WHY TRAILS ARE IMPORTANT FOR OUR SUSTAINABILITY: TRAILS FOR PEOPLE, TRAILS FOR THE PLANET!

By Andrea Hassler

From the outside looking in, it may be hard to imagine how trails contribute to our sustainability. They're just made for fun, right? They're just for someone to get from one place to another! They're for me to take my dog for a walk! They're just for kids wanting to express their teenage angst on those gosh darn mountain bikes! They're a scar on the landscape where there should be NO people! They're for horses to leave their dung in the middle of! Trails and sustainability? Pshaw!

However, if we look a little bit closer, we may begin to see just how important trails can be for our sustainability.

Trails are for people. Sure, there are pack trails that animals follow to get to a stream or to stay undercover from predators. Those are trails, too, but I am just going to talk about human trails. Trails *are* to get people from one place to another, but they also serve other purposes. These purposes can have a very beneficial impact on our culture, creating positive outcomes for our environmental and social sustainability; even our economies can benefit.

Trails can provide the user with a range of experiences, from the quiet and peaceful, such as a hiker seeking solitude, to the extreme and rowdy, such as a mountain biker pushing limits on jumps. I won't get into "which use is better" or "which use is more sustainable" as I think it is important to think about the potential experiences for all trail users, regardless of what *kind* of experience they choose.

One outcome is inevitable: spending time outside in nature. This can vary too, as some trails are more "pristine and natural" than others. However, many studies have shown the positive benefits to our emotions and physical bodies as well as our spiritual and intellectual bodies (see any book by Richard Louv for a somewhat comprehensive works cited on research done on these topics).

In his book "The Nature Principle", Louv directly addresses the benefits of time spent in nature, citing research that proves it's ability to make us smarter (you read it right, folks!) and happier. Specifically, research has shown nature's ability to provide increased self-esteem and ability to learn new tasks, improved problem solving, memory and attention, increased ability to overcome mental fatigue and more! I don't know about you, but I want *all* of those things!

Imagine a culture of people operating at this frequency. Imagine your classroom, work place, or family room, if every person were operating at a high level of emotional and intellectual intelligence. Would people recycle because it's logical and we're all smart enough to know that? Would people insult others less since their own self-confidence was high enough to not rely on the inferiority of others (which maybe wouldn't even exist!)? Would we treat each other with more respect because we are generally happier?

Imagine how our decision-making would be impacted – imagine if the CEO of Walmart and his Board of Directors went for a 2 mile hike every day for 5 years. I wonder if they would still sell food that was coated in toxins from pesticides. I wonder if they would continue to exist as a large corporation or realize they would be better off shutting down and allowing the success of small, locally owned businesses and co-ops. I wonder if all of the owners and operators of our coal and gas mines would do the same. Would they still continue to explore for new oil reserves? Would they make the costs of gas reflect the true cost, including all of the environmental impacts? Would that drive people to drive their cars less? Would they use less energy in their homes and workplaces?

I wonder if our time *not* in nature has led to a society who has created *and allowed* these kinds of things to exist.

Trails are for the planet. The planet didn't make them, but trails are for the planet in a similar way sidewalks downtown are for the community. Sidewalks get people from one place to the place where they can spend their money, where the street performers showcase and where the community activists advertise. Sidewalks allow people to experience downtown and want to come there more often (if the experience is a positive one). Sidewalks are where people and places interact with one another, creating a culture of people that are proud of where they are from and willing to do whatever they can in support of it.

Trails are how people access wilderness, wildlife, beautiful landscapes, and cultural histories. Trails take us to places that allow us to be freed of the constraints of society. There are no billboards, no computer monitors, no traffic lights or truck engines. Trails allow us to experience a place in its natural state – shaped over time by the weathering of the sun and water, the decaying of the bacteria and fungus, and the growing of the trees and animals. All of these processes, which are so un-human in a way, bring about a sense of awe, wonder, respect and gratitude. They make us fall in *love* with the place.

Imagine the last time you went for a hike, or maybe your favorite hike you've ever taken. What stands out in your mind? Is it the smell of the cool mountain air? The feel of the sun on your back? The sight of the columbines blooming or fish swimming? The sound of the leaves rustling or birds chirping? What else happened on that hike? Maybe it's where you fell in love with your significant other, rejoiced with friends or had an "aha" moment that led you to some sort of genius discovery. Now, brace yourself…

Imagine someone was coming to destroy that same exact spot you so recall. How do you feel? Does this make you happy, or sad? If you could do something within reason to stop it, would you? Why?

Oftentimes, trails lead us to develop a relationship with a place, to the point where we would do anything we could, within reason, to protect it. Sometimes, that same sense of place is so strong that it translates to places we haven't even been, or places that are similar but different.
In an essay by Aldo Leopold called the "Land Ethic" he refers to this very thing. According to Leopold, "when we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." When you grow to love a place, like this trail or the place the trail took you to, what happens? Do you want to see it thrive, flourish and continue to be a place you love and adore? Continue to be your favorite? Trails make us fall in love with a place and want to take care of it. According to Leopold, having a land ethic "reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land."

So trails make us want to be responsible beings on the planet. They also help us to take care of ourselves and one another. A society of people who care of themselves, one another, and our planet is a society of people who will make daily choices that will further result in a better people and planet.

So, the next time someone asks you "why are trails important? Why go for a hike? Why buy that mountain bike?" you can simply say "because it makes the world a better place". *

*Author's note: The author has spent many years as a trail user, trail builder and trail closer. This article does not address the potential negative impacts of trails in places where they have not been designed in a way that is sustainable. The author does recognize the importance of sustainable design as she has witnessed first hand the impacts of trails that are not planned in consideration of natural processes and place. She is happy to discuss this further if there are any questions, comments or concerns. She can be reached by e-mail at ahassler@uccs.edu, by phone at X7508 or in person at the Campus Recreation S.O.L.E. Center where she works.