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Preserve, Protect, Defend

Paint Horse owners must work with fellow enthusiasts to maintain and protect equine trails and ensure their long-term preservation.

By Alana Harrison

Sharon Witherspoon of Bells, Texas, undeniably enjoys showing her solid Paint-bred mare Aria in hunt-seat equitation and ranch riding, but she also finds trail riding with her beloved partner to be both emotionally and physically beneficial to their bond.

“There’s something incredibly peaceful about trail riding. You shut out the modern world and it’s just you, your horse, your friends and nature,” Sharon said. “It also provides horses with valuable, real-life experience and teaches them lessons you can’t get anywhere else—from negotiating

rough terrain to encountering unexpected wildlife to building endurance and confidence in both horse and rider. You can’t get that in an arena.”

Whether or not you and your Paint enjoy and benefit from trail riding as much as Sharon and Aria, you should be concerned about maintaining and protecting both public and private equine trails.

The U.S. Forest Service reports that America loses an estimated 6,000 acres of open land every day due to the increasing demand for urban and suburban development. The land we’re losing is used

to feed, ride and care for our horses. If it continues to be consumed at this rate, we could start losing the resources needed for our horses in as little as 15 years. Meanwhile, a massive backlog of trail-maintenance projects on U.S. public land is leading to trail deterioration, closures and frustrated users.

But there’s good news: A number of ways exist for the Paint Horse community to help preserve these cherished equine landscapes, safeguard trails for equine use and ensure future generations have the necessary resources to care for and enjoy their horses.

The Issues

Public trails have been in dire need of maintenance overall for the last several decades, and Congress has done little to pass legislation addressing the problem. In recent years, however, Back Country Horsemen of America—a national nonprofit organization dedicated to keeping trails on public lands in 32 states open to everyone—partnered with the American Horse Council and the Wilderness Society; in 2016, they successfully pushed the Trails Stewardship Act through Congress to reduce the trail-maintenance backlog. In February 2018, the Forest Service took further action by releasing a list of 15 areas throughout the United States designated as priority maintenance projects, based on recommendations from BCHA and AHC.

In past years, many of the priority areas only needed light maintenance, but Randy Rasmussen, advisor for public lands and recreation for BCHA, says heavier maintenance is becoming increasingly necessary in certain parts of the country due to the epidemic of insect disease in pine trees and the recent spike in the number and severity of wildfires.

“Wildfires have caused so much dead and downed timber; our crews have been working overtime to cut and remove hundreds of downed trees,” Randy said. “Wildfires are occurring at such a cataclysmic rate, our volunteers and the Forest Service can’t keep up with the maintenance. Affected trails aren’t getting the post-fire rehabilitation they need and this is causing a lot of de facto trail closures, especially in the West and Pacific Northwest.”

Randy says that a warming climate and a century of fire suppression on America’s national forests have contributed to the frequency and intensity of wildfires; Congress has not adequately funded the Forest Service to reduce the severity of the fires.

“Our fire season has been extended an additional 60 days, and the fires are becoming more severe,” Randy said. “When necessary low-intensity burns are suppressed, we get a huge build up of fossil fuels and overgrown forests that burn more rapidly. We could reduce the problem with fire prevention and selective thinning, but Congress is scaling back funding. It’s a self-perpetuating disaster.”

Another issue trail riders are facing is non-equine trail users’ general lack of education and understanding about horses and their impact on trails. Randy says BCHA aims to raise the bar on increasing awareness and educating all trail users about minimizing their impact on the land.

To reduce negative perceptions of equine trail users, BCHA has worked with the Center for Outdoor Ethics in Boulder, Colorado, the Federal Bureau of Land Management and state land management agencies to teach trail-riding organizations how to respect the environment, minimize their impact and educate others.

“The general public often doesn’t know the difference between private horsemen and -women that BCHA represents and commercial outfitters, who have regular trails and campsites they use every day or every season,” Randy said. “As horsemen, we want to lead by demonstrating how we

care about public trails and about our reputation as trail users.”

Commercial Outfitters vs. Private Horsemen?

Many assume commercial outfitters have a greater effect on trails and are the primary source of complaint from non-equine trail users. Randy says this depends on the size and scale of the outfitter. Single hunting guides might only take out small parties at a time, while large-scale operations, such as the Grand Canyon mule rides, might have many animals and multiple trips per day.

“There’s a large range of outfitters and clearly the bigger ones who run animals back and forth on a trail more often have a greater impact,” Randy said. “But the bulk of outfitters have really good operations and do a great public service.”

While commercial outfitters are obviously for-profit endeavors, there are many who are also BCHA members. While BCHA doesn’t represent commercial outfitters, BCHA’s leaders carefully follow their operations and offer advice if problems arise that could potentially affect private horse owners’ access to public trails.

“We have some great leaders within BCHA who are also outfitters and who really value public land and strive to minimize their impact,” Randy said. “Commercial outfitters also play a valuable role in educating the American public. As a majority of their customers would never otherwise ride a horse into the backcountry wilderness, outfitters provide them with incredible experiences and expose them to land-

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scapes they likely would never see—and a lot of their customers become advocates for protecting these landscapes after they've experienced them first-hand.”

Practice 'Leave No Trace'

While a nationwide Leave No Trace program for backpackers and campers has been existence since the early 1990s to reduce human impact on public land, BCHA established an Equine Leave No Trace program to provide specific guidelines for horseback riders. The Equine Land Conservation Resource created a similar program for private trails called Tread Lightly. BCHA is the first nonprofit organization to obtain certification to teach the Forest Service how to conduct master education courses in Equine LNT policies.

“We basically train the trainers,” Randy explained. “This has been a really good way to demonstrate our leadership and strengthen our bonds with federal and state agencies to spread the word

about Equine LNT.”

As its name suggests, Equine LNT aims to leave little to no evidence of horses or riders after they've used a trail. Here are a few examples of the commonsense practices Equine LNT advocates:

•**Plan, prepare, then proceed:** Randy says the No. 1 way riders can minimize their impact on trails is through careful planning and preparation.

“Know what to expect on any given trail. When you don't plan, problems happen,” he said. “We strive to educate riders about when trails are vulnerable to damage and you should avoid riding on them.”

Riding on wet, muddy trails results in horses leaving track marks or punching holes in the ground that cause physical damage to a trail and take time to heal. If you're navigating a trail that's only muddy in certain areas, guide your horse over the driest, most durable surface to avoid causing damage.

•**Respect the environment:** If you're planning a multi-day trail ride, determine how best to corral your horses overnight to prevent them from damaging campsites. If you plan to tether them, find a way for your horses to move freely so they don't paw at the ground or girdle trees with ropes. Consider what type of wildlife you might encounter and learn how those animals might respond to people on horseback so you can be respectful of their home.

•**Manure management:** Randy says the chief complaint he receives from non-equine trail users is about manure on trails, especially when it's close to water sources. While most non-equestrian trail users expect some manure on shared trails, Equine LNT offers several easy solutions to reduce the amount.

“We encourage riders to be sensitive to both the aesthetic and water concerns regarding manure, so horses don't get a bad rap from hikers who encounter a lot of manure on trails, especially near water or trailheads,” Randy said.

Riders tend to stop at creeks to let their horses drink, which often results in horses unloading manure in or near the water. While horse manure doesn't contain pathogens harmful to humans, animals or the environment, small amounts of phosphorous and nitrogen in manure can accelerate algae growth faster than ecosystems can manage it. To reduce the chances of this happening, riders should stop 100 to 200 feet before a creek to encourage their horses to unload well away from the water.

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“Horses also usually unload the first quarter-half-mile from the trailhead. If you're on a day trip with a large group of horses on a shared-use trail, have someone follow your group on the way back to shovel manure off the trail or haul it to the trailers,” Randy said. “We don't suggest riders stop and shovel up every bit of manure, as there's an increased risk of injury with frequent mounting and dismounting.”

What You Can Do to Protect Equine Trails

Everyone who uses trails exerts an impact—backpackers, bikers and horseback riders alike. It's crucial that horsemen and -women learn how to minimize their impact, assist with trail maintenance and educate others about Equine LNT policies to keep trails open for equine use. Here's how you can make a difference:

•**Educate yourself:** Utilize education programs like Equine LNT and Tread Lightly to learn about their policies and how to minimize your impact. If you use public-land trails, go to bcha.org to learn about Equine LNT; private-land trail users can learn about Tread Lightly at elcr.org. Once you're familiar with the policies, share your knowledge with fellow trail riders.

•**Volunteer:** Become a member of your local BCHA or ELCR chapter or join a similar organization and volunteer to help with trail maintenance—this is especially crucial in the 15 priority areas. Maintenance needs vary by region, but the majority of work needed within the 15 priority areas involves clearing shrubs and brush overgrowth and removing downed trees from trails.



“Trails need both vertical and horizontal clearance,” Randy explained. “Vertically, we clear low-hanging branches 8 to 10 feet so riders don't have to duck or worry about getting poked in the eye. Horizontal clearance is sometimes up to 8 feet, especially if it's a trail frequented by horses or mules with wide pack saddles.”

To a lesser degree, BCHA members “limb” and “buck” trails. If a large tree branch is blocking passage, volunteers will chop off the limb. If a tree has fallen across the trail, volunteers certified to operate chainsaws buck the log, making at least two cuts for easy removal. The bulk of work needed is light maintenance done with large pruning shears or loppers; most of the time, volunteers can do vertical clearance from the saddle.

“We would love to see new groups like APHA come forward and volunteer to help with maintenance,” Randy said. “Even if you don't have any experience, it's a great way to give back to public lands and learn about the important issues we're facing. Whether you're certified to operate a chainsaw, can do light trail maintenance or provide meals for maintenance crews, every effort helps.”

•**Positive interaction:** Through programs like Equine LNT and Tread Lightly, learn how to positively interact with non-equine trail users to ensure it's a friendly experience and to foster trail stewardship. When you encounter a non-equine user, inform them about Equine LNT policies and respectfully explain how they can avoid spooking horses on shared trails.

•**Ride Your Paint Horse:** David Ruby, vice-chairman of APHA's Equestrian Experience Advisory Committee and APHA national director from Nevada, urges members to get involved with BCHA or ELCR and says volunteering for trail maintenance is a win-win opportunity for Paint Horse owners.

Even if you don't regularly ride on trails, helping with maintenance is a great way to give back to the equine community and will help ensure trails remain open to horses. David encourages riders who have no interest in show-ring competition, but own a registered Paint, to participate in APHA's Paint Alternative Competition program and log hours for their time riding and doing trail maintenance from the saddle.

“We strive to recognize and reward everyone who loves, appreciates and rides their Paint Horses—not just those who excel in the show pen,” David said. “You don't have to own 14 world-champion show horses to get recognition with APHA. If you enjoy riding your Paint in any



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Get Involved with Trail Preservation

- Become a member of your local BCHA or ELCR chapter or join a similar organization.
- Learn how to minimize your impact on trails through education programs like Equine Leave No Trace or Tread Lightly and teach fellow riders about their policies.
- Volunteer with BCHA, ELCR or a similar group to help with trail maintenance in your area. Participate in APHA's PAC program and receive points for your time in the saddle while volunteering.
- Foster stewardship with non-equine trail users through positive interaction on shared trails; educate other trail users about Equine LNT or Tread Lightly's policies.
- Develop respectful relationships and open communication with private landowners and help them understand liability issues.
- Start a riding club in your community. Especially important for private trail users, local clubs help members advocate for trail needs and maintenance projects, provide a regular source of information on new issues and enable you to establish a common set of rules for trail etiquette.

Get Educated: Trail Resources

Utilize the educational programs offered by these organizations to learn more about how you can help support, maintain and protect equine trails in your community.

Back Country Horsemen of America
bcha.org

Equine Land Conservation Resource
elcr.org

American Horse Council
horsecouncil.org

The Wilderness Society
wilderness.org

U.S. Forest Service
fs.fed.us

Paint Alternative Competition:
apha.com/programs/rideamerica
apha.com/programs/pac

capacity, become a member of BCHA or a like-minded group and help preserve trails for equine use. And through our PAC program, you can receive performance-record credits and awards for riding while volunteering.”

Landowner communication: ELCR Board of Directors Member Dot Moyer says private trails are most at-risk in the equestrian landscape and to preserve them, it's essential for private trail users to develop and foster friendly relationships and open communication with landowners. A lack of respect for these relationships or poor communication with landowners leads to anger, frustration and closed trails.

“Landowners have reasonable expectations that their property will be treated with respect. Entitled attitudes or inconsiderate usage lead to loss of trail access,” Dot said. “This includes things like no littering, no loose dogs near owners' livestock or pets, and no riding when trails are wet.”

Dot says landowners' other main concern is legal liability. A single bad accident can spook owners and result in lost access to trails; taking simple precautions like wearing helmets reduces owners' liability risk and puts them at ease. Learn about liability insurance through your state's recreational liability laws and help landowners understand the laws.

If you have concerns about maintenance on a private trail, fully assess the trail's condition and talk to the landowner about resolving any problems. Organize a group of riders who regularly use the trail and volunteer to assist with maintenance; if there are any major improvements needed, seek advice from a professional trail developer to help you create an improvement plan or make any necessary changes.

Trails' Takeaway

Careful planning and action are paramount to keeping land open for equine use; trails must be valued and cared for—from design and maintenance to minimizing impact and respecting the environment. As Sharon and Aria discovered, trail riding can serve as a fun way to bond with your Paint, offer a multitude of valuable, real-world lessons and can even provide you with a new and often profound experience.

“In addition to the other benefits of trail riding, it's a great way to keep horses' minds fresh and it prevents arena or show-ring burnout by incorporating variety into their routines,” Sharon said. “A lot of farms and ranches don't have the available land or terrain for trails and because we're losing so much open land, it's extremely important that we have access to trails to provide all equestrians with this valuable experience.”

