

Starting a Trail Club

Protect your local trails by organizing a group to take care of them.

If you have a trail in your community, a great way to protect it is to start a trail club. While the organizing stages can be difficult, the rewards will be enormous: your trail will become better maintained, you may be able to protect it from development, and more people will use and appreciate your trail.

Attract others dedicated to the cause

Sometimes a group of friends or neighbors will decide, after talking casually, to take action and save a local trail. At other times, just one individual chooses to start such a group. In either case, it's important to bring in other stakeholders to help form an organization that will achieve your goal. After putting in writing the type of trail organization you'd like to create, reach out to other hikers in your community to involve them. You can use social media, blogs, and meet-ups and should also get the word out by working with like-minded outdoors organizations in your area.

It's also important to work with the park, agency, or land owner who owns the trail. A park ranger or a land manager will be crucial in getting official recognition.

Be prepared once people begin to contact you. You'll want to have answers ready to common questions. Be sure to record the names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails of those who contact you.

Have your first meeting

Plan an informational meeting for those that expressed an interest. Having the meeting in your home is fine, but if you expect a large group you can contact your local school, community center, or library for free meeting space.

As leader of the meeting, you will need to provide a reason for the guests to take the initiative. Give some background on the trail and some potential or even current problems facing the trail. Explain what you hope to do about it, and then open the floor to others. Let people share information and ideas as you record.

Find a mentor

It's likely that there are many people out there willing to help you with your cause. Contact local officials, politicians, environmental groups, recreation clubs, and housing associations. Your state's Department of Natural Resources or Parks Department is frequently a good starting place. Invite individuals that seem knowledgeable to meet with you to answer questions. Take a list of questions with you to the meeting and be sure to take careful notes.



Get organized

After a few weeks, hold another meeting to gather information and determine the feasibility of moving forward. Does it make sense? Is there sufficient interest? If the answer is, “yes,” then create an action plan with a timeline. This will help the new trail club stay organized and focused. Allow others to take on some of the responsibilities.

Formalize your organization

Once you feel well-informed and ready, contact those who are heavily involved. Now is the time to choose a name for your group. Your group’s name should be simple to say, express what your group stands for, and be different enough from other organization’s names so as not to be confused. Once you’ve chosen a name, you will want to begin publicizing your group beyond your neighborhood through the web, press releases and letters to the editor explaining your group’s purpose and goals.

If your trail group plans on performing trail maintenance or leading hikes for the public, you will also need to discuss liability waivers or insurance for volunteers. In order to shield the individual leaders of the group from liability, and to shift fiscal responsibilities from individuals to the organization, it is suggested that you incorporate your group and obtain non-profit status, usually as a 501(c)(3). Many states have Associations of Nonprofit Organizations or foundations that may be able to assist with this process.

Assign Leadership Roles

Delegating responsibility is the easiest way to make sure your club gets things done more effectively. As your group grows, it becomes harder for you to keep track of organizing meetings, keeping membership in order, and keeping in contact with your outside mentors. At the very least, you should have a treasurer to handle funds and a secretary to take meeting minutes and to sign official documents. The president is not only the leader of the meetings, but is also the figure who addresses the public on behalf of the group. Vice presidents are important for large groups when the president can’t be everywhere at once.

Publicize your group

To attract members and public support, it is important that others know about your trail group. Presumably your group hopes to get more people out on your trail, so you’ll have to “advertise” accordingly. Have a stand at the trailhead to distribute information on your group. Local outdoor recreation products retailers may also be willing to post information on your group, and such a partnership will be beneficial to your group. You should also create a website or a blog and use social media to your advantage.

Fundraise

In order to keep your organization going, money is vital. While membership dues will help, you will need to fundraise. You can offer guided hikes or trail education activities for a fee to non-members or even investigate publishing a trail guide and/or trail maps. This not only generates revenue but also increases visitation to your trail.

You should also consider applying for a grant. American Hiking Society offers money to trail groups through the National Trails Fund and there are many other funders out there as well.