

NAVAJO TRAILS INITIATIVE

Benefits of Trails

Trails are beneficial to our physical, emotional and spiritual health and well-being. In addition, trail systems open to the public have well documented economic benefits and are catalysts of community wellness. Some communities across the Navajo Nation have experienced these benefits first-hand for many years and now the Navajo Trails Initiative is working to spread these benefits to communities across Dine' Bikeyah.

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."

– Michelle Obama, on childhood obesity

In the United States, youth obesity and diabetes have become epidemic. Computer games, texting and social media have to a large degree replaced physical activities for children. The negative health effects of these trends are visible across the USA and on the Navajo Nation, as well. Yet, this trend is being reversed in many places.

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 trails enhances trail usage; people who live within a short distance 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. Across the Navajo Nation, many chapters, Navajo Parks & Rec, IHS Health Promotion programs and others have recognized the health benefits of trails.

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. An increasing number of community trails, long-distance routes and trails in our parks have helped to offer more trail opportunities across the Nation.



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 most of us know from experience the good that comes from being outdoors. All of us who walk, run, hike, ride a bike or horse in a natural setting away from the stress of our every-day life are aware of the power of nature. The soothing effect on us, helping to restore balance and harmony, is a powerful and positive feeling.

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

Spending time in a natural environment, creates for many people a deeper contact with the spiritual realm. 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.

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. Places such as Monument Valley, Little Colorado River Gorge, Rainbow Bridge/Naatsisaan, Cove, Chuska

Mountains, Shiprock Pinnacle, Canyon de Chelly, Defiance Plateau, Carrizo Mountains, Antelope Canyon, Asaayi are amazing venues for trails – hiking, trail running, mountain biking and backpacking. As a tourist destination, the economic benefits of trails can be significant and 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 and can be best determined by thorough planning and discussion among the community members, chapter officials and tribal leaders.



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.



Summary

Trails have proven to be a valuable and growing community asset across the Navajo Nation in recent years. They can, as part of a broad approach to health and wellness, make a significant contribution to a more positive future on the Nation. They can also be powerful economic development engines. Finding the balance of trails with natural, environmental and cultural resources is important and feasible for trail planners.

www.navajoyes.org/trails