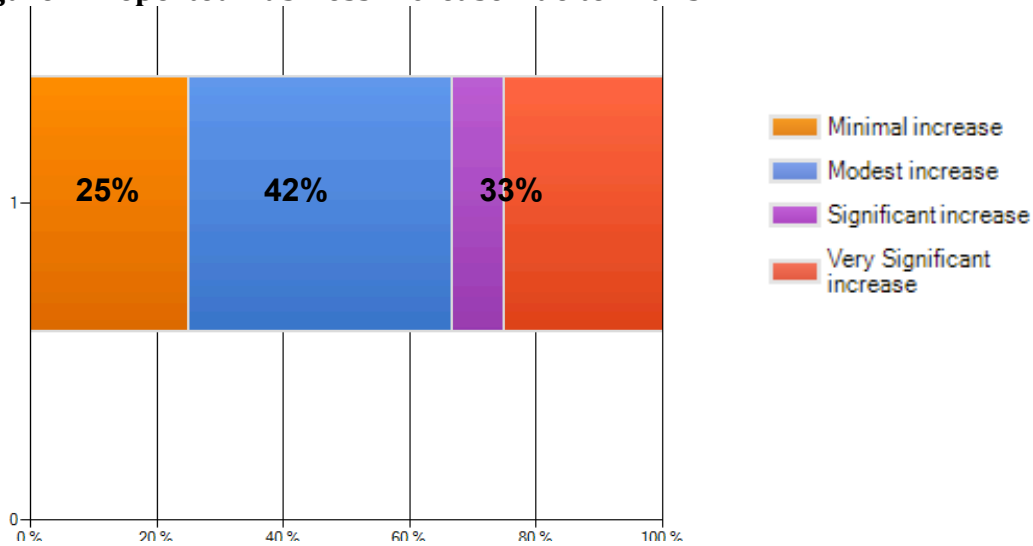
<sup>14</sup> Both EAW documents as well as the records of decision are available at the project website:

[http://www.dovetailinc.org/programs/land\\_use/northwoods\\_atv\\_trail](http://www.dovetailinc.org/programs/land_use/northwoods_atv_trail).

<sup>15</sup> The plan is available at: [http://www.dovetailinc.org/land\\_use\\_pdfs/acld\\_70\\_mile\\_monitorv3.pdf](http://www.dovetailinc.org/land_use_pdfs/acld_70_mile_monitorv3.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> See Aitkin County Trail Town website, visit: <http://northwoodsatvtrail.com/index.html>

**Figure 1. Reported Business Increase Due to Trails**



**The Bottom Line**

Effective recreation management and responsible trail planning are not easy tasks. However, the rewards can be significant, especially if the result is a trail system that meets user expectations while also minimizing user conflicts and being feasible to manage and maintain with available administrative and enforcement capacities. If a trail does not provide a quality user experience, cannot be supported by the underlying natural resource conditions, or strains the human capacities to maintain it – it is not a responsible or sustainable trail system.



The Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System in northern Minnesota resulted from a planning, design, development, and management process that required more than five years of commitment from local project partners, land managers, decision-makers, stakeholders and citizens. The result is a trail system that provides a high-quality experience, attracts recreation enthusiasts from around the country, fits within the environmental conditions of the region, and is manageable for local agencies and partners. The experiences with this trail system can be helpful for informing efforts by other land managers and interests.

## **Appendix A**

### **A Report on a Survey of Local Businesses Impacted by the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail**

*Dovetail Partners*

February 2014

#### **Background**

In 2007, Aitkin County Land Department along with other partners began development of the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System. Originally named the 70-Mile Trail Project, the objectives were to:

- Focus the increasing ATV user base on an existing extensive (420+ miles) and meaningful (popular destinations) trail system within 2 hours of the Twin Cities;
- Connect major recreation destinations (from the Mille Lacs area, through McGregor and the Big Sandy Lake areas, and on to the Grand Rapids area) via an ATV trail to promote tourism and its associated economic impacts; and
- Revitalize local communities along and near the trail system. These communities benefit economically from seasonal snowmobile use; expanding a similar clientele (ATV users) to a larger segment of the year could have significant benefits to these small communities.

The motivation for the project included a desire to reduce the potential negative impacts on natural resources, often caused by unregulated cross-country travel. The project partners hoped to accomplish this by providing a well advertised "place to go" and by linking trail segments in environmentally sensitive ways. The project partners also hoped to provide economic benefits to the "trail towns" along the route, including increased business for food, lodging and other services.

By summer 2013, the majority of the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail System was completed and open for use during the trail riding season. Several of the new trail segments have been open since 2010. Given the completion of the trail construction phase, there was interest from project partners in evaluating any impact the new trail system may be having on local businesses. To better understand the potential economic impacts of the trail, a business survey was developed.

#### **Methods**

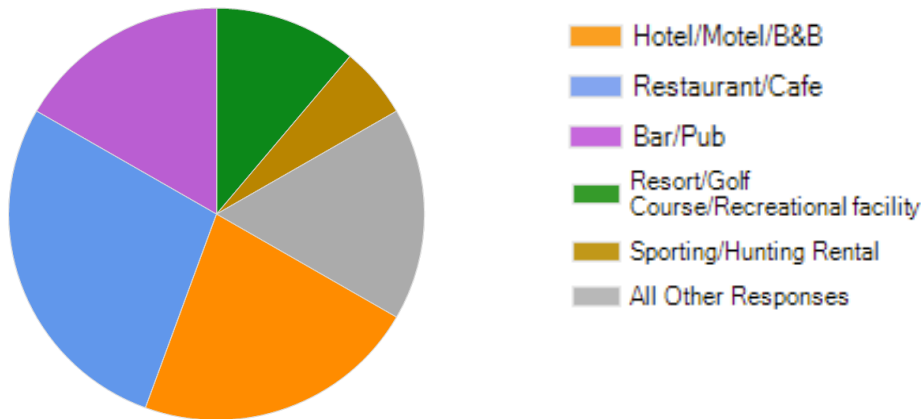
Dovetail Partners collaborated with Aitkin County Land Department and the County's Economic Development staff to design and implement a survey of local businesses in Aitkin County that may be impacted by the Northwoods Regional ATV trail.

The Economic Development Coordinator for the county provided Dovetail Partners with a list of 15 businesses located in Aitkin County and associated with towns near the trail and/or services that may be expected to be impacted by trail users.

All 15 businesses were contacted multiple times via phone and email to invite participation in the survey. Businesses were provided the opportunity to complete the survey via a phone interview or by going online and providing their own written answers. A total of 12 businesses agreed to participate and complete the survey (80% response rate). One business declined to

participate and two businesses were not able to be contacted despite multiple attempts. Contacts were made between November 20, 2013 and January 21, 2014.

**Figure 1. Categories of Responding Businesses**



The businesses that participated in the survey (Figure 1) included restaurants/cafes (42%), hotels/motels (33%), bars/pubs (25%), resorts/recreational facilities (17%), sporting/hunting rental (8%), and others (25%). *(Note: percentages total greater than 100% because businesses could identify multiple categories for classifying their operations.)*

The survey consisted of 21 questions concerning personal knowledge of the trails, the economic impact of the trails to their business, and ideas for improvement for the trails. See Appendix B for a full copy of the survey questions.

**Results**

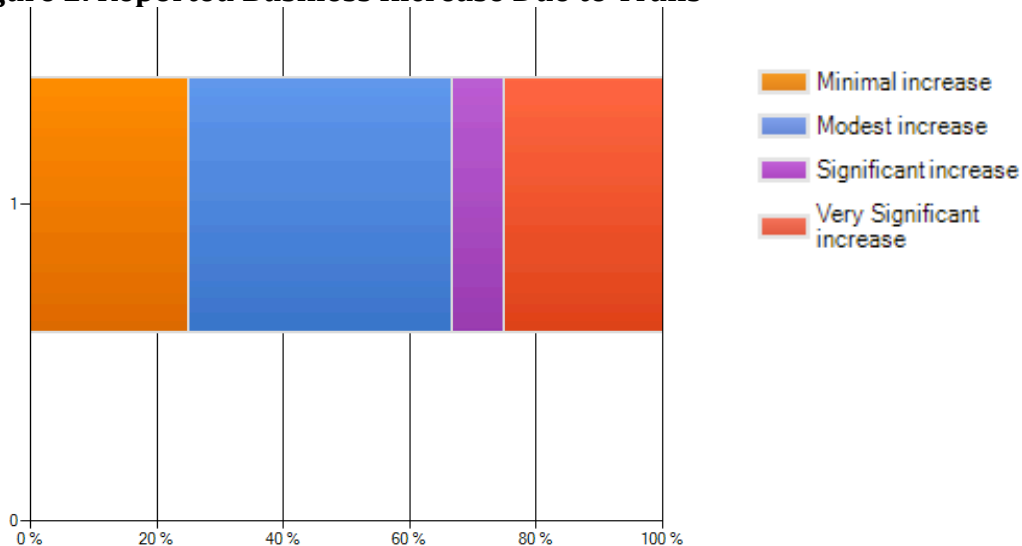
When asked about their personal familiarity with the trails the majority of respondents said they were very familiar with the trails (59%). A third of the businesses (33%) said they were somewhat familiar, and 8% said they had heard of it but didn't know much about the trails. Half of the individuals providing answers for the business (primarily managers or owners) have personally used the trails, while 50% indicated they have not used the trails themselves.

The majority (64%) of the businesses are located on/next to one of the trails, 27% are located within one mile of the trails, the remaining businesses (N=2) were located more than 20 miles from the trails. The two best business seasons for the operations are Summer and Fall with both at 50% of their businesses. Three of the businesses (25%) also said Winter was popular, and two (17%) had said Spring was popular for their business. The majority (83%) of the businesses indicated they were affected either positively or negatively during different seasons, while 17% said the season did not make a difference in their business flow.

Many of the businesses said the Summer months have brought an increase in ATV riders to their establishment. One of the businesses located on/next to the trail had said it has made it easier for clientele to use the trails because there is no need for a trailer from their resort for trail access.

Other businesses commented that there had been more people coming into town asking for directions.

**Figure 2. Reported Business Increase Due to Trails**



**In terms of reported business increase due to the trails, 100% of the survey participants said their business has increased since the development of the ATV trails.** In terms of how much of an increase (Figure 2), the majority (42%) said it was a modest increase; 25% reported a very significant increase; and 25% of the businesses said they had minimal increase. Even though all of the businesses have seen an increase in business, half of them (50%) had seen a change in clientele and half (50%) had not seen a change in clientele. Among the businesses that have seen a change in clientele, they said there has been an increase in young people. Only 17% (two businesses) have changed some of their products or services, while 83% (10 businesses) have not changed anything. Of the two businesses that have changed products, one reported they have increased their tool drive equipment, and the other reported offering room package discounts and lunches to-go for the riders.

Respondents were asked about their favorite and least favorite aspects of the trails. Many indicated their favorite aspect of the trail is that it brings business to their town and establishment. Others mentioned that the trails have brought the alternative sport of ATV riding to the area which adds diversity to the traditional focus on snowmobiling. Many also noted that they feel their trail riding customers are positive attitudes resulting from a good trail riding experience and that they have been very respectful and generally nice people. Overall, many of the businesses said the trails have brought a family friendly environment with respectable and genuine people visiting the county and using the trails. Businesses noted seeing more people from the Twin Cities area and out-of-state visitors. Concerning least favorite aspects of the trails, the majority (67%) of the businesses did not have anything to report. Of the businesses that had concerns, the commented include a desire to make the trails wider, provide more trail loops, address noise impacts, and prevent impacts from riders that go off of the designated trail. Some



of the businesses indicated recognition of the fact that the trails provide a contained area for riders instead of roaming wild in the forest, which is better for the environment.

Many of the businesses had suggestions and ideas to improve the trails and the trail rider experience. The most common suggestion was for additional signage along the trail stating locations of lodging, gas, and nearby towns. Others suggested creating an extension of the trail to Grand Rapids and granting permission for riders to use county roads. Other ideas included adding challenge spots for riders (e.g., mud holes) and increasing the accessibility to trail maps within nearby towns.

## **Conclusion**

In general, the Northwoods Regional ATV trail system has provided positive benefits to the businesses that are being affected. There has been an overall increase in business as a result of the trails. The majority of the increase has been in the Summer and Fall months due to the increase in ATV riding during the trail riding season. A primary concern, according to the businesses surveyed, is the lack of information about the trails in the towns (e.g., access to maps), as well as lack of information about the businesses in the nearby towns along the trails (e.g., directional information and signage). This addition of information could draw more clientele into the towns and provide a safer more confident environment for riders on the trails.

*This report was prepared by Allison Serakos, Matt Frank, and Katie Fernholz of Dovetail Partners. February 2014.*

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**Appendix B: Survey Questions**

## Aitkin County ATV Trail: Economic Development Assessment

Thank you for participating in this assessment process! This 10minute questionnaire seeks your feedback about the economic impacts and changes you have seen as a result of the development of the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail in central Minnesota.

If you have any questions about this assessment or would like to receive the questions in an alternative format, please contact Dovetail Partners at 612-333-0430 or [info@dovetailinc.org](mailto:info@dovetailinc.org).

1. How familiar are you with the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail?

- Never heard of it
- Have heard of it, but don't know much about it
- Slightly familiar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

2. Have you personally used the trails?

- Yes
- No

3. What type of business do you operate? (Choose as many answers as necessary below)

- Hotel/Motel/B&B
- Restaurant/Cafe
- Bar/Pub
- Retail shop
- Resort/Golf Course/Recreational facility
- Sporting/Hunting Rental
- Outfitters/Equipment Dealer
- Other (please specify)

4. Where is your business located in relation to the trail? (Choose as many answers as necessary below)

- On/next to the ATV trails
- Within 1 mile of the ATV trails
- Within 5 miles of the ATV trails
- Within 10 miles of the ATV trails
- Within 20 miles of the ATV trails
- In Aitkin County
- Other (please specify distance, town, county, etc.)

5. How have the recent ATV trail developments affected your business? Please list any positive or negative results.

6. What is the best time of year for your business? (Choose as many answers as necessary below)

- Winter
- Spring
- Summer
- Fall
- Other (please specify specific holidays, months, etc.)

7. Have the trails positively/negatively impacted your business at different times of the year/different seasons?

- Yes
- No

8. If Yes, please describe the impacts and during which times/seasons.

9. Have the recent ATV trail developments increased the amount of business at your establishment?

- Yes
- No

10. If Yes, how much of an increase in business do you think the trails have contributed?

- Minimal increase
- Modest increase
- Significant increase
- Very Significant increase

11. If No, how much have the ATV trails decreased/hurt your business?

Minimal decrease

Modest decrease

Significant decrease

Very Significant decrease

12. Have you noticed the clientele of your business changing because of the recent ATV trail additions?

Yes

No

13. If Yes, please describe.

14. Have you changed any of the products/services your business offers as a result of the ATV trail developments?

Yes

No

15. If Yes, please describe.

16. What is your favorite aspect of the new ATV trails?

17. What is your least favorite aspect of the new ATV trails?

18. Is there anything you would change about the ATV trails?

19. Do you have any ideas/suggestions on how to better promote the trail to benefit local businesses?

Yes

No

20. If Yes, please describe.

21. Any final comments you would like to share?

Thank you for participating in the Aitkin County ATV Trail Economic Development Assessment! Your time and feedback and greatly appreciated.

Please feel free to pass this questionnaire along to any other local businesses as you see fit. If you have any questions, please contact Dovetail Partners at 6123330430 or [info@dovetailinc.org](mailto:info@dovetailinc.org). More information about the Northwoods Regional ATV Trail is available at <http://northwoodsatvtrail.com/>

*This report was prepared by*  
**DOVETAIL PARTNERS, INC.**

*Dovetail Partners is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides authoritative information about the impacts and trade-offs of environmental decisions, including consumption choices, land use, and policy alternatives.*

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