Completing the California Coastal Trail
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January 2003

This report is prepared pursuant to Chapter 446, Statutes of 2001.
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Mary Nichols, Secretary for Resources

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January 31, 2003

To the Members of the Legislature:

This report is submitted pursuant to Senate Bill 908 of 2001.

Completing the California Coastal Trail provides a strategic blueprint for a recreational facility that will have lasting value for California. The Coastal Trail will enable Californians to enjoy our coastal treasures and will attract visitors from around the world. The costs of accomplishing this are reasonable and the benefits manifest.

I believe that continuing investment in public access to California's coastline and parks is essential to maintain and improve our quality of life. As the State's population continues to grow, more recreational facilities will be needed; well-designed hiking, biking, and equestrian trails provide urban residents with opportunities to enjoy nature without imperiling sensitive habitat areas. State bond funds approved by California voters in 2000 and 2002 should enable the Coastal Conservancy, State Parks, the Wildlife Conservation Board, and other State agencies to complete many of the needed improvements within the next few years.

The California Coastal Trail is a concept that has captured the imagination of public officials at all levels of government. Inherent in a project of this scope, substantial physical and administrative obstacles lie ahead; we look forward to working with our State, local, and federal partners and the private sector to meet these challenges. In doing so, the support that this project has received from local community groups should be rewarded with an implementation program that reflects the highest quality of design and environmental protection.

We greatly appreciate the assistance provided to this planning effort by the many local volunteers associated with Coastwalk, and for the collaboration of our colleagues at State Parks and the Coastal Commission.

Sincerely yours,

Sam Schuchat
Executive Officer
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The legislature and the Governor directed the Coastal Conservancy, through SB908 of 2001, to report on a proposed trail that would stretch 1,300 miles along the entire California coast, across dozens of political jurisdictions, and to develop that report within a thirteen-month period (by January 31, 2003).

To meet this challenge, the Conservancy relied principally on two sources of information: (1) the Local Coastal Programs adopted by 60 local governments, further elaborated through interviews with staff members of these local agencies and the Coastal Commission; and (2) the two-volume *Hiking the California Coastal Trail* (by Bob Lorentzen and Richard Nichols) developed by the non-profit organization Coastwalk, Inc., and further elaborated through many site visits conducted by Coastwalk volunteers.

The collection and initial analysis of this information was principally conducted by Coastal Conservancy staff and mapped under the management of the Technical Services Division of the California Coastal Commission.

To evaluate policy issues regarding development of the Coastal Trail, and to develop recommendations regarding priority actions necessary to complete the trail, staff members of the Coastal Conservancy, the State Parks Department, and the Coastal Commission have worked in on-going consultation with the staff and board members of Coastwalk. This group met monthly during 2002 to oversee the production of this report.
Goals for the California Coastal Trail

As an initial step in defining what will be required to complete the Coastal Trail, the “Coastal Trail Working Group” (Coastal Conservancy, State Parks, Coastal Commission and Coastalwalk, Inc.) agreed on the following:

Objectives in Completing the California Coastal Trail

1. Provide a continuous trail as close to the ocean as possible, with connections to the shoreline (“vertical access”) at appropriate intervals and sufficient transportation access to encourage public use.

2. Foster cooperation between State, local, and federal public agencies in the planning, design, signing, and implementation of the Coastal Trail.

3. Increase public awareness of the costs and benefits associated with completion of the Coastal Trail.

4. Assure that the location and design of the Coastal Trail is consistent with nonmotorized transportation.

Definition of the California Coastal Trail
A continuous public right-of-way along the California coastline; a trail designed to foster appreciation and stewardship of the scenic and natural resources of the coast through hiking and other complementary modes of nonmotorized transportation.

Hikers at Klamath River Overlook, Del Norte County
the policies of the California Coastal Act and local coastal programs, and is respectful of the rights of private landowners.

5. Design the California Coastal Trail to provide a valuable experience for the user by protecting the natural environment and cultural resources while providing public access to beaches, scenic vistas, wildlife viewing areas, recreational or interpretive facilities, and other points of interest.

6. Create linkages to other trail systems and to units of the State Park system, and use the Coastal Trail system to increase accessibility to coastal resources from urban population centers.
The coast of California has been used as a trail for as long as people have inhabited the land. Native tribes residing near the coast on a permanent or seasonal basis used the readily accessible beaches and coastal grassland bluffs as transportation and trading routes, and many subsequent visitors have trod those same paths.

The Portolá expedition of 1769 marked the first overland journey by Europeans along the California coast. This was followed a few years later by the de Anza expeditions. This latter effort is now commemorated by the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, which shares part of its route with the Coastal Trail. In 1910 and 1911, J. Smeaton Chase explored the California coast on horseback. His record of this journey, published as California Coast Trails, describes the pleasure of traveling “within sight of the sea and within sound of its wise, admonitory voice.”

More recently, in 1996, a determined band from the nonprofit group Coastwalk hiked the entire California coast to demonstrate that it was possible to do so despite many impediments.

In 2003, Coastwalk members plan to repeat this feat, again hiking the whole coast from Oregon to Mexico.

Policy makers and coastal managers have long planned for a continuous coastal trail in California. The Coastal Act of 1976 required local jurisdictions to identify an alignment for the California Coastal Trail in their Local Coastal Programs. In 1972, Proposition 20 provided that “A hiking, bicycle, and equestrian
trails system shall be established along or near the coast” and that “ideally the trails system should be continuous and located near the shoreline."

The California Coastal Trail was designated California’s Millennium Legacy Trail in 1999 by Governor Davis and the White House Millennium Trail Council, encouraging federal agencies to assist in developing it.

State legislation in 2001 aimed at a focused effort to complete the Coastal Trail. Assembly Concurrent Resolution 20 (Pavley) declares the Coastal Trail an official state trail and urges the Coastal Commission and Coastal Conservancy to work collaboratively to complete it. Senate Bill 908 (Chesbro) charges the Coastal Conservancy, in cooperation with the Coastal Commission and State Parks Department, to submit to the Legislature a plan that describes how the Coastal Trail may be completed by 2008.
Passage of SB 908, the Coastal Trail bill, was preceded by almost 20 years of advocacy by Coastwalk. Coastwalk brought this vision into public awareness by introducing people to the California Coastal Trail and the wonders of the coast with hiking and camping excursions in all 15 coastal counties. The task of Coastwalk, a non-profit citizens’ organization, has been to educate the public, elected officials, and state agencies in the values and benefits of a continuous trail along the state’s entire shoreline.

Hikers find inspiration and pleasure in walking a simple path along an interesting route. Coastwalk envisions a 1,300-mile hiking trail linking California’s northern and southern borders through some of the planet’s great landscapes; a trail that will extend along beaches, bluffs, and roadsides, through ancient redwood forests, over sand dunes, mountains, and cactus-covered hillsides, through towns, cities, parks, and historic sites. Respecting and protecting the terrain, the California Coastal Trail will vary widely, according to the character of the landscape and the built environment. In many areas it will be a path for hikers and equestrians through wilderness and along beaches; in other areas it will be a paved, urban pathway.
accessible to bicyclists, skaters, wheelchair riders, and others using nonmotorized transportation. It will be a braided trail in many places, designed as a cohesive system to accommodate many people and different uses.

The uniqueness of the California Coastal Trail derives from its proximity to the sea. The seashore offers openness and a sense of space that will encourage people to leave cars behind and explore this rare environment on foot. The Coastal Trail will rival any long-distance trail in the world for scenic beauty, diverse landscapes and interesting locations.

Whether strolling along the Venice Beach boardwalk or contemplating a sunset from a secluded beach on the north coast, people who use the trail will enjoy and respect this fragile and unforgettable coastline, and wish to conserve it for future generations.

*East Beach Coastal Trail, City of Santa Barbara*
Principles for Designing the Coastal Trail

LEE OTTER
Central Coast District, California Coastal Commission

LINDA LOCKLIN
Coastal Access Program, California Coastal Commission

The Coastal Commission and local communities have been working since 1972 to increase public access to the shoreline. Many, many opinions have been expressed regarding the appropriate design of public access facilities, and many proposals have been put forward for the establishment of a single set of standards for public trails along the California coast. These suggested standards generally address such topics as trail width, surfacing, setbacks from the edge of the coastal bluff, trail furniture, signing, and necessary accommodations for the needs of various user groups. The topic that seems to stimulate the most heartfelt and animated discussions, however, is the trail alignment, namely, just where should the trail go?

To answer this question in regard to the Coastal Trail we must know what user groups the trail will be designed to accommodate: hikers? bicyclists? mountain bikes or road bikes? people in wheelchairs? equestrians? We must also consider seasonal variations, such as beaches that are narrower in winter, nesting season for snowy plovers and least terns, and the elephant seal migration.

In the case of the Coastal Trail, existing development patterns or other constraints along some parts of the coast may dictate that more than one user mode will be obliged to share a single-trail alignment. But in areas that are subject to intensive use, experience has taught us that parallel tracks may be needed to accommodate different modes and to minimize conflicts. Experience has also shown us that if the trail is to be accepted and supported by our coastal communities, it must be adapted to local circumstances and sensibilities. One size does not fit all, nor would any single standardized model work for the entire Coastal Trail.

Therefore the Coastal Trail will be comprised of many differing segments,
each with its own character, reflecting the great diversity and variety found among our coastal communities. The trail also needs to be adaptable to environmental constraints, which may vary immensely over the course of a year. The challenge is to provide an orderly alignment to the trail system while at the same time allowing for community individuality. Thus, to assure a consistent high level of quality and connectivity throughout the length of the state, common principles are needed.

To meet this need, and to provide a framework for the task of identifying the route of the trail, Coastal Commission staff has drafted a set of Coastal Trail alignment principles, based on shared values. These principles are: proximity to the sea, connectivity, integrity, respect, and feasibility. Each of these principles, explained below, is based on the following premise:

The Coastal Trail is not a single designated pathway spanning the length of California’s shoreline. It should be envisioned as a yarn comprised of several different but roughly parallel threads—here widely separated, there drawn together—with each thread being a particular trail alignment or trail improvement that responds to a specific need or accommodates a particular purpose. One thread may be for beach walkers, another for bicyclists, another may be merely an interim or temporary alignment, or may be placed where it is because of topography, land ownership, or natural barrier. Some threads may be seasonal paths to detour around a snowy plover nesting site, circumvent a sprayed agricultural field, or bypass winter high water where a fast-flowing river cuts a barrier across the beach. Yet when we step back, we can see that all the threads form a coherent whole.

The following principles of alignment would apply to all of the different components of the California Coastal Trail:

**Proximity**

Wherever feasible, the Coastal Trail should be within sight, sound, or at least the scent of the sea. The traveler should have a persisting awareness of the Pacific Ocean. It is the presence of the ocean that distinguishes the seaside trail from other visitor destinations.

**Connectivity**

The trail should effectively link starting points to destinations. Like pearls on a string, our parks, ports, communities, schools, trailheads, bus stops, visitor attractions, inns, campgrounds, restaurants, and other recreational assets are strung along the edge of our coast. They are already connected by roads, streets, and highways. Our challenge is to create alternative non-automotive connections that are sufficiently appealing to draw travelers out of their automobiles.

*Coastal Trail at Moonstone Beach, San Luis Obispo County*
Integrity
The Coastal Trail should be continuous and separated from motor traffic. Continuity is vitally important: if a chain is missing a link, it is useless. Where such separation is absent, the safety, pleasure, and character of the trail are impaired. Appropriate separation can take many forms. Substantial horizontal distance is generally the most desirable, thus avoiding the sight, sound, and scent of the internal combustion engine. Separation is also possible through vertical displacements of gradient, underpasses, vegetative buffer strips, barrier rails, and other means.

Respect
The trail must be located and designed with a healthy regard for the protection of natural habitats, cultural and archaeological features, private property rights, neighborhoods, and agricultural operations along the way. Manmade features such as boardwalks, guidewires, and fencing can be used to protect wetlands, dunes, archaeological sites, and agricultural fields. Screening fences and vegetative barriers not only protect residential privacy but may also minimize disturbance of sensitive bird habitats.

Respect also requires understanding that this trail will exist in a context of other trail designations, including the Pacific Coast Bike Route, Humboldt Bay Trail, Lost Coast Trail, San Mateo Coastside Trail, Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail, Santa Monica Mountains Backbone Trail, Los Angeles South Bay Bicycle Trail, etc. Providing a clear identity for the Coastal Trail on maps, signs, and brochures should not compete with or displace these existing trail identities. Where the Coastal Trail alignment incorporates or is a component of these other trails, the Coastal Trail should be no more than a concurrent designation.

Feasibility
To achieve timely, tangible results with the resources that are available, both interim and long-term alignments of the Coastal Trail will need to be identified.
Outdoor activities are engrained in the culture of California and are a key attraction to the 300 million people who make California the “most visited state in America.” The completed California Coastal Trail will be a state resource and a national treasure. Because of the diversity of the California coast, this trail will draw a far more varied mix of visitors than is usually found among trail enthusiasts.

Long-distance trails provide far-reaching benefits to the communities through which they pass. Trails have significant, well-documented quality-of-life benefits to health, the economy, and the environment.

**Economic Benefits**

Studies indicate that trails are an economic boon for communities.

The American Hiking Society’s fact sheet, *The Economic Benefits of Hiking*, states, “In the year 2000, almost one-third of Americans, that’s 67 million people, went hiking. The USDA Forest Service is predicting a steep increase in backpacking and hiking . . . over the next 50 years.” The report goes on to say, “communities are recognizing the economic, social, and health benefits of trails and hiking . . . [and] Revenues generated from trail-related recreation and sports activities provide substantial income and employment opportunities.”

Venice Beach Boardwalk
Many studies support these conclusions:

- In 2000 Americans spent $213 million on hiking boots, $284 million on backpacks, $78 million on tents, and $86 million on sleeping bags, according to the American Hiking Society.

- Recreational trails were described as the second-most-important community amenity in a 2002 survey of potential home purchasers conducted by the American Association of Homebuilders, and a 1995 study by American Lives, Inc. found that homebuyers rated proximity to walking and bicycle paths as the third-most-important factor in choosing a home.

- A 1995 survey of real estate agents in the Denver metropolitan area indicated that 73 percent of the agents believed that a nearby recreational trail would make it easier to sell a home.

- A study in Boulder, Colorado indicated that the average value of a home adjacent to a park area with trails would be one-third greater than the value of the same property 3,200 feet away from the park.

- In a 1998 National Park Service survey, 61 businesses located along the 35-mile Missouri State Trail reported that the trail was having a positive effect on their business.

The California Coastal Trail promises to deliver the benefits indicated in these studies. On the rural north coast, where traditional resource-dependent economies are in decline, scenic and open-space values are high and tourism is on the rise. Long-distance trails serve to attract visitors who will spend money at restaurants, hotels, campgrounds, retail stores, and movie theatres.

In the more urban coastal communities of central and southern California, public beaches and scenic open space enhance the quality of residential life and help to provide a competitive edge in the effort to attract new employers. The commercial tourism industry in these areas, already a strong component of regional economies, is also strengthened by continuing public investment in accessible recreational amenities.

**Environmental Protection and Enhancement**

If well-designed and managed, the California Coastal Trail can be a powerful tool for conserving the environment, protecting habitat, and providing public access to natural areas in the coastal zone.

- Trails provide corridors for animals to travel between protected habitat areas.

- Established, marked trails help to channel human use so as to minimize impacts, enabling people to experience environmentally sensitive areas without damaging those resources.

![A trail designed to protect sensitive habitat](image)
• Bringing people into closer contact with natural resources will foster an appreciation of environmental values and provide opportunities to encourage environmental stewardship through interpretive programs and trailside materials.

• By encouraging nonmotorized transportation, trails may reduce the release of carbon dioxide and other pollutants. (Over one year, substituting human-powered transportation for two miles of daily driving will spare the air of 730 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions.)

• Development of the Coastal Trail will be subject to all regulatory requirements of the California Coastal Act, assuring an appropriate balance between public use and the protection of sensitive natural resources.

Quality-of-Life Benefits

Recreation
The noun “recreation” is defined as “refreshment of one’s mind or body through some activity that amuses or stimulates.” The verb “recreate” is defined “to refresh mentally or physically.” For millions of people these definitions convey the very reason they use trails. Hiking and other forms of outdoor activity have an immediate and positive effect on physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Pleasant surroundings such as greenways, parks, and tree-lined streets in cities, and open space, farms, parks, and wilderness areas in the country, only heighten these benefits. Human desire to actively connect with nature not only benefits human well-being, but benefits the lives and habitats of other creatures. Aldo Leopold said in A Sand County Almanac, “When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may

Lupine, Sonoma County

Free recreation for children, youth, and adults along Venice Beach
Trails lead many people to the idea that we humans must save the land and all the creatures on it.

Recreational activities also benefit communities. They enhance a community’s sense of place, strengthen families, build support for parks and trails, add to economic diversity and health, and lower the cost of skyrocketing health care.

Recreation, then, has a much deeper meaning than just “having fun.” Recreation contributes to personal health and encourages respect for nature. People are happier; communities are stronger.

People who love the coast come to respect its fragile beauty, people who walk the coast want to share it with others in an environmentally sensitive way, and the Coastal Trail can inspire these sentiments.

**Transportation**

The concept of using trails for transportation—moving oneself or things from one place to another—rather than for recreation, is not readily understood or accepted in a culture dominated by the automobile. We as a culture have drifted away from the idea of using our own energy instead of fossil fuel to transport ourselves. Polls have shown that many people would bike to work if trails existed. Studies have indicated that half of all trips are for three miles or under. If we as a society turn from the regular use of the automobile and either walk or ride to work, our health will improve, stress related to traffic congestion will drop, air quality will improve, we will have less reliance on fossil fuels, and we will save money by using our own bodies instead of automobiles.
Public Health Benefits

A multitude of scientific studies prove that regular exercise is good for mind and body. The American Heart Association suggests that a vigorous 30 to 60 minute walk three or four times a week can help to control weight, prevent heart disease, decrease hypertension, relieve stress and depression, slow the aging process, prevent and control diabetes, improve arthritis and relieve back pain. It is surprising to learn that in spite of this conclusive evidence only about fifteen percent of American adults participate in even moderate regular exercise.

Simply put, it is invigorating and energizing to be in nature. As Francesca Lyman writes in an article in the Trust for Public Land’s Land and People magazine, there is “a growing body of evidence in a variety of disciplines—from biology to environmental psychology to landscape architecture—that natural surroundings may make us humans healthier, and maybe even happier and smarter.” This connection between trails, nature, and health, as embodied in the Trails and Greenways movement to create greenways in and around cities, has been understood by outdoor adventurers and “nature lovers” for years.

Now, through improving accessibility to coastline trails, there is an opportunity for many more people to experience these healthful benefits. In a society in which many people are overweight and chronic illness such as heart disease is rising, a lack of convenient access to recreational opportunities is commonly cited as a barrier to regular exercise. The Coastal Trail will be close to millions of homes and workplaces and it can provide a low-cost exercise alternative to indoor fitness facilities. Along with the many other trails systems that are slowly growing, the Coastal Trail can make a significant contribution to encouraging physical fitness and reducing public health costs.