

BLUE TRAILS GUIDE:

Helping Communities
Protect and Restore
Rivers and Landscapes
through Recreation



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Introduction

American Rivers believes that the best way to move people from environmental awareness to environmental action is by giving them an opportunity to experience and enjoy their rivers and lands through family-friendly recreation. All communities can and should have access to low-cost recreational opportunities like boating, fishing, hiking, and picnicking. And we provide the tools and resources to help communities make that happen. Once people know and love their rivers and lands, they will be more likely to take action to protect them.

To that end, we created the Blue Trails Guide, the first-ever step-by-step instructions for creating and implementing a community-based plan to protect rivers and lands and connect people to them through recreation. This guide is aimed at local, state, and federal governments and non-profit organizations that understand the value and need to protect our nation's natural resources and to connect people to them through recreation.

A blue trail is a dedicated stretch of river or waterway that enjoys special clean water protections and is a destination for boating, fishing, hiking, picnicking, and other recreation. Just as hiking trails are designed to help people explore the land, blue trails help people discover rivers and waterways. They provide a fun way to get kids active outdoors and are economic drivers benefiting local businesses and quality of life.

Blue trails also connect communities to treasured landscapes and offer a new popular approach to conserving land and water resources. Blue trails are often associated with conservation easements and land acquisition, and higher water quality standards. Riverside trees, wetlands and floodplains filter polluted runoff and soak up floodwater. While specific protections vary from community to community, blue trails can be an organizing tool, galvanizing citizens to support clean water and habitat safeguards.

Tribute to Al Staats

This guide is dedicated to Al Staats. A visionary, Al saw that the best way to protect and restore rivers is to grow the constituency caring for them through recreational enjoyment. Al started the important work of providing practical advice on how to create water trails when founding North American Water Trails in 1999. We are grateful for Al's legacy and dream of healthy rivers for generations to enjoy.

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1: Plan

Identify a River

Your community is interested in enhancing outdoor family-friendly recreation opportunities and protecting your rivers and surrounding lands. But are your rivers and lands an ideal candidate for such activities?

Before proceeding, consider the checklist below. This checklist is not meant to be exhaustive but will give you a sense for whether your rivers and surrounding lands is a good candidate for recreational enhancements. Generally speaking, you need the following elements to be successful:

Recreation and social values

- Potential to offer a variety of recreational experiences (boating, fishing, hiking and wildlife-watching, etc.)
- Opportunities to connect people to protected places such as parks, refuges, and forests
- Reasonably safe rivers (no dangerous currents, heavy commercial traffic, etc.) or the possibility of improving safety (removing trash, improving signage, removing obsolete dams)

Community support and engagement

- Strong potential for community, political, and business support for recreation and conservation
- Communities with existing access and recreation through public lands
- Communities that have or are likely to establish river recreation outfitters or associated businesses (outfitters, fishing shops, rentals, etc.)
- Community and/or regional fundraising potential

Conservation values

- Opportunities to add value to other regional conservation work
- Rivers that adjacent to protected areas
- Opportunities to protect critical, irreplaceable landscapes through conservation easements, land acquisition, increased community engagement or improved public land management

If your river meets these criteria, let the planning process begin.

Identify Partners

Successful efforts to enhance recreational opportunities and protect rivers and lands are the product of partnerships among a wide array of stakeholders. Each partner will have different resources to contribute. The following are important partners to consider involving in your project.

Local and state government agencies

- **Local municipal and county governments** may manage their section according to agreed upon standards. They may control ordinances and zoning affecting access, parking, signs, landscaping,

and water quality. An advantage to municipal involvement is that an existing park or recreation department can manage and maintain the river corridor and public concerns about maintenance and security will be likely alleviated.

- **Parks and recreation departments** may have plans and budgets for acquiring additional land for parks and recreation. Riverside greenways and parks are an excellent way for people to enjoy their hometown river.
- **Planning departments and commissioners** can recommend capital improvement projects, such as land acquisition for conservation and recreation. Your project should be consistent with and incorporated into local comprehensive plans.
- **Departments of conservation and recreation** may provide guidance for property owners seeking property tax abatement for lands designated for open space use. Some states (e.g. MN, IA, FL, MD, OH, and PA) have robust water trail programs. They may also have regulatory authority that can be helpful.
- **State departments of environmental quality** may offer federal matching grants to local governments for projects that protect natural resources, develop public access, and improve habitat. They may also have statutory authorities beneficial in protecting and restoring the resources.
- **State departments of transportation** may administer federal funding that can be used for recreation enhancement projects. Consider including your project in local transportation plans that have strong local support.
- **Departments of game and fisheries** conduct educational programs and prepare material for use in habitat management on private land. They may own and build boat launches, piers, and other water access facilities in your state.
- **Soil and water conservation districts** may provide technical assistance and information about erosion, land use, habitat improvement, and wetland protection and manage agriculture easement programs that protect land and water resources and improve access to recreational opportunities.
- **Departments of historic resources** are repositories for information related to archaeological and historic structures in your state and may be a good partner in locating areas with significant historical importance.

Federal agencies

- **Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program** provides technical assistance to communities so they can conserve rivers, preserve open space, and develop trails and greenways. Contact the staff person in your region for consultation.

- **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** may collaborate on projects that incorporate the enforcement of water quality standards, hazardous sites, etc. Contact a staff person in your region for consultation.
- **U.S. Forest Service** may collaborate on water and land trails that connect to forests. Their Forestry Sciences Lab conducts research on the best management practices and the health of forests.
- **Natural Resources Conservation Service** offers several programs to conserve wetlands and riparian lands on farmland for habitat improvement and other values.

Non-governmental partners

- **Elected officials** can raise the visibility of your project and make available opportunities for local and state funding. State legislators and local elected officials may also establish ordinances, regulations, land use plans, easement programs, and incentives that encourage the protection and restoration of lands along the blue trail. It's important to engage them in your project early in the process.
- **Land trusts and conservancies** raise money for the purchase of lands and seek donations of land and easements. They are experienced at title searches, property research, and management. Land trusts and conservancies can be a valuable partner even if you are not looking to secure an easement or acquisition. They typically have strong relationships with private landowners and may help you build support among private landowners and possibly secure access to land for launches or campsites.
- **Private landowners** may open their land to recreational use by informal or formal agreements or may sell or donate land through conservation easements and acquisitions. Building support among landowners may be critical to the success of your project. It is important to obtain a landowner's permission to use their property to access the river or for campsites. It is not unusual for landowners to have initial concerns about a project, but this doesn't have to be a deal breaker. Communicating and working with private landowners can be a delicate situation. To learn more about communicating with landowners see [Work with Landowners](#).
- **Recreational users** are important partners and will likely be familiar with the river and surrounding lands and a valuable resource when it comes to mapping your project. They can be a helpful voice in advocating for and promoting your project.
- **Chambers of commerce** can host presentations about your project and provide connections with business community leadership to assist with fundraising and political support.
- **Residential and business neighbors** can be identified by using the tax maps. If possible, meet with neighbors and businesses individually, or invite them as a group to "neighborhood meeting" to inform them of the proposed plan and listen to any concerns and suggestions. This may provide an opportunity to get local businesses to support your project through promotional activities or funding.

- **Outfitters, liveries, and outdoor-related businesses** can be important partners. They often have a heightened interest in recreation and tourism.
- **Schools and colleges** may offer educational and recreational opportunities to their students on your project and serve as possible research partners on recreational use and environmental conditions.
- **Volunteers and non-profit organizations** are important as you will rely on them for raising public awareness and providing a source of labor for the project. Sources of volunteers include Boy and Girl Scouts, school programs, church groups, and trail users. To learn more about recruiting and motivating volunteers see [Recruit Volunteers](#).

Create a Vision

The process of creating a vision is an important opportunity for people to come together to discuss what they want to accomplish. A vision statement helps define how to proceed and aids in recruiting and keeping volunteers motivated.

Gather the players

Creating a vision begins with bringing together a small, diverse group of stakeholders. Gathering a group to do this work provides a sense of shared ownership and a commitment to the vision, while broadening support among the community at large. Arrange the meeting with a facilitator and record all comments. Explain the exercise, make clear time limits, and stress the importance of participation and respect for one another. For information on key partners see [Identify Partners](#).

Get focused

Set a limit on what the vision will address. Possibilities include physical features such as watersheds or river valleys, boundaries such as townships or counties, or the vision may be for an entire entity like an organization. Make sure everyone understands and is in agreement about the limits before proceeding.

Identify what's important

Have people identify the qualities that make their river, community, or organization special. Look for themes among the attributes and have the group cluster and label them accordingly. If there is a long list of attributes, it may be necessary to prioritize and possibly rule some out.

Think future

Imagine how these attributes might be described to a visitor five, fifteen, and fifty years from now. Given these qualities in this community, what is possible? What is the dream? It is okay if the dream is slightly out of reach. Scale back if it is totally unrealistic. Be creative and have fun thinking of scenarios.

Write it

A vision can be a single sentence or a few bullet points as long as it's clear, focused, and easy to understand. Using the words captured during the brainstorm, form a statement. Try beginning with "To become the..." "To be known as..." "To maintain..."

Agree on it

The final vision should be something the group feels addresses what is most important for the river, community, or organization. With a vision in-hand, tell others about it by issuing a press release, printing brochures, or creating t-shirts. Let everyone know about the vision so work can begin to implement it. To learn more about publicizing your vision see [Promote a your project](#).

Solicit Input

The success of your project depends on community support and involvement. You need engaged partners, stakeholders, and community at large. To ensure that all parties are in agreement about the project there must be early and extensive outreach. The community should be involved in every stage of development from initial planning to design, building, managing, and promotion.

It takes time and resources to properly reach out and solicit input. There are many mechanisms for doing so and each has its advantages and disadvantages. Choose the strategies that will work best in your community.

Ways for raising awareness, soliciting input, and building support

- **Letters** may be appropriate as invitations to a meeting or in the very early stages to inform parties of the proposed blue trail. They should always be followed up with personal contact.
- **Printed or online newsletters, pamphlets, brochures, maps, and posters** can present information at various levels of detail.
- **Surveys** can provide answers to a variety of questions, be directed toward broad or specific audiences and monitor community attitudes and knowledge. You can choose from simple and free online services like Survey Monkey to more formal, expensive surveys. Shop around to find the survey that best suits your needs.
- **Public meetings** can provide a forum to solicit feedback, identify issues, and announce future activities. They also offer an opportunity for the public to rank their priorities. Results from public meetings must be transcribed, organized, and reported back to the community. To learn more about planning and implementing a successful community meeting see [Meeting in a Box](#).
- **Special events** are meant to draw media attention, public interest, and excitement. Disadvantages are that they can be a lot of work and expensive.

- **News stories and press releases** provide broad coverage, place major issues before the public, and can be cost-effective if the coverage is adequate. To learn more about publicizing your blue trail see [Work with the Media](#).
- **Tours and field trips** can educate the participants about points of interests and provide firsthand information about the project in an informal setting. However, field trips can be expensive, require a number of experts, and subject to weather conditions.

Analyze Input and Information

Conducting a well-researched feasibility study will help to answer the essential question of whether you should proceed. It can also help attract funding and other support. The following components should be included in your feasibility study.

Introduction and background

How did the project come about? What are the physical specifications of your project? Is there a need and desire for your project?

Community input and support

Can you demonstrate that the project has support from the local community including but not limited to local governments, civic leaders, planners, service organizations, recreation and conservation groups, businesses, schools, and other entities? What methods have you used to gain knowledge of that support?

Management and maintenance planning

How will use and maintenance issues be addressed? How will public access and operation be ensured in the long term? Is there land nearby that is managed by local, state, federal, and/or conservation agencies? Has the project been identified as a priority in any local, state, or regional recreational or conservation plans? Has the local government authority, planner, or land manager given their endorsement of the project? How will they be involved in the planning, managing, and maintenance of the project? Who will undertake and pay for ongoing operation and maintenance costs?

Safety

Are certain types of boats discouraged because of safety concerns? What are the hazards? What options are available for search and rescue? Has local law enforcement been included in your plan? Do cell phones work in the area in case of an emergency?

Connections

Will the project utilize existing parks, federal and state boating launches, private marinas, campgrounds, and land owned by non-profit organizations? How will it provide linkages between towns or community facilities, other trails, and natural, cultural, historical, and recreation areas?

Access and sharing opportunities

Will the project accommodate a range of users (e.g. paddlers, anglers, walkers, bikers, etc.)? How will different users share the resources and amenities? What is the existing level and type of use? Are there sufficient access points for different types of users?

Conservation

What are the existing environmental conditions? What are the biggest threats facing the water body (e.g. pollution, low flows, sprawls, etc.)? How will the project improve the health of the environment and community? Who is currently working to protect and restore the river? How are they involved? To learn more about conserving your river see [Plan for Conservation](#).

Political realities

What is the political environment? Is there political support at the local, state, or regional level? Are there key constituencies likely to oppose the project?

Cost and funding

What is the expected cost of the project? Has the local government or other entities promised to provide funding? What other potential funding sources exist?

Conclusion

Why should the project proceed? What are the strengths and weaknesses? What is required for the project to proceed?

Plan for Conservation

When planning your project, it is important to identify short and long term goals for improving the health of your river and surrounding lands. It is important that these goals are priorities for your community. Identify who needs to be involved and what needs to happen to make these short and long term goals a reality. To learn more about developing an action plan see [Build for Conservation](#).

Raise Money

There are a number of investments that must be made to create and maintain your project. This section provides basic information on finding funding for your project.

Membership

Members can be recruited through a brochure, a display, an event, and word-of-mouth. Once individuals are enrolled as members, they should be solicited for additional donations in an annual giving appeal. In addition to monetary contributions, each member is valuable as an ambassador of the program. Be sure they are fully informed of the mission of your blue trail and all activities.

Individual donors

The vast majority of donations are from individual donors. You should identify people who are prospective donors and ask them to help by contacting people they know. In contacting individual donors, ask questions to ascertain their interest in the project. Do they paddle, fish, birdwatch, or hike?

Fundraising events and sales

The variety of fundraising activities is limited only by your imagination.

Foundation grants

Many large community, family, and corporate foundations make grants to trail groups. The Foundation Center is the nation's leading authority on philanthropy and maintains the most comprehensive database on U.S. grant makers and their grants and operates research, education, and training programs.

Corporate support

Identify corporations with a track record of community giving or a high stake in the quality of life in your community. Insurance companies, healthcare providers, and sporting goods manufacturers often see the benefits of supporting blue trails. The chamber of commerce or other business associations may help identify good prospects.

Federal funding programs

If you are exploring conservation easements or land acquisition as part of the project, there are a number of federal funding programs that can be applied. To learn more about federal funding programs see [Funding Database](#).

Chapter 2: Build

Provide Access

During the planning process, you'll likely receive many suggestions for potential launch sites. Lay out the route on paper, consider these suggestions, and make initial selections based on the location of roads, accessibility of the terrain, and spacing along the route. Initial access typically will be at existing parks or open space, federal and state boating launches, private marinas, campgrounds, and lands owned by non-profit organizations and individuals. Once you have identified potential access points, you face the challenging but rewarding job of obtaining permission to use lands for launches, campsites, and other facilities.

Public land

Even if land is publicly owned, it doesn't mean it will automatically be accessible to users. You will need to request permission from the public land manager. Natural and recreational areas are usually a good place to start. These areas may already have camping or other overnight accommodations and well-established launch sites. Public land managers will have many of the same questions as private property owners. Do your research and be prepared when approaching these managers about becoming partners in your project.

Private land

Easy access is vital to draw people to your project area. Many times, this means working with private landowners. It's important to get landowner permission for users to use their property whether it's to access the river, stop and stretch their legs, or camp overnight.

Private landowners can open their land to recreational use by formal or informal agreements or may sell or donate land through conservation easements and acquisitions. To identify landowners, you can go to the tax assessor's office for copies of the tax parcel maps for each parcel of land in your Blue Trail corridor. These maps will also show the boundaries of individual parcels. Your local land trust may also provide this information and help you identify and approach supportive landowners.

Private property owners will be interested in the stewardship and management services you will offer to ensure protection of their property. They will want to know about anticipated usage and plans for facilities and services before agreeing to allow access to their land or exploring the possibility of an easement or acquisition.

Public access to rivers is a complex issue and liability can be a concern among landowners. To learn more see [Access and Navigability](#) and [Liability](#) to learn about laws and rights in your state. For information on common landowner concerns see [Work with Landowners](#).

Work with Landowners

It is not unusual for landowners to have initial concerns about a project. Therefore, it is important to involve landowners during the early stages of planning. Landowners may worry about their land being taken or otherwise reduced in value. They may fear that the project will impose restrictions that will

somehow limit future opportunities to sell or develop land for profit. However, trails and greenways increase the natural beauty of communities and they have been shown to bolster property values and make adjacent properties easier to sell. Other concerns include sense of privacy, security, and trash. But open communication can address these concerns and dispel misconceptions.

In these litigious times when liability and lawsuits are on the minds of many, it may not be easy to convince landowners that opening their land to public or semi-public use is in their best interests – and in some cases it may not be. An important job in evaluating a potential site is to weigh the consequences of opening it. Who will use it? Will it be subject to overuse? Is it an environmentally sensitive area? Is ownership simple (one owner) or complicated (several persons in undivided ownership)? Can you assure it will be well maintained?

Fortunately, nearly every state has a recreational use law designed to limit liability for landowners who open their property for free public recreational use. To learn more about your state's recreation use statute see [Liability](#).

Your case will be helped by addressing frequently asked questions at the very beginning, which should be enclosed with your letter requesting use of the property. Be sure to let landowners know that they, not your group, will set the rules for use of their property. In many cases, other than a few rules they feel are necessary (no fires, no cutting of trees, confine use to the immediate area of the campsite, etc.), they will settle for your guidelines for camping and low-impact use.

The decision whether or not to have a formal lease with the landowner should be left to them. In most cases, you will improve your chances for getting permission to use a site by listing agreements between you and the owner in an informal letter and then sealing the agreement with a handshake. This gives the owners an “out” if for any reason they no longer want their land to be part of the blue trail, whereas they may feel they are being painted into a corner if they have to sign a contract.

Alleviate common concerns

You can take various approaches when working with landowners and others who may have concerns about your project. You should always stress the benefits of your project and keep landowners and others who may have concerns involved in the process. Accept the fact that you may revisit their concerns several times during the process. Deal with the issues head-on. Seek out opponents and hear their concerns and objections. Engage them in solving the problems.

Landowners, those who participate as well as those who do not participate, should be regularly updated during the development, implementation, and use of the Blue Trail. This could include updates by phone, mail, email, and regularly scheduled meetings and organizational events. Their continued participation is essential for success and they need outlets to both receive information and question and comment on it.

Reach out to landowners and neighbors

Don't wait for landowners and neighbors to learn of the proposal by reading about it in the newspaper. Talk to them directly, either by circulating a letter or giving a presentation at a community gathering.

Listen to what they're saying

Take time to understand why landowners and neighbors have concerns about the project. Listen carefully, address concerns, and try to arrive at solutions that benefit as many people as possible. Imagine yourself as a landowner to better understand their perspective.

Find allies among landowners and neighbors

Within a group of landowners and neighbors, you may find paddlers, anglers, families, and others – all of whom will be likely supporters. Seek out these individuals, explain the benefits and urge them to support your efforts.

Give landowners and neighbors a role in the project

Establish an advisory committee and ask landowners and neighbors to serve along with advocates and user groups. Often, when given a chance to participate in the process, landowners and neighbors are willing to work toward solutions.

Invite former opponents to speak to their neighbors

Invite an articulate landowner who once had concerns about your project to come speak in your community. Hearing the story of how an opponent became an advocate can help lessen the concerns others.

Work hard for favorable reviews in the media

Favorable coverage in the media helps to defuse the opposition and generate support for your cause. Give your project the best opportunity for positive exposure by supplying television, radio, and newspaper reporters and editors with interesting and accurate information.

Reach out to decision-makers and opinion-shapers in the community

This can include the mayor, city and county council, state delegate or senator, local business owners, and notable leaders and members of recreational organizations, neighborhood clubs, school and universities, churches, etc. It always helps to have official or neighborly support to build acceptance, deeper support, and usage.

Communicate with landowners and land managers

It is important to bring landowners and land managers into the process from the very beginning. By doing so, they will likely be more supportive of the blue trail and willing to talk to other landowners and land managers to get their support and involvement as well.

Working with landowners can be a rewarding experience but may require reaching compromises and facing outright rejection from time to time. Landowners, of course, do not have to participate, no matter how effectively you present your plans. Landowners are within their rights to walk away at any time

before a solid agreement is reached. But there are ways to communicate with landowners that will make forming effective partnerships easier.

Contact landowners and land managers by letter

You may have better success by first writing to an owner or manager rather than making a cold call where a quick “no” is easier than a discussion. A letter can detail exactly what you want and include a brochure or other information about your blue trail, giving the recipient a chance to mull over your request and make any inquiries. Be sure to include your contact information and suggest a time you will check back with the owner or manager.

Introductory information

Compile an introductory package of information that includes a brief description, the vision, frequently asked questions, information on your state’s liability laws, and any other details you think would be helpful. For information on your state’s liability laws see [Liability](#).

Before approaching an owner or manager for permission to use their property, you should have the following in place:

- Trained volunteers or staff to assist in caring for the property
- Tools and equipment including workboats if the property is accessible only by water
- A management plan, be it a formal document or unwritten intentions
- A commitment to an ongoing relationship and regular communication with the manager or owner
- A single, reliable contact within your group

Make the request

Asking for access to a property is much like fundraising. It requires preparation and a gracious, thoughtful approach by an enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and trust-inspiring representative of the group. In your letter, let the landowner or manager know you will be calling them in a few days for a reply or to see if they have further questions. Therefore, when you call, there’s no need for a lot of explanation and you can get down to business. Mention other landowners or managers in the area are being contacted simultaneously, so as to not infer the singling out of a property.

Try to arrange an in-person meeting at a time and place convenient to the owner or manager. At the meeting articulate the following:

- Benefits that will appeal to them (fostering an appreciation of nature, building a constituency for the resource, etc.)
- Your group’s philosophy and policies about usage (Leave No Trace practices, etc.)
- The type of users they can anticipate on their property (families, school groups, campers, etc.)
- Amount of anticipated usage
- Services you are willing to provide (periodic cleanups, habitat restoration, stewardship services, etc.)

If the owner or manager agrees to grant access to users, be sure to express your gratitude and follow that up with a letter acknowledging the agreement. Ask owners or managers if they would like to be listed where you publicly acknowledge other donors (newsletter, website, etc.) as providing access to their land is a valuable donation. Also ask if they would allow the use of their name when reaching out to other landowners.

Assess the property

After an owner or manager agrees to grant access to their land, make a thorough assessment of the property, if you have not done so already. Your assessment may include:

- A description of the site, access points, amenities, and river
- An inventory of sensitive wildlife habitat or fragile vegetation
- Identification of potential campsites, launch and day-use areas that would minimize impacts on the property
- An evaluation of the access point's ease of use from the water and safety concerns
- An investigation of any hazards, such as uncapped wells and hunter's traps

Use the results of these studies to develop a policy on how the site will be managed.

Seal the deal

If the property is suitable, talk with the owner or manager in detail about their expectations of use and impacts and your group's ability to manage usage. Encourage the adoption of strict low-impact standards (no fires, carrying out human waste, etc.) for all sites along the Blue Trail, but let the owner or manager establish the rules and restrictions for the specific site.

Reach an understanding in writing. Some landowners and managers prefer a simple letter reiterating agreements and responsibilities while others may request a legal document. Land trusts may prefer a stewardship and management plan based on the inherent qualities and characteristics of the property. Include a time period in all agreements with an option to renew. It's wise to have your lawyer examine and approve your agreements before signing them.

Explore land protection opportunities

Many landowners are motivated to conserve their land because they think conservation is good in its own right, the general public would obtain or retain access to or protection of these special resources, and because there are financial incentives.

While many landowners have a sense for the value of their lands and natural resources, they often do not know what incentives are available and how to take advantage of them. These incentives can help sway them from development and towards conservation. The appeal can be made to their hearts and heads. Contact a land trust in your community to learn more about the organization and host of services they provide.

Federal funding for easements and acquisitions

There are a number of federal funding programs that can be applied to easements and acquisitions. [Click here for an inventory of state and federal technical assistance programs](#) that support land protection efforts.

State and local government funding for easements and acquisitions

Many state and local governments have land protection programs. For more information on your local and state government land protection programs visit the [Trust for Public Land's Center for Conservation Finance](#).

Develop Launches

Providing visitors a safe and easy way to access your community's rivers and lands is of the utmost importance. When developing access, involve experts who can provide information on legal matters, hydrology, riparian ecology, and other factors. Below are resources that will help you get started.

[Preparing to Launch](#), produced by the National Park Service and River Management Society, is a resource designed to help facility and trail planners and park and recreation project leaders plan and build or update an access site tailored to the needs of users and provides a variety of launch construction options.

[Small Footprint Water Accesses](#), developed by the Iowa Water Trails Program, provides information on how to create sustainable launches on small to mid-sized rivers.

[Designing Accessible Communities](#) is a non-profit organization providing information about accessibility to people with disabilities and to professionals in the fields of design, construction, code development and enforcement. They specialize in developing universally accessible canoe and kayak launches.

Manage Trash and Waste

Regular maintenance of a campsite is a necessity. If campers arrive at a clean site, they will be more likely to leave it in the same condition. Encourage campers to pick up after earlier users if the campsite was left in less than perfect condition. Experience shows that a system of high cleanliness works remarkably well in maintaining a site and sets a positive example for future campers.

A carry-in, carry-out policy is accepted as normal by most campers and should be encouraged. Unless campsites are located in a well-maintained park that are tended to daily, trash cans are a mistake since they are quickly overloaded and become a problem rather than an asset. Minnesota has gone so far as to ban the use of cans and bottles in the Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe area, a major step in reducing trash accumulation.

Human waste

Always a challenge is the proper disposal of human waste at campsites. Proper disposal of human waste is important to avoid pollution of water sources, avoid the negative implications of someone else finding it, minimize the possibility of spreading disease, and maximize the rate of decomposition.

In most locations, burying human waste is the most effective way to meet these criteria. Solid human waste must be packed out from some places such as narrow river canyons. Ask your land management agencies to advise you of specific rules for your area. The following are guidelines from Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics.

- **Catholes** are the most widely accepted method of waste disposal. Locate catholes at least 200 feet (about 70 adult steps) from water, trails, and campsites. Select an inconspicuous site where others will be unlikely to walk or camp. With a small garden trowel, dig a hole 6-8 inches deep and 4-6 inches in diameter. The cathole should be covered and disguised with natural materials when finished and widely dispersed when camping with a large group or in an area for several nights.
- **Latrines** may be better options when camping with young children or if staying in one camp for longer than a few nights. Use similar criteria for selecting a latrine location as those used to locate a cathole. Since this higher concentration of waste will decompose very slowly, location is especially important. A good way to speed decomposition and diminish odors is to toss in a handful of soil after each use. Ask your land manager about latrine-building techniques.
- **Toilet paper** should be plain, white, and non-perfumed. It should be used sparingly and disposed of properly by thoroughly burying it in a cathole or placing it in plastic bags and packed out. Encourage use of “natural” toilet paper such as vegetation and snow.
- **Feminine hygiene products** should be placed in plastic bags and packed out. They should not be buried because they do not decompose readily and animals may dig them up.
- **Urine** has little direct effect on vegetation or soil. In some cases urine may draw wildlife that’s attracted to salt. They can defoliate plants and dig up soil. Urinating on rocks, pine needles, and gravel is less likely to attract wildlife. Diluting urine with water from a water bottle can help minimize negative effects.
- **Special considerations for river canyons:** River canyons often present unique Leave No Trace problems. The most common practice is to urinate directly in the river and pack out waste in sealed boxes for later disposal. Ask your land manager for details about specific areas.

Build for Conservation

To have a successful project you need to have a healthy river. This section is meant to get you thinking about potential short and long term conservation goals and provide the tools to get you started working toward those goals. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather a starting point that provides basic information and resources for protecting and restoring your river and improving quality of life in your community through your project.

There are many experts across the country that can help you with your specific issues and conservation goals. American Rivers can provide advice on many of these issues and put you in touch with other experts across the country as well.

Short term conservation goals

It is important to identify goals that you will achieve in the near future. These short term goals help to build awareness of and engagement in your blue trail and ultimately motivate people to work on the more meaningful and challenging long term conservation goals.

Clean up trash: Organizing and volunteering at a cleanup is a great way for your community to get involved in efforts to restore your hometown river and provides an opportunity to connect with people who share your commitment to improving your community's environment. American Rivers is the sponsor of [National River Cleanup®](#), the most popular stream cleanup program in the country. To help guide you through the organizing progress, American Rivers created the [River Cleanup Organizer's Handbook](#). This handbook includes information on site selection, volunteer recruitment, turning your cleanup into a news story, engaging civic leaders, safety, and handling and disposing of trash).

Improve vegetation management: Native vegetation filters polluted runoff, controls flooding, reduces erosion, provides shelter and food for wildlife, and lowers water temperature creating more favorable conditions for native fish. Non-native plants generally create monocultures with no ecological diversity and provide little or no habitat compared to natives. Along the water body's edge and in the floodplain, native vegetation can be reestablished through a number of methods. Replanting native landscapes requires a complex process of analysis, planning, design, installation, monitoring, and maintenance. It should be undertaken by an experienced team that includes aquatic and plant ecologists, civil engineers, and landscape architects. Weed removal and control is equally important. Weeds may be removed by hand pulling (a good volunteer project), cutting, or selective use of herbicide. For more information on vegetation management in your area, contact your conservation district.

Long term conservation goals

Long term goals often are our most meaningful and important goals. These long terms goals may be protecting against poorly planned development and pollution, protecting and improve water quality, reducing flooding, protecting and enhance wildlife, just to name a few. But by definition the achievement of these goals is usually far in the future. That is why it is helpful to plan for these goals early on in your planning and celebrate your smaller victories and improvements along the way. Below are some tools that may help you reach your long term goals.

Protect land through conservation easements: Conservation easements are a useful tool to preserve private land by limiting land uses. They are used to prevent development or to preserve scenic, natural, or other values land may hold. Once in place, an easement runs with the deed, and, therefore, future landowners must abide by the terms of the agreement. Landowners either donate or sell a conservation easement to a recipient that holds the easement and is responsible for monitoring the terms of the easement for compliance. When easements are sold, the price is often the difference between the value of the land if used for development and its value under current use. When easements are donated, a federal income tax deduction can be taken. Typical easement holders are land trusts managed by non-

profit organizations or governments. For more information on conservation easements contact the [Land Trust Alliance](#) or the [Trust for Public Land](#).

Improve zoning and buffer requirements: Buffers serve as natural boundaries between streams, wetlands, lakes, and floodplains, and existing development. Buffers are important for good water quality. Buffers can reduce water treatment costs by preventing pollutants from entering drinking water sources, reducing erosion caused by uncontrolled runoff, and stabilizing riverbanks with vegetation. They provide shade that lowers water temperature and protects fish habitat. Buffers are visually appealing and can serve as excellent greenways, parks, and recreation areas. State laws and local planning ordinances can preserve buffers through development regulations. For more information on improving zoning and buffer requirements contact American Rivers and the Trust For Public Land.

Improve watershed planning: Watershed planning is a strategy for achieving water resource goals that provides assessment and management information for a geographically defined watershed. The premise of watershed planning is that impervious cover rather than population density is the best measure of growth impact and future stream quality. Watershed planning begins with an evaluation of current and ideal conditions for each body of water in the watershed, as well as comprehensive mapping of land-use practices. Planners then determine land uses that promote healthier rivers, streams, wetlands, and lakes. Public officials, residents, and other stakeholders create a watershed plan and land use ordinances that designate the locations, levels, and types for new development or redevelopment that will protect or enhance the watershed.

The [U.S. EPA's Handbook for Developing Watershed Plans to Restore and Protect Our Waters](#) is designed to help communities, organizations, and local, state, tribal and federal agencies develop and implement watershed plans to meet water quality standards and protect water resources.

Reduce impervious surfaces: Roads, parking lots, sidewalks, driveways, paved paths, and rooftops are impervious surfaces that prevent rainwater from filtering through soil and replenishing rivers and streams as groundwater. The impervious surfaces degrade urban rivers because they do not absorb stormwater and significantly increase the volume, velocity, and temperature of rainwater runoff. They contribute to pollution when stormwater washes surface oils, fertilizers, heavy metals, bacteria, and other contaminants into rivers.

Installing permeable and semi-permeable surfaces can help restore natural watershed functions, filter pollutants, and prevent erosion of banks and channelization of streambeds. More natural landscapes in new development can save money for local governments, developers, and homeowners and allow varying degrees of water infiltration. For more information on ways to reduce impervious surfaces in your community, contact [American Rivers](#).

Enforce existing water quality standards: Citizens using the support garnered from a blue trail to enforce existing water quality standards should be aware of several important tools available under the Clean Water Act. One of these tools is the "impaired waters list," which requires each state to develop a list of polluted water bodies and set priorities for their cleanup. Water bodies that qualify for the list are too polluted or otherwise degraded that they no longer support their designated and existing uses. States must submit their impaired waters list, or 303(d) list, to Congress every two years.

Contact your state water quality agency, regional EPA office, or EPA headquarters to find out if your water body is on the most recent impaired waters list.

If your water body is not on the list, do not assume it is healthy. It is possible that it was not monitored enough to detect problems or your state's standards were too low to trigger a listing. Since a listing can lead to restrictions on new discharges, changes to existing permits, and improved management practices to reduce non-point source pollution, the effort to make sure that impaired waters lists are complete is worthwhile. Play an active role in ensuring that impaired waters lists are complete by making sure their standards are strong, the chemical, physical, and biological health of your waters are regularly monitored, and all reliable water quality data are considered by the state whenever the impaired waters list is updated.

Once a water body is placed on the impaired waters list, it becomes one of many in line for the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) process. This process identifies pollution sources, determines pollution reduction needs, and assigns responsibilities for needed action. After a TMDL is developed, implementation must begin. Critical first steps include reducing permitted discharges and securing better control of other sources of pollution through whatever means available. These usually include a combination of education and voluntary measures, financial assistance, cost sharing programs, and regulations.

If a water body has problems, it will likely receive more attention and resources in the years ahead if it is placed on the impaired waters list. Consequently, it is critical that you provide information to your state to help identify newly impaired or threatened waters every two years. By providing valuable information to the agency responsible for listing, you can help improve the quality of the list. Any information that is collected about the health of a water body may be useful to the state in determining whether designated and existing uses are being met.

For more information on the enforcing existing water quality standards, contact [American Rivers](#) and [River Network](#).

Improve water quality standards: The Clean Water Act requires each state to hold public hearings on the adequacy of its water quality standards at least once every three years. During this Triennial Review the entire state water quality standards system is up for analysis, debate, and revision. This is the public's best chance to comment on individual pieces of the system, including the state's designated uses and classifications; criteria associated with its classifications, classifications of specific water bodies and any site-specific criteria, anti-degradation policy and implementation system, and other general policies. Take this opportunity to comment on the adequacy of the standards and make specific suggestions for improvements.

States can, and sometimes do, weaken standards. Changes that seem innocuous to the casual observer can have a huge impact – for better or worse. Some members of the regulated community put consistent pressure on state agencies to weaken standards. Consistent support for strong standards from an informed, involved public makes it easier for agencies to resist this pressure.

States can initiate changes by consulting with the EPA, notifying the public, and providing ample opportunity for public review and comment. The public review and comment process must include at

least one public hearing. The public can also initiate standards changes. The rules for initiating changes vary from state to state and they should be available from your state agency or regional EPA office.

One common state procedure for public-initiated changes is a “petition for rulemaking.” Many states allow interested parties to petition state agencies to amend environmental rules. Don’t be intimidated by the term “rulemaking petition.” They are simply formal requests for a state agency to amend its rules in a particular way. Corporations, associations, and public interest groups, and individuals can submit a rulemaking petition.

You should be able to ask for changes in any part of your state’s water quality standards. You might request changes in classification of a particular water body, improvements in the criteria applying to one or more classifications, strengthening of the anti-degradation policy, or clarification of the anti-degradation implementation procedures.

If your state does not have a citizen petition procedure, it should have another method that provides for proactive public involvement. Your state environmental agency, state attorney general’s office, or regional EPA office can tell you how to find the rules and get started.

If you are not satisfied with your state’s public involvement procedures, consider establishing better ones a key objective for the next Triennial Review. Or, take your concerns to the EPA, your state environmental commission, governor, attorney general, or legislature. For more information on improving water quality standards, contact [River Network](#).

Enhance flood control naturally: For decades, our nation has relied on structural flood prevention strategies such as dams, levees, and concrete-lined riverbeds that create a false sense of security for people in the floodplain, increase flood heights, and damage a river’s natural ability to minimize flooding. Factor in climate change and the stage is set for repeated disasters of increasing magnitude. Our best hope to protect our communities against flooding lie in working with nature, not against it. Natural flood protection can be attained by protecting and restoring wetlands and floodplains and a river’s natural flow and meandering channel. Giving some floodplain back to a river will give the river more room to spread out safely during periods of high water.

Wetlands act as natural sponges, storing and slowing the release of floodwaters after peak flows have passed. A single acre of wetlands, saturated to a depth of one foot, will retain 330,000 gallon of water – enough to flood thirteen average-sized homes thigh-deep. Coastal wetlands reduce storm surge and slow its velocity, minimizing damage to homes and businesses. Maintaining and restoring healthy rivers, wetlands, and floodplains provide a host of benefits in addition to reducing flood damages. They provide clean water, control erosion, sustain commercial fisheries, support recreation, and provide vitally important habitat. For more information on enhancing natural flood protection, contact [American Rivers](#).

Remove a dam that no longer makes sense: Dams block fish migration, disrupt water flow, change water temperatures, and generally wreak havoc on the food chain in rivers. They limit public access to rivers and harm the natural and aesthetic quality of their setting. Efforts to remove unneeded, unsafe, or obsolete dams have been gaining momentum. Many communities have low-head dams that no longer serve a purpose, but block fish migration and cause hazards for boating and other recreation. In recent years, more than 465 dams have been removed across the country. Removing dams where the

benefits of removal outweigh the benefits of repair or replacement is the most effective way to restore rivers, save taxpayer money, revitalize riverside communities, and improve public safety.

[Read more about how dam removal can improve communities.](#) For more information on removing a dam that no longer makes sense contact [American Rivers](#).

Seek protective designations: Blue trails can lead to protective designations for rivers. One such designation comes under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. A Wild and Scenic River designation is one of the strongest tools available to protect outstanding, free-flowing rivers. Using this tool, you can permanently protect your river from federally licensed dams, federal water resources projects that would adversely impact your river's outstandingly remarkable values, and ensure water quality is maintained, a cooperative river management plan is created, and funding to manage the river is authorized. A Wild and Scenic Rivers designation does not grant federal authority over private land use or local.

Outstanding Resource Water is a designation that provides the maximum level of protection under the Clean Water Act. It ensures our highest quality rivers and streams stay that way by prohibiting any activity that would degrade water quality. The designation does not stop development but helps shape and pace development to protect waters from pollution and runoff. It can increase property value by protecting clean, healthy rivers that attract homeowners. It can also help spur job growth in the tourism industry because healthy water and healthy economies go hand-in-hand. For more information on Wild and Scenic River and Outstanding Resource Water designations, contact [American Rivers](#).

Restore wildlife habitat: Wildlife habitat restoration projects provide a host of benefits to your blue trail and community as they restore the functional aspects of an ecosystem to a semblance of its pre-disturbed state. The reasons for the disturbances vary greatly but are typically caused by humans. Habitat restoration does not simply refer to wild areas or places visited only by biologists or hikers. Important restoration projects can happen right in our backyards. These restoration projects might include installing bird boxes in backyards and parks, improving local fisheries, controlled burning in a needed area, or cooperating with agencies around the reintroduction of native species like river otters.

Habitat restoration also provides a strong force for social change, particularly in areas with lower socio-economic standing, which have historically been the hardest hit in terms of environmental problems. Restoration offers a way for people to take back control of their communities and affect a positive change.

Chapter 3: Manage

Recruit Volunteers

The use of volunteers can help increase public awareness and provide a good source of labor for the program. Many supporters will give their time freely to help their community. However, finding additional help is almost always needed.

It takes time, energy, and resources to recruit volunteers. Potential sources of volunteers include Boy and Girl Scouts, school programs, church groups, trail users, local outdoor stores and outfitters, and court workers. Also use promotional materials to solicit volunteers.

Proper training of volunteers and employees

All volunteers and employees should be thoroughly trained to understand all aspects of blue trail maintenance. Safety, clear direction, a good work ethic, and proper care of equipment and tools will always be the backbone of a good maintenance training program. Volunteers and employees also must be aware of the need for positive public contact. Proper positive attitude toward public questions and concerns is important, as is the conveyance of this information to trail supervisors.

Recognizing volunteers

Every volunteer needs to have his or her efforts recognized. Giving public recognition to those who give their time and energy to the community encourages the people involved and can interest others in volunteering. It is important to understand volunteer concerns and recognize their contributions.

For more information about recruiting volunteers read the National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program's [Toolbox for Volunteers](#).

Maintain

A comprehensive maintenance plan will ensure your Blue Trail is a safe and desirable community asset. Safety is central to all maintenance operations. A maintenance plan should include scheduling and documenting inspections of launch and campsite conditions, proper and adequate signage, removal of debris in and around your Blue Trail, and coordination with other groups and governmental entities associated with trail maintenance.

Maintenance to be performed regularly

Inspections are integral to all maintenance operations. Inspections should occur on a regularly scheduled basis, the frequency of which will depend on the amount of use, type of use, and location. Inspections should be documented for your records and include the condition of launches, campsites, picnic areas, signs, other facilities.

Sweeping the river for debris such as fallen logs and other hazards is one of the most important aspects of blue trail maintenance, helping ensure user safety. Waterways should be cleared of potentially hazardous debris.

Trash removal is important from a safety and aesthetic viewpoint. Trash removal should take place on a regularly scheduled basis, the frequency of which will depend on trail use and location. Organizing a cleanup is a fun and easy way to engage volunteers. To learn more about organizing a cleanup see [National River Cleanup](#).

Maintenance to be performed as needed

Launch sites should be closely tied to the inspection schedule. Prioritization of repairs is part of the process. The time between observation and repair will depend on whether the needed repair is deemed a hazard, to what degree the needed repair will affect the safety of trail users, and whether the needed repair can be performed by the trail maintenance crew or outside entities.

Record keeping is essential to a successful maintenance program. Accurate logs should be kept on items such as activities, hazards found and action taken, maintenance needed and performed, and so on. Records can also include surveys of the types and frequency of use of certain trail sections. This information can be used to prioritize trail management needed.

Accurate mapping is important from a maintenance standpoint. You may need to update a map every few years, especially if new amenities (campsites, launches, riverside businesses, etc.) are added. For more information on maps see [Create a Map and Interpretative Guide](#).

Law enforcement agencies should be aware of the location of blue trail and launch sites and the level of use they receive. Increased law enforcement awareness may be addressed on an as needed basis.

Create an Adopt-a- Program

Adopt-A- Program and similar programs are great ways for your community to help monitor and enhance your rivers and lands. Anyone with an interest in the outdoors can participate. School and youth groups, scout troops, church, community and service organizations, businesses, families, and individuals are all examples of volunteers. Activities may include:

- Keeping launch sites free of debris
- Pruning small limbs from the launch site area (only for safety purposes)
- Maintaining launch sites, parking lots, campsite, and signage
- Cleaning up
- Reporting erosion problems, illegal activities, vandalism, and safety issues

An Adopt-A-Blue Trail program provides an opportunity for people to be actively involved in conservation. Helping to maintain and enhance existing Blue Trails improves the resource for all to enjoy. The effort brings trail and nature enthusiasts closer to the environment and their community. Volunteers enjoy the time they spend outdoors and the personal satisfaction they gain through volunteering on a conservation trail.

Typically, a trail or trail section is adopted for a period of one or two years, renewable annually thereafter upon approval by the program manager. This agreement usually can be terminated at any time by the volunteer or program manager. Typically, volunteers are asked to visit the adopted trail or trail section at least 4 times a year (approximately once every 3 months). Volunteers choose the days

and time they visit the trail. After each visit, volunteers send a written report to the program manager so that they can keep track of volunteer efforts. For more information on recruiting and training volunteers see [Recruit Volunteers](#).

Monitoring

Monitoring plays a key role in protection and stewardship. Monitoring is also a great way for people to get to know their river. Monitoring is observing or measuring selected features of your river in order to assess its health, the ability of the ecosystem to support human uses, detect early warning of changes, provide insight into the causes of problems, and tell you whether you have achieved your management and conservation goals.

A volunteer water quality monitoring program can help fill in important data gaps. They provide the basis for identification of problems needing immediate attention and for long-term trend evaluation. Consider implementing a monitoring program for your Blue Trail. Schools and universities in your community may already have such programs on or near your river.

Designing a monitoring program involves determining why you want to collect information, choosing indicators, methods, and sites, determining the time of year, day, and frequency of your monitoring, and assuring the quality of your results. For more information on monitoring contact a representative of your state volunteer monitoring program (your state water quality agency should be able to help find this person if such a program exists in your state).

Additionally, EPA offers these resources on monitoring:

- [Volunteer Stream Monitoring](#)
- [Volunteer Estuary Monitoring](#)
- [Volunteer Lake Monitoring](#)

Enforcement plays an equally important role in protecting your resource. If something is wrong or you suspect illegal activity contact your state environmental department, water managers, or non-profit conservation organizations to get advice on how to enforce current laws and regulations.

Chapter 4: Promote

Create a Map and Interpretative Guide

Maps and interpretative guides are fundamental tools for communicating with users. Properly designed, they can greatly enhance the user experience by aiding navigation and geographic orientation, warning of potential safety issues, and deepening an appreciation of the natural, cultural, and historical attributes of the area. A map and interpretative guide can also entice users to become stewards.

Maps

Maps can range from simple to sophisticated, from small foldout maps to larger spiral bound guides with interpretative information. For many blue trails, a simple foldout map is sufficient. This format works especially well for short day trails and overnight trails of approximately 50 miles or less. Longer trails may require a larger compendium of multiple maps.

Since most rivers are linear in extent, mapping can pose challenges both as to size and scale of the map. Preferred scale must be balanced with the geographic extent of the trail. On a large format, up to 25 miles or more of a water body may be depicted in sufficient detail on one side. With a smaller format, smaller segments may be depicted per page. Water bodies of significant width (1 mile or greater) may also need to be divided into smaller segments for effective presentation. Planning agencies, consulting firms, and colleges and universities are good sources of mapping assistance and it's not unusual to be charged for these services. The National Park Service [Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program](#) is another helpful resource.

Key map elements

In some cases, there is a tendency to provide too much detail and information on a map, making it difficult to read and understand. It's better to stick to principal facts and let the users find their way and make their own discoveries. Not only does this place the emphasis on personal competence, but it can result in considerable personal satisfaction. The following key elements should be included in a map:

- **Brief overview:** The scope and mission, start and end points, and its significance and relationship to your community.
- **Safety:** Prominently display safety and emergency information including launch sites, water levels, weather variables, and hazards (dams, rapids, poison ivy, etc.). Note the skill level necessary for certain segments and include any boating, camping, and fishing regulations and private property. A description of the launch site can also help users assess whether the river is suitable for their skill level. Include information on opportunities to access emergency help when cell phones do not function in remote areas. For more information see [Safety](#).
- **Interpretation:** Include key information about natural, cultural, and historical qualities of the area and their relationship to the region. Develop a theme for your project and identify corresponding points of interest. Think about flora, fauna, fisheries, transportation, settlements, anything that makes your river, lands, and community unique.
- **Stewardship:** Emphasize stewardship and provide guidelines for responsible use and promote responsible wildlife viewing. Word these messages in a positive way to inspire a stewardship ethic. Encourage Leave No Trace techniques.

- **Amenities:** Identify amenities such as riverside restaurants, connecting trails, bathrooms, potable water, picnic areas, campsites, etc.
- **For more information:** Every map should point users to a place where they can find additional information such as a website or phone number. For more information on websites see [Create a Website](#).

Interpretative guide

A well-written interpretative guide can be an effective companion piece to a map and may include a map. Interpretative guides allow you to tell a broader story about your river and its natural, cultural, and historical uniqueness. Aside from its main purpose of assisting users, an interpretative guide can be an excellent promotional piece to be displayed at local businesses, chambers of commerce, museums, and so on. A high quality interpretative guide and map may be an effective fundraising vehicle. For more information on fundraising see [Raise Funding](#).

If you create an interpretative guide, assume it will be carried with users on the river so it's best for it to be compact and reasonably water resistant. A soggy kayak is no place for a coffee-table volume.

Online maps and interpretative guides, such as the [Eagle River Blue Trail Mobile Site](#), are a popular alternative to a printed guide. Users are able to print sections that interest them most and they can easily bring it with them on their adventure.

Key interpretative guide elements

Everything that is included in your map should be included in your interpretative guide. If you produce an interpretative guide, consider including the following additional elements:

- **Detailed stories of place:** Every river has a unique and valuable history. Share these stories with the users.
- **Comprehensive list of amenities:** Provide the information for a broader array of amenities along the river including outfitters, tackle shops, restaurants, lodging, grocery stores, museums, and any amenity that may enhance the user's experience. This may be a good opportunity to partner with your chamber of commerce and businesses located near the river. For more information see [Identify Partners](#).

Advertising

Too much advertising can clutter the interpretative guide and commercialize the experience, but sales of advertising space can pay the printing bill. The right advertisements can enhance the trail experience by providing a helpful directory of relevant outdoor retailers and service providers. Again, you may consider a partnership opportunity with a local business located near your project.

Grants and sponsors: Public and private grants and corporate sponsors can often pay for products like maps and interpretative guides. These funders normally require minimal recognition thus streamlining the map and guide and devoting a maximum of space to trail matters. Some grant programs require specific formatting guidelines to be followed and may have limitations on sales of products produced with grant funds. For more information about fund raising for your project see [Raise Funding](#).

Produce your map and interpretative guide

There are many resources available to help you get started producing a map and interpretative guidebook. Your local city or town hall can offer master plans, zoning bylaws, subdivision regulations, and road specifications. Check with your public works, transportation, and parks and recreation departments for current plans and projects. Your state department of environment, real estate tax offices, local tax assessors, and local or regional planning departments are other resources available to you. Local colleges and universities may also have the tools and students available to assist with your project.

Mapping programs

Short of learning complicated and expensive professional-level GIS programs, many are turning to off-the-shelf computer mapping applications. Listed below are just a few of these programs.

[TOPO!](#) software, a product of National Geographic Maps, is a powerful mapping tool intended for anyone with a general interest in outdoor recreation and mapping. This program allows users to zoom through different USGS map series, add custom text, symbols and routes, import GPS data from a receiver and other sources, and print custom photo quality maps of any size on ink-jet and laser printers or export to a website.

[GIS Data Depot](#) is a depository of free GIS data for the environment and natural resources, including parkways, scenic rivers, National Wetlands Inventory data, USGS data, and maps of dams, aquifers, mining sites, and more.

[LandView](#) is a desktop mapping system that plots jurisdictional boundaries, detailed networks of roads, rivers, and railroads, census block group and tract polygons, schools, hospitals, churches, cemeteries, airports, dams, and other landmarks.

[National Atlas](#) has nearly 2000 map layers ranging from land use, to county boundaries, to environmental hazards and streams.

[National Geophysical Data Center](#) is a national repository for geophysical data that provides a wide range of science data services and information for habitat and solid earth geophysics.

[National Map](#) includes aerial photographs, elevation, geographic names, hydrography, boundaries, transportation, structures, and land cover. Other types of geographic information can be added within the viewer or brought in with a Geographic Information System to create specific types of maps or map views.

[National Park Service](#) offers topographic and thematic maps of the U.S. and comprehensive digital spatial data that contains information about surface water features such as lakes, ponds, streams, rivers, springs, and wells.

[National Spatial Data Infrastructure](#) has a data clearinghouse that allows access to more than 250 spatial data servers, primarily using GIS technology.

[Natural Resources Conservation Service \(U.S. Department of Agriculture\)](#) has soil survey maps and reports, watershed plans, river basin surveys and studies, and flood hazard analyses.

[U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) offers information about wetlands, endangered species, and water courses.

[U.S. Geological Survey](#) publishes topographic and thematic maps of all areas in the U.S. and offers a comprehensive set of digital spatial data that contains information about surface water features such as lakes, ponds, streams, rivers, springs, and wells.

[U.S. Geological Survey Water Data Discovery](#) has real time and historic maps of stream flows, floods, droughts, and river forecasts.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency offers a variety of data and mapping resources:

- [Envirofacts Warehouse](#) provides access to information contained in most EPA databases
- [Enviromapper](#) combines EPA datasets to allow users to look at many geographical levels of environmental data
- [Geospatial Data Clearinghouse](#) provides geospatial data from EPA
- [Index of Watershed Indicators](#) provides a compilation of information on the health of aquatic resources in the U.S.
- [Surf Your Watershed](#) allows users to locate, use, and share environmental information on their community's watershed
- [WATERS](#) is a mapping system that displays state water quality standards in the geographic context

Printing versus the Internet

The Internet is a great way to make maps and interpretative guides available. Electronic versions of this information may be more easily updated and modified than hard copies, and the related pages of the website provide a great forum for news, requests for volunteers, and more. Consider the financial tradeoffs of providing access to downloadable information that otherwise might be purchased or available free of charge.

Create signs

Signs inform users and create a safer and more environmentally sensitive experience. They can raise awareness of and support for your project and attract more users by providing exposure to the resource. Sign needs will vary depending on the size, type, and goal. Signs can be an expensive venture so it's good to develop a plan. In some cases signs may not be the best way to educate users: maps, interpretative guides, or websites may be more appropriate. See [Create a Map and Interpretative Guide](#).

Check with your state agency in charge of signs on permitting and regulations. They may also have materials and resources available to you.

Design and construction

The design and installation of signs can be controversial. Selecting the proper amount, size, color, style, location, and material are important in balancing the need to be visible with the desire to minimize visual intrusion. Other practical factors are cost and availability, weather resistance, installation, and susceptibility to vandalism and theft. Consider the following issues when developing a plan for signs along your blue trail.

- **Amount:** Decide what information requires a sign and what does not. If you want a site to stand out so it can gain recognition, it is probably appropriate to put a sign there. If land ownership varies and trespassing is a concern, consistent signage of campsites or day-use sites may be appropriate. On the other hand, users may be familiar with the river or carrying maps and guides, so it may be unnecessary to have a sign at every site. Carefully consider the amount of information you include in a sign.
- **Size and color:** The size and color of a sign depends on its purpose. A sign that users will need to see from a distance such as a hazard warning should be large and have contrasting colors. A sign indicating the name of a campsite and reminding users to pack out their garbage can be less visually obtrusive.
- **Standardization:** Selecting a system that is easily understood and one that has been used successfully elsewhere is recommended. Consistency of color use can help establish your project's identity.
- **Placement:** Acquire any necessary permits or permission for placing your signs. Care should be taken to avoid sensitive habitat such as wetlands and areas with rare plants. States such as Florida have guidelines on the permitting and installation of signs and do not allow signs to be posted on trees.
- **Materials:** Issues to consider besides environmental sensitivity are cost, durability, vandalism or theft, and ability to mount signs in ice and snow, swamp, forest, and other conditions. When possible, use materials that are appropriate to the local environment. Consider using recycled materials or locally and sustainably produced materials in your signs. The longer a sign will last, the more expensive it will likely be.
- **Maintainability:** Before building signs, it is important to determine who is responsible for maintenance – an organization, landowner, state or county entity. If vandalism is a problem in your area, consider using materials that are inexpensive to replace or repair. Using positive wording on signs can help reduce vandalism. As you develop your plan, prioritize signs that are most critical to maintain.

Maintain a master list of all signs you install including information on type of sign, materials, conditions, and maintenance dates.

Create a Website

The Internet is a primary source of information for travelers and tourists. Unlike printed materials, websites can be constantly updated. You can provide current information about weather conditions, special events, services along the blue trail, and change photographs of the landscape according to the seasons.

Depending on the technology you choose, you don't have to be a computer wizard to create and manage a website. Database technology makes it easy to create and manage a website without using an

expensive web designer. The key to developing a useful website that is visited again and again is to establish a unique presence and offer accurate and useful information. Below is basic information on the website creation process.

Get started

- **Consider your budget:** Can you afford a static site or one that is interactive? If necessary, begin with a simple homepage and build on it as your budget allows.
- **Find the expertise:** Look within your group of supporters first. There may be someone who knows how to create a website. The more elaborate your site, the more likely you'll need to hire a professional.
- **Find a hosting service:** Look at the websites of other groups and contact them for referrals for websites you find particularly useful and attractive. Be sure to check out services that have been set up for blogs (Blogger, Typepad, and WordPress are some examples). These are often easy-to-use tools that also have designs that are ready to use immediately. This will help you get started faster
- **Ask yourself basic questions:** How will the site be updated and monitored? Will email be built-in? If so, who will respond to email messages? Is a professional web master needed to manage the site? Is there a volunteer or staff person able to take on this responsibility?
- **Determine your style:** Consider what you'd like for graphics, colors, text, and a background for your page. Be sure to use colors and themes from your local area. This will pull in the local flavor and engage your audience quickly.
- **Create a unique address:** Your URL or domain name should be short, simple, and one that people will remember.
- **Determine your audience:** This will help shape what content you need as well as how you say it.
- **Use what's available:** Use existing materials such as brochures, videos, and newsletters on your website. Repurpose content as much as possible. If you write a brochure, pull out pieces for blog posts. A videotaped interview can become a blog post. Pull out the sound and you have a podcast.
- **Locate photographs:** Photos can help convey your message more powerfully than words.
- **Show off your logo:** Use your logo throughout your website.

Website content

- **Accurate and current information:** Focus on the content, not so much on how it looks. People will return to your website if they can count on getting the basic, yet accurate information they need.
- **Make your home page easy to read:** Don't clutter it with too much information. Give users an easy way to find topics.
- **Avoid too many photos or lengthy video:** Everyone hates to wait for something that takes a long time to download. A good rule of thumb is that a video should not be longer than 3 minutes.
- **Track usage:** This will help you see what does and does not work. While it is helpful to know how many people are coming to your site, it is even more important to know where they came from (referring sites) and what content they liked the most. Use that information to help with your marketing as well as to shape what content you build out on your site.

Get the word out

- **Advertise your website:** Put your website address on all your printed materials, including brochures, newsletters, business cards, and letterhead.
- **Register your website:** Make sure that your site is listed on Google and Yahoo. This will help you get found. Be careful when using services the “guarantee” listings on “thousands of search engines and websites.” Some of these companies are not reputable and your site may get flagged as spam.
- **Link to related websites:** Get them to link to yours as well. Connect with other attractions in your area that have websites. Don’t forget your state tourism office, and other state and regional websites.
- **Create an email address:** Provide a feedback mechanism so potential visitors can communicate with you.
- **Create a photo blog:** A typical blog uses text as its primary form of communication, in a photo blog the emphasis is photographs.

Design a Media Campaign

While your project can gain important publicity from having a spokesperson quoted in the newspaper or interviewed on the evening news, the true power of the media is its ability to affect change. An effective media campaign can educate the general public, inspire citizens to act, pressure decision-makers to do the right thing, and draw public attention to the importance of your issues and goals.

Before developing a media campaign, you should carefully identify your campaign objective. What do you want to achieve? Your objective may be to connect people to their river so they will be more likely to conserve it, to enhance your community’s economy, to promote better health, to improve general quality of life for your community, or all of the above. Your objective will guide your media campaign.

Identify a target audience

Once you have defined your objective, identify the audience you are trying to reach. Individuals in a position to help you achieve your objective are your “primary targets.” Primary targets may be local decision-makers, business owners, civic leaders, or local or state government entities. Then identify your “secondary targets,” the people who can influence your primary targets. Secondary targets may include constituents of an elected official, paddlers, anglers, or private landowners.

Your media strategy should include efforts to educate your secondary targets about the benefits and opportunities for your project. The ultimate goal of this education is to inspire these constituents to support your project and encourage others to support it as well

Develop a message

Once you know your objective and have identified your target audience, develop a strong message that will connect you with your audience. Your message is the thought or idea you want your target audience to remember and act upon.

A good message:

- Is clear and simple
- Is consistent throughout your media campaign
- Encourages your target audience to take action
- Communicates the problem and solution in matter-of-fact language
- Is easy to understand by someone who's not familiar with your project
- Avoids jargon, acronyms, and complicated terms

To help develop your message, identify the one or two points you would want your target audience to remember after reading or hearing about your project. Then incorporate the values you share with your primary and secondary targets into those points. Perhaps you share concerns about protecting the riverbank from poorly planned development. Framing your message around themes that reflect values held by your target audience will help you connect with them.

Your media campaign should have one main message that is consistent throughout your campaign and among all spokespeople. Because your overall message typically will be too wordy and cover too many issues to be quoted in the media, you should distill that message into a sound bite to get your message into the news.

Create a sound bite

A sound bite distills your message into a brief and memorable statement that is instantly understandable even to someone unfamiliar with your project. It should accurately capture the essential message you want to communicate. Because it is the statement most likely to get quoted, you should also make sure that your sound bite is on message.

A sound bite should not provide context or detail. To the contrary, a good sound bite will be stripped of context and qualification. In a newspaper article or broadcast, the report will provide the context. In a press release, you can provide the context in paragraphs following your sound bite. In an interview, you can follow your sound bite with the context and facts that support your message.

Develop a media strategy

Your media strategy should identify when you will attempt to get your message into the media to reach your target audiences and who will be your spokesperson. Ideally, this strategy will take advantage of both opportunistic and strategic media to deliver your message in as many ways and as many times as possible.

Opportunistic media will take advantage of news created by other parties to deliver your message. Taking advantage of opportunistic media often will require an ability to respond rapidly to news events about which you may have little advance knowledge.

Strategic media is when you create your own newsworthy events to promote media coverage of your message. For example, you could issue a news release or hold a press conference on the day you dedicate your project. Strategic media allows you to control your message and the timing of your media efforts.

A key element of strategic media is to make your media activity newsworthy. To determine the newsworthiness of your activity you should evaluate whether it creates a news hook that will compel a reporter to write a story about the activity right away.

Three elements that give news a “hook:”

- Timeliness: By definition, news must be something that is new
- Proximity: Stories that are closest to the reader will have the greatest affect
- Relevance: News that applies to a reader’s life will be most interesting to the reader

You don’t always have to generate new information to generate news. You may be able to creatively repackage existing information to make it newsworthy, or you could send your message with unusual or nontraditional allies such as birdwatchers flocking to your river. A joint announcement by recreational users, businesses, environmentalists, and civic leaders supporting the project could generate media because these groups typically may not join forces in these ways.

You may be able to enhance the newsworthiness of your announcement by tying it into something else that is going on in the world of potential readers (within the government, on television, or in the community where they live).

Work With the Media

To consistently get your message into the news, it’s important to develop a strong relationship with reporters who are likely to cover your issues. To do this, maintain regular contact with key journalists, provide them with accurate information, refer them to other reliable sources when you cannot answer their questions, and be respectful of the constraints on their time. If journalists view you as a trusted source of information, they are more likely to turn to you for comments on a regular basis.

Identify key media contacts

It is important to get to know the reporters, editors, and editorial writers who cover your issues at local, regional, and for some issues national news outlets.

There are many ways to obtain this information, but it’s easiest to begin by identifying all of the newspaper, wire services, and television and radio stations that might cover your issue. You should include local, regional, and national media outlets. Then talk with local, regional, and national conservation and recreation organizations to find out who covers your issues at these outlets.

It may be necessary to look on websites, read previous coverage, or call news outlets. While cold-calling a news team may be daunting at first, most journalists will appreciate your effort to locate the right person rather than bombarding them with information that will never be used.

As you identify these individuals, keep a running contact list that you can turn to when you have news to report or a story to tell. It’s important to have a list that is organized, easily accessible to you and other supporters, and easy to update since media contacts often change.

Get to know the following journalists, reporters, and editors in your area:

- Environmental, outdoor, recreation, or other beat reporters at your local papers
- Editorial writers and news editors at the same papers
- Bureau chief or news editor at the nearest Associated Press Bureau
- Assignment editors for each local television station
- News directors for public radio stations (sometimes NPR affiliates) that service your area
- News directors for commercial radio and all news stations that service your area

Many companies publish directories that can make this job easier. Green Media Toolshed, a non-profit provider of electronic media lists, is geared toward serving environmental organizations at an affordable price. Other companies offer annually printed directories and sell access to their media databases. Leadership Directories Inc. publishes a national news media guide known as the *News Media Yellow Book*. These resources may be available free of charge at your local public or college library.

Communicate with journalists

Working effectively with the media involves more than having your message and facts in order. It's important to understand the pressures journalists typically work under and to communicate with them in a way that helps them get their work done on time. When working with the media, you should:

Be prompt and mindful of time: Always return a call from a journalist as soon as possible. Reporters are often on a deadline and calling back too late will mean missing your chance to get your message in their story. Be sensitive to their needs and to the amount of time they have available to talk with you.

Be honest: One of the quickest ways to ruin a relationship with a reporter is to provide incorrect information. Never provide information that you're not sure is accurate, and do not speculate. It's far better to direct reporters to another person that might be able to help.

Be accessible: Do your best to be available to reporters, particularly on the day you are holding a news event or issue a press release. Consider providing your cell or home phone number to journalists since they often have more time after normal working hours to talk.

Be proactive: You should call reporters if you have news or if you want to get your message into a story. Don't wait around for a reporter to call you.

Be aware of competing news: When planning strategic media, be cognizant of other competing news events and avoid releasing information when you know another competing event is being held in your area.

The best way to initiate contact with a reporter is by phone. You can then follow-up by emailing or faxing additional information. Be sure to tell the reporter you are sending follow-up information so he or she knows to look for it. Most importantly, send the information right away. If you need time to pull information together, let the reporter know (find out if there's a deadline) and send the information as soon as possible.

Make an interview work for you: The key to making any interview successful is to maintain control of the discussion. While you have no control over the questions you are asked, you have complete control over the answers you give. To maintain control of an interview, whether conducted in person, live on the air, by phone, or at a news conference, you should:

- Focus on no more than 3 key messages that you can support with facts and examples
- Refine and rehearse your message so that you can sum them up in 30 seconds
- Prepare responses to potential questions and rehearse those responses, especially responses to questions that reflect the opposing viewpoint
- Deliver your most important message first and provide facts and examples only after discussing your messages
- Stay on message and if a question is not related to your message or veers the conversation into a different area, briefly acknowledge the question then bridge the discussion back to your message
- Always base your message and answers on fact and never let a reporter convince you to speculate or hypothesize on an issue
- Be conversational, stay jargon free, and don't use sarcasm or make flippant remarks
- Speak clearly so the reporter can understand and accurately record your comment
- Remember that nothing's ever off the record unless you have specific prior agreement with the reporter

Develop Media Tools

There are a variety of tools that you can use to implement your media strategy.

Media kits

Media kits are a collection of materials that provide basic information about your project. Its purpose is to give the media easy access to the information they need to accurately report on your issue. Ideally, your media kit will be compiled in a folder and include.

- A fact sheet or general overview of your project
- Recent news releases related to your project, river and/or issues
- Visual materials such as photos, maps, or CDs
- Other materials that describe your mission and stance on the issue
- Your contact information

Press releases, statements, and advisories

Press releases, press statements, and advisories are common and effective ways to get your message to the media.

Press releases advise the media of a news event, provide your message about that event, and give background information. They should include:

- Your logo
- The date of the release and the date that an embargo will be lifted
- Contact information for the person who will talk to reporters
- A headline that conveys the most important message of the story
- A “dateline” that identifies the city and state where the story is taking place
- A first paragraph or “lead” that provides the main idea of the story
- A quote or quotes from a key person from your group or an expert
- Supporting paragraphs that answer the “how” and “what” of the story and provide more details on the lead (all paragraphs should be short and concise)
- If the release is longer than one page, an indication that it continues by adding the word “more” at the bottom of the first page, and a header on the following pages that includes the release date and page number
- If appropriate, a web address where more information is available
- Boilerplate language at the end that describes your group
- Below the boilerplate language, include “####” to indicate the end of the release

Press statements are similar to a press release but are simpler to prepare because it provides your comments on a news event without providing the context or background information. They should include:

- Your logo
- The date of the statement
- A headline that conveys the most important message of the story
- The name, title, and organization of the person making the statement
- A lead paragraph that provides the main point you want to make and one or two additional paragraphs that provide further comment
- If appropriate, a web address where more information is available
- Boilerplate language at the end that describes your group
- Below the boilerplate language, include “####” to indicate the end of the statement

Press advisories are used to announce news events and provide information to editorial writers. A news event advisory is an announcement that informs reporters of the time and place of a news event such as a press conference, news briefing, public workshop, or special event. They should include:

- A title telling the recipient what the event is about
- Logistical information about the event in a “who,” “what,” “when,” “where” format, including the time, location, and/or phone number for a teleconference
- Background information to make your story interesting, without giving away too much information (you want reporters to come to the event to get the story)
- Contact information

Editorial advisories provide background or in-depth information to editorial writers and urge them to take an editorial stand on an issue. Editorial advisories can be written in an informal style, as if you were speaking to the person receiving it. They should include:

- A direct pitch urging the recipient to take a stand
- An indication that you have experts or staff that the writer can speak to
- A statement of the problem and proposed solutions
- Factual information to drive home the importance of the story
- A statement identifying what individuals can do to be part of the solution
- Contact information

Editorials, op-ed, and letters to the editor

Generating editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor are an important component of your media strategy.

Editorials are articles in a newspaper or magazine that express the opinion of the editor, editorial board, or publisher. In addition to sending press advisories to editorial writers, you should talk to editorial writers whenever you have a specific issue that's appropriate for editorial coverage. Be prepared to provide why your issues are important to their audience, including facts and figures and identifying academics and policy-makers who support your position, and provide attractive written materials (brochures, fact sheets, and photos) that support your issue.

Opinion-editorials are opinion pieces prepared by someone other than an editor that appear on the page facing the editorial page. The key to getting an op-ed published is to make it relevant to the readers, usually by localizing the information. An op-ed should:

- Suggest a headline (but the newspaper ultimately will decide the final headline)
- Include the author's name at the top
- Be relevant to the paper's readers; you can create relevance by localizing the information or otherwise tying it to an issue of concern to the readers
- Be organized in the following order: (1) pique the reader's interest; (2) provide background; (3) explain the problem you are addressing; (4) provide a solution and discuss any challenges to reaching that solution; (5) include a call to action; and (6) close with a snappy statement that will mobilize readers
- Be short and concise
- If appropriate, mention your group
- At the end, restate the author's name, position, and group, and website

Letters to the editor respond to news stories, editorials, or opinion pieces that were previously printed in the paper. They are an easy and effective advocacy tool for sending your message on an issue addressed in the original article, reinforcing a point in the original article that drives home your message, clearing up inaccuracies that may have been reported, providing information omitted from the original article, making a local issue national or a national issue local, and reaching a large audience to garner support.

A letter to the editor should:

- Be brief and respond to only one article or opinion piece (many newspapers have a 200-word limit and longer letters will not be published or may be edited)
- Be sent to the newspaper as soon as possible, ideally within one day of the date the original article was published.
- Include the headline of the article to which you are responding and the date of publication
- Use a strong lead sentence to attract the editor and reader's attention, and immediately state your reason for writing
- Include supporting in a second or third paragraph and mention your group and its views on the subject
- Use the final paragraph to sum up your letter and demonstrate the larger picture surrounding the issue

Paid advertising in a newspaper or on the radio can enhance your earned media efforts. The cost of advertising varies among media outlets and within markets. The cost also varies based on the type of advertisement. It's typically less expensive to advertise in a weekly paper than a daily paper. Radio advertisements also can be relatively inexpensive, particularly in rural areas. Explore the costs with the newspaper or radio stations most likely to reach your target audience before doing any work to prepare an advertisement. In determining paid advertising costs, don't forget to factor the cost of preparing the advertisement or radio spot.

Chapter 5: Safety

Safety is of the utmost importance. Guides, maps, signs, and other safety information should be easily accessible to everyone. Websites providing printable materials make this possible during the planning stage of trips. Access points should provide maps and other safety guides to assist those who are setting out. Signs should be unobstructed and easily viewed from the water.

By marking hazards, labeling access points, and detailing a specific route, paddlers unfamiliar with the area will be able to set out on the river better equipped and more prepared. Keep in mind the “self-selection” value of safety messaging to trail users. By describing the conditions and hazards to users before they start down the river, you can give them the tools they need to self-select trails that are suitable to their skill levels. This is an important component of managing risk and keeping people safe.

Each waterway has hazards that pose risks to users. These risks range from rocky areas, strong undertows, and heavy whitewater rapids to dams, pipelines and other infrastructure. Without the full knowledge of these various hazards, paddlers unfamiliar with the area may find themselves in dangerous situations.

Through your project, you can help educate paddlers about their responsibility to share the river with other boaters, thereby reducing the potential for conflicts and increasing the overall enjoyment of recreation paddlers. Through the development of a blue trail, paddlers are also directed to safer areas of the river that may be less traveled by commercial or motorized boats. In addition, users of the blue trail can be made aware of specific segments of the trail that pass through areas of higher commercial boating traffic.

Safety information for printed materials and website

The following details basic safety information that should be accessible in printed materials and websites. The [American Canoe Association](#) has a variety of boating safety information available for use on signs and in printed materials.

Basics

- Avoid boating alone
- Always wear a properly fitted U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket
- Read safety information and park rules before your trip
- Leave your route and return time with a relative or friend
- Learn to control your boat and be able to stop the boat at any time and land on shore
- Learn to recognize river hazards such as fallen logs, dams, and bridge piers
- When in a group, assign a lead and sweep boat operated by experienced paddlers
- Stay in your boat if it becomes stuck and carefully shift your weight as you push off with your paddle or pole
- Never paddle farther from shore than you are prepared to swim
- Avoid drugs and alcohol as they slow reflexes and impair judgment
- In most emergencies, it is best to stay with your boat. This increases your visibility to rescue personnel

Planning

- Review the blue trail map before setting out
- Know where your trip will take you, where to get out, and emergency routes
- Make sure you identify and avoid hazards marked on the map
- Allow enough time to complete your trip within daylight hours
- Check river conditions. A flooded river can be dangerous and should be avoided. A low river may expose logs or rocks and require carrying your boat, which may make your trip slower and more difficult.

Gear

- Always wear a properly fitted U.S Coast Guard approved life jacket
- Dress for the weather, prepared to get wet, and wear fast drying cloths (no cotton)
- Bring a spare paddle or pole
- Wear shoes with tops and sides for optimal protection. Avoid sandals
- Always carry a noise-making device such as a horn or a whistle. A flashlight, strobe, flare, VHF radio, bright flag, and mirror are other key items to bring. Carry a cell phone, but be aware that it may not work in some areas.
- Other essentials: a first-aid kit, plenty of drinking water, sunscreen, sunglasses, and bug repellent

Weather

- Check weather conditions before your trip. Do not go if the weather is beyond the ability of the least experienced person in your group.
- During your trip, stay alert to changing weather conditions
- Get off the water during electrical storms
- Canoe close to shore
- Drink plenty of liquids to stay hydrated