



European Trails Policy Paper

Trails as Strategic European Infrastructure

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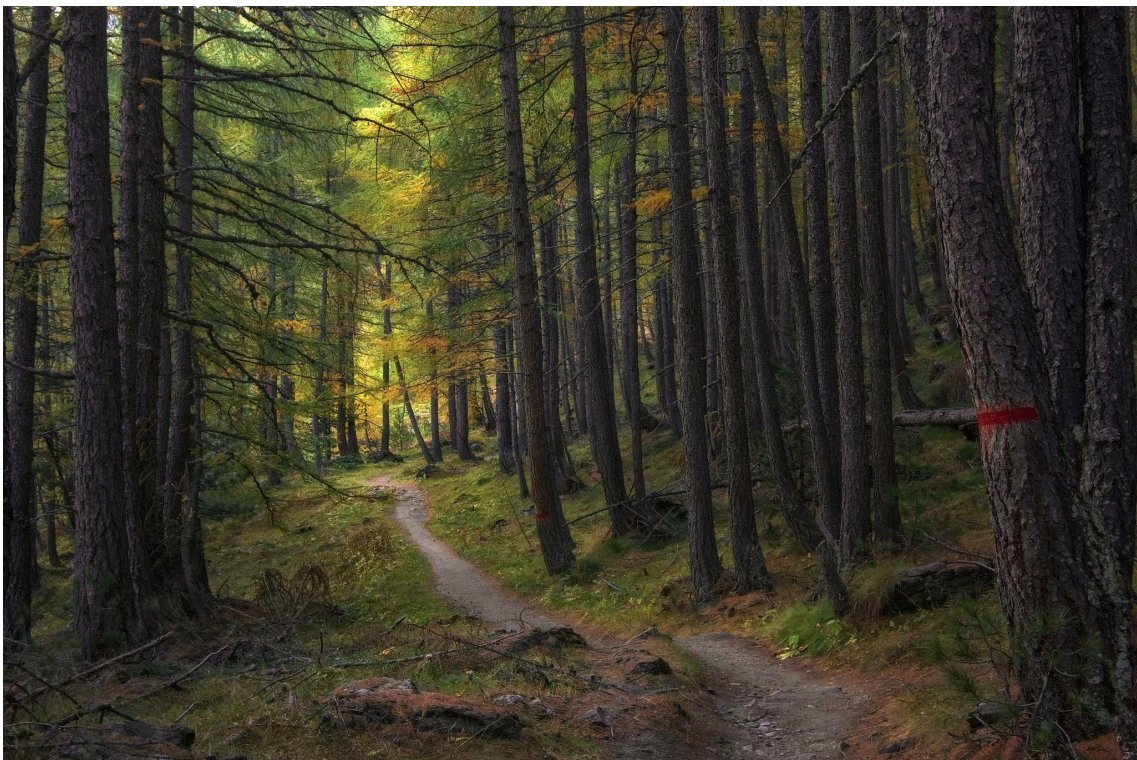
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Executive summary

Trails are among Europe's oldest and most widely used public infrastructure, yet they remain politically invisible, under-funded, and structurally unsupported. At a time of accelerating biodiversity loss, climate impacts, an inactivity-related health crisis, and deepening urban–nature disconnection, ignoring the value of trails represents a missed strategic opportunity.

Well-managed trail networks deliver measurable public value across seven priority EU policy domains: health, nature conservation and restoration - including the establishment and maintenance of the Natura 2000 network -, (active) sustainable tourism, climate-neutral mobility, rural development, sport and social cohesion. Despite this, trail governance across Europe is fragmented, under-resourced, and overly dependent on volunteer labour.

This policy paper calls for the formal recognition of trails as essential public infrastructure and outlines targeted, feasible actions for the European Union, Member States, and local authorities.



1. The Policy Problem

Across the EU:

- Trails enable access to protected and natural areas while reducing ecological damage through visitor guidance.
- Trail use has increased significantly since COVID-19¹, yet maintenance funding has not kept pace.
- Responsibility for trails is diffuse (NGOs, government agencies, protected areas, volunteers, private landowners, forestry services), with no strategic framework at EU level.
- Capital investment may sometimes be available, but long-term management, maintenance and climate resilience are chronically underfunded
- There is a very significant growth in urbanisation with 75% of Europeans living in urban areas in 2021², a figure which is forecast to increase to 83.7% by 2050³. With this projected urbanisation comes an increased disconnect between populations and nature and natural areas.

Without action, trail degradation will:

- Contribute to ecological damage through informal path creation⁴,
- Reduce access to nature for urban and low-income populations⁵,
- Undermine public support for biodiversity and nature restoration policies,
- Increase long-term healthcare and environmental management costs,
- Cause a decline in spending on tourism, ecosystem services and other trail based related services in the local / regional economy.

¹ <https://see-project.eu/menu-reports/infographics>

² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=EU>

³

https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/foresight/topic/continuing-urbanisation/developments-and-forecasts-on-continuing-urbanisation_en

⁴

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/401210274_Trail_Management_Terminology_and_Decision-Making_A_Conceptual_and_Practical_Framework

⁵ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2668>

2. Why Trails Matter Now

2.1 Health and Wellbeing

Physical inactivity is driving non-communicable disease and rising healthcare expenditure⁶. Trails provide low-cost, inclusive, lifelong access to physical activity and mental health benefits for everyone, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

2.2 Nature Restoration and Biodiversity

Trails are management tools, not threats, when properly designed and maintained. They:

- Channel human movement away from sensitive habitats,
- Support visitor and biodiversity monitoring, conservation work, and emergency access,
- Build public understanding and support for nature conservation and restoration efforts.

2.3 Climate and Sustainable Mobility

Trails support zero-emission mobility, both for outdoor recreation, and short-distance travel. Connected trail networks can reduce car dependency, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, and complement public transport systems. At the same time, climate change poses a real risk to the trail-based community due to increasingly intense and frequent extreme weather, increasing pest-borne diseases, air pollution and from reduced sport participation⁷.

2.4 Rural Economies and Cohesion

Trail-based tourism supports diversified, resilient rural economies⁸, generating employment and sustaining small businesses without heavy infrastructure investment⁹. Trails provide eco-system services for which there is great public demand. Various case studies show that the total social value generated (SROI)¹⁰ by trails over the lifespan of 25 years ranges from every €1,- spent to create the trail, it will generate between €10 to €20 in return.

⁶ <https://www.who.int/teams/health-promotion/physical-activity/global-status-report-on-physical-activity-2022>

⁷ https://csb10032000c7bf75ac.blob.core.windows.net/pow1/assets/Downhill_from_here_POWUK_cycling_report.pdf

⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021SC0166&from=EN>

⁹ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2025.100928>

¹⁰ <https://out-scape.com/resources-archive/trail-impact-surveys-2020/>

3. Strategic Policy Gap

Despite their cross-sectoral value, trails:

- Are absent from EU transport, health, and infrastructure frameworks,
- Lack harmonised standards, data, and strategic planning,
- Are excluded from systematic funding for maintenance and climate adaptation.

This gap can be closed with limited regulatory intervention and targeted funding, delivering high (social) return on investment.

4. Policy Recommendations

4.1 European Union Level

1. Establish an EU Trails Framework

Start a debate — and ensure that the topic becomes part of the EU policy agenda in the near future — at EU level with the EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, EU Council, Committee of the Regions, European Economic and Social Committee) towards a potential EU-level policy covering:

- Management and maintenance of existing trails, including long distance, crossborder trails,
- Efforts to ensure broad accessibility and equality regarding access to trail infrastructure across all levels of society,
- Mechanisms to ensure collaboration and stakeholder coordination,
- Sustainable trail design and conflict mitigation,
- Development of new trail infrastructure in rural, urban and peri-urban areas,
- Acknowledging the importance of accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

2. Secure Dedicated EU Funding

Prioritise dedicated EU funding sources, such as the European Structural and Investments Funds or the funding lines for the Common Agricultural Policy, in the future EU budget post 2027 for trail management, maintenance, restoration and climate resilience, in accordance with National Strategies for trails.

3. Respect, recognise or create trail corridors within the TEN-T Network

We call for the EU and TEN-T planners to recognise and respect existing and future trans-border, long distance routes, like E-paths¹¹, in the planning and development phase of the TEN-T Network. Ensure to limit potential negative impacts such as physical barriers, unsafe crossings, lost opportunity for new connections and detracting from the natural experience.

4. Harmonise Trail Standards

We call for the EU to provide resources for the development of uniform EU guidelines to describe trail characteristics in terms of difficulty, remoteness, exposure that allows for national implementation and signage systems

5. Improve Evidence and Data

Commission a dedicated Eurobarometer on trails to inform evidence-based policy and investment decisions.

6. Integrate Trails into Green Corridors Policy

Prioritise the creation and development of green corridors and buffer zones along waterways and appropriate agricultural land with associated trails as a strong policy recommendation for Member States, linked to the Water Framework Directive, forest strategy and Agri-environment schemes.

4.2 National Level

7. Prioritise Trail Infrastructure

Treat trail management on par with roads and existing cycle networks, with dedicated funding mechanisms for development, maintenance and rehabilitation of degraded trails by the governing body for recreational trail infrastructure.

8. Promote Responsible Access and Outdoor Education

We call for Member States Departments to advocate for and support public access to existing trail infrastructure and public awareness campaigns and partnerships with schools, communities, and outdoor organisations.

¹¹ <https://www.era-ewv-ferp.org/recommends/hiking-holidays/>

4.3 Local and Regional Level

9. Establish Local Trail Forums

We call for those with responsibility for trails at local levels to establish advisory forums to engage with the community, including representatives of trail user groups to ensure management systems and access regimes have the support of users.

10. Support Volunteer Systems

Recognise the valuable contributions of volunteers in trail maintenance and management and invest in volunteer programs, trail adapter networks, training, safety and partnerships with local organisations.

11. Leverage Trails for Local Economic Development

Highlight and support the potential for trails to boost local economies through ecotourism, services, and events, with reinvestment mechanisms for infrastructure upkeep.

4.4 Digital Governance

12. Develop a European Approach to Trail Data

There's a need for a collaborative discussion on digital trail data management, in alignment with the EU Digital Services Act and with particular attention to legal rights, ownership, protected area legislation and landscapes.

To ensure trail data is managed transparently, responsibly, and interoperably, aligning digital innovation with conservation and legal frameworks, digital information providers should strive to make trail data available in a digital, open source, standardized format. Eventually resulting in a situation where every physical trail will have a 'digital twin'.

Appendix 1: Glossary

Trail (Definition)

A trail is a recognisable route or path, predominantly intended for non-motorised, human-scale travel and recreation, located in natural, rural, peri-urban, urban, or aquatic environments. Trails may be natural-surfaced or constructed, signed or unsigned, historic or newly created, multi-use or activity-specific, and may occur on public or private land where access is permitted.

Trails can include:

- Singletrack paths, footpaths and hiking routes
- Bridleways and equestrian trails
- Mountain bike and cycling trails
- Forest and field tracks, unpaved roads, and mountain tracks
- Long-distance recreational routes
- Greenways and active mobility corridors

Trails serve recreational, transportation, cultural heritage, conservation, health, and tourism functions.

Access - The ability and legal or permitted right for people to use a trail or trail network.

Active Travel - Non-motorised travel for transportation purposes, such as walking, cycling or wheeling, often overlapping with trail networks.

Bridleway / Equestrian Trail - A trail intended or designated for horse riding, often shared with walkers and sometimes cyclists.

Carrying Capacity - The level of use a trail or area can sustain without unacceptable ecological, social or experiential impacts.

Greenway - A connected corridor reserved primarily for non-motorised movement that links communities while supporting recreation, biodiversity, and sustainable transport.

Heritage Trail - A trail recognised for historic, cultural, archaeological or traditional significance.

Long-Distance Trail - A waymarked trail designed for extended journeys, often crossing regions or countries and passing through varied landscapes and settlements.

Low-Carbon Mobility Route - A route supporting non-motorised or low-emission transport, including many greenways and active travel trails.

Multi-Use Trail - A trail designed or managed for use by more than one activity, such as walking, cycling, horse riding, or skiing.

Natural-Surfaced Trail - A trail with soil, rock, grass, sand or other unpaved surfaces, as distinct from hardened or paved routes.

Path / Footpath - A route primarily intended for pedestrian use, often informal or traditional in origin.

Private Land Access Trail - A trail crossing privately owned land where public use is enabled through legal rights, easements, agreements, or customary access arrangements.

Recreational Trail - A trail primarily intended for leisure, outdoor activity, or nature-based recreation.

Singletrack - A narrow trail generally intended for single-file travel, often associated with hiking, running, or mountain biking.

Shared Use Trail - A trail formally designated for multiple compatible user groups under agreed management arrangements.

Sustainable Trail Management - Planning, design and maintenance practices that balance recreation, environmental protection, landowner interests and long-term resilience.

TEN-T - Trans-European Transport Network: European Union policy and infrastructure network designed to connect and improve transport systems across Europe through coordinated road, rail, air, maritime and inland waterway corridors.

Trail Corridor - The physical route of the trail and its surrounding space, including adjacent natural, scenic, ecological, and cultural features.

Trail Infrastructure - Constructed elements supporting trail use, including bridges, boardwalks, drainage, signage, gates, trailheads, and rest areas.

Trail Network - An interconnected system of trails within a landscape, region, or jurisdiction.

Trailhead - An access point where a trail begins or can be entered, often including signage, parking or visitor facilities.

Trail Stewardship - The shared responsibility for maintaining, protecting and improving trails through land managers, communities, volunteers and users.

Unmarked Trail - A recognisable path in nature that exists without formal signage or official documentation.

User Conflict - Tensions or incompatibilities between different trail users or uses, managed through design, education, or regulation.

Waymarking / Trail Marking - Signs, symbols or markers used to guide users along a trail.

Appendix 2: Benefits of trails

Benefits of Trails

Trails constitute multifunctional green infrastructure delivering environmental, social, cultural and economic benefits, while contributing to key European policy objectives, including the European Green Deal, the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the Nature Restoration Legislation, the EU Green Infrastructure Strategy, the Rural Pact, the Sustainable Tourism Transition Pathway, TEN-T active mobility ambitions, and the EU framework on Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA). As low-impact and nature-based infrastructure, trails support ecosystem resilience, human wellbeing, sustainable mobility and territorial cohesion.

1. Biodiversity, ecosystems and nature restoration

Trails can contribute to biodiversity conservation and nature restoration objectives by facilitating access to and stewardship of natural areas while helping manage visitor pressures through designated routes. Well-planned and maintained trails can reduce habitat disturbance, soil degradation and fragmentation, while supporting ecological connectivity, habitat management, ecological monitoring and, where relevant, wildfire access. As elements of green infrastructure, trails can support ecosystem resilience, landscape connectivity and the delivery of ecosystem services, in line with the EU Biodiversity Strategy, the Nature Restoration Legislation and the Green Infrastructure Strategy.

2. Health and wellbeing

Trails support healthy lifestyles by enabling regular physical activity and access to nature, contributing to the HEPA agenda and preventive health objectives. Evidence shows positive impacts¹² on physical and mental health, quality of life and resilience, while helping reduce risks associated with chronic disease. The World Health Organisation has highlighted the interdependence between biodiversity and human health¹³, reinforcing a *One Health* perspective in which healthy ecosystems contribute to healthy

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021SC0166&from=EN>

¹³ <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/9789289055581>

people. Trails can support this preventive, nature-based approach to health policy, while studies indicate strong social returns on investment in trail infrastructure.

3. Social inclusion, access and territorial cohesion

Trails support inclusive access to outdoor recreation and nature, contributing to social cohesion, quality of life and territorial balance. Often freely accessible at the point of use, they provide low-threshold opportunities for recreation across generations and communities, including in rural, peri-urban and underserved areas. In this way, trails contribute to social inclusion, community resilience and the broader objective of strengthening territorial cohesion.

4. Sustainable rural development and resilient local economies

Trails support diversified and resilient rural economies through sustainable tourism, local value creation and employment, contributing to Rural Pact objectives and long-term rural vitality. Visitor expenditure linked to trails can support SMEs, local services, cultural heritage, traditional crafts and nature-based enterprises. Trails can help diversify rural economies beyond primary sectors while strengthening place-based development and sustainable tourism models, including regenerative tourism approaches promoted through the EU Tourism Transition Pathway.

5. Climate action, sustainable mobility and resource efficiency

Trails support climate objectives by enabling low-carbon¹⁴ recreation, active mobility and links with public transport, contributing to modal shift and sustainable mobility goals under the European Green Deal. As complementary infrastructure for walking and cycling, trails can support broader active mobility networks and, where relevant, strengthen connectivity with TEN-T and regional mobility systems. As largely nature-based and resource-efficient infrastructure, trails often build on historic pathways and require relatively low material and energy inputs compared with conventional tourism or transport infrastructure.^{15 16}

¹⁴ <https://ourworldindata.org/travel-carbon-footprint>

¹⁵ <https://pathsofgreece.gr/services/>

¹⁶

<https://www.ecf.com/en/news/httpsecfcomcycling-ghg-emissions-literature-review/#:~:text=To%20date%2C%20the%20only%20at%20tempt,this%20report%20is%20urgently%20needed.>

They therefore represent a cost-effective contribution to climate mitigation, resource efficiency and sustainable land use.

6. Safety, resilience and visitor management

Well-managed trails contribute to safe and responsible access to nature through waymarking, information and visitor management. They can strengthen resilience by helping manage recreation pressures, improving user safety and supporting emergency access where relevant. In this context, trail governance and standards, including European guidance on waymarking developed by EUMA and ERA¹⁷, contribute to quality, safety and sustainable management.

7. Culture, heritage and sustainable destination development

Trails are part of Europe's cultural landscapes and contribute to preserving and interpreting natural and cultural heritage. They support forms of sustainable and regenerative tourism rooted in local identity, heritage, gastronomy and landscape values. By linking conservation, visitor experience and place-based development, trails contribute to cultural resilience, sustainable destination development and the broader objective of strengthening Europe's natural and cultural capital.

¹⁷

https://www.european-mountaineers.eu/storage/app/media/Project%20and%20public-documents/Erasmus%20plus%20good%20governance/2022Waymarking_in_Europe_4th_Edition_E-Book-final-3.pdf

Appendix 3: ENOS Guiding Framework

As part of this declaration, there are some aspects with respect to trail development and management that should be addressed which link to the ENOS Charter¹⁸ and the ENOS / EUROPARC 10 good principles¹⁹ for outdoor sports in protected areas. .

- In natural habitats and especially protected areas the development of trails should be focused on protecting the environment from human activity and encroachment.
- There should be a premise for the enhancement and restoration of ecosystems along trail corridors. Trail development and maintenance practices should contribute to habitat restoration, native woodland planting and the promotion of biodiversity. Biodiversity improvements that trail corridors bring to monoculture (industrial forestry) should be supported. Landowners and especially farmers should be rewarded and supported through EU-funded sustainable agriculture programmes for biodiversity rich corridors that includes the creation and management of trails.
- Generally trails should be open at all times but there may be times and seasons when restrictions can be applied for example to protect specific sensitive species such as during nesting seasons, avoiding night hours, or for safety reasons such as the risk of wildfires or avalanche. Collaboration between land / water managers and the outdoor sector is essential to ensure understanding and buy in.
- Minimal interventions in the natural environment should be the focus for development and management, using locally sourced materials and sympathetic to the landscape.
- While the partners agree that it is important for everyone to be able participate in the outdoors, not all habitats and environments are easily accessible due to terrain, altitude, steepness or other geo-physical factors. Significant engineering and landscape modification in the form of trail development and management especially in protected areas should not be a substitute for training,

¹⁸ https://www.outdoor-sports-network.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Charter_ENOS_09_18.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.outdoor-sports-network.eu/projects/10-good-principles-for-outdoor-sports-in-protected-areas/>

technical skills and suitable equipment to access challenging environments. Involving local stakeholders in the design, construction and management of trails is essential.

- However, on the contrary, trail development and management in urban green space areas should be focused on developing opportunities for everyone of any ability to access nature and green / blue spaces and so trail surfaces and materials may include robust and hard-wearing surfaces to provide an easier surface for wheel based travel (chairs and prams), whilst in more remote areas, trail surfaces should be in keeping with the local environment and avoid importing materials.
- Trail furniture (waymarking, signage and seating etc.) should be appropriate to the environment with a sliding scale of intervention. Urban and peri-urban settings can be equipped with more elaborate signage, while wilderness areas may feature minimal, if any, signposting.
- In the context of rapid technological advancement and increasing digital data in the outdoor sector, it is essential that there is responsible management of trail data to promote sustainable and sensitive access to habitats and ecosystems.
- Minimum trail width and potential segregation may be required to manage conflict between users and should be factored in high usage areas. Likewise there is a need to consider carrying capacity, reduce desire lines, shortcuts and the development of unsanctioned, new, informal trails as a priority in sensitive areas.
- Trails need not be restricted to land based opportunities. Water recreation trails, for those using recreational small crafts, have been developed in some European countries²⁰ and in the Americas²¹ to effectively connect people to water environments and habitats.

²⁰ https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2022-03/criteria_water_0_1.pdf

²¹ <https://www.nps.gov/thingstodo/water-trails.htm>

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