



The significance of a nature trail is not just for a stroll in the woods, though that in itself can make it an enjoyable place to visit. Nature trails today are often educational experiences, teaching about natural history, conservation and science topics. When developing a trail you will want to think about the things you can teach with the trail.

**Science Topics:** To make nature trails relevant to schools you can easily emphasize sites that enhance natural history curriculum, a big part of elementary science education; what is an insect, trees, ecosystem, succession, life cycles, food webs, photosynthesis, erosion, etc. Recreational visitors will also find this information interesting and thought provoking. The trick is to discover what you have on your nature trail to show these concepts.

**Forest Study:** It may be worthwhile to do an extensive study of the forest or wetland where the trail will travel. It will help you determine the eventual route of the trail if you find interesting sites you wish to have the trail go by. Take some time to explore the woods.

**Interpretive Sites:** If you already have a trail route, these sites can be chosen for interpretive signs. Interpretive sites can include historical sites (old homesteads, mining camps, etc), trauma sites (ice storm blow down, forest fire, etc.) or be strictly natural history.

Here are some examples of sites that might be found on your nature trail and focused on:

- 1) **Habitat Diversity** - Choose a site for each habitat passed through. i.e. mixed hardwood forest, wetland, swamp, marshland, bog, meadow, hedge row, beech forest, coniferous forest, hemlock forest, forest regrowth after fire, forest disturbance, club moss forest, ferns, wild flowers, etc.
- 2) **Significant Animal Life** can be found in the forest, but is unlikely to be seen on a nature trail randomly. This does not, however, mean you cannot post educational signage about what is potentially present in the forest, i.e. forest birds, amphibians on the forest floor, owls, wetland reptiles, mammals of the woods, night animals, bats, beaver, etc.
- 3) **Animal Signs:** Bear scratches, deer antler rubbings, deer antlers shed, porcupine chewings, deer dropping,

beaver gnawing, all can be pointed out by temporary signage each year (as these signs can fade quickly).

4) **Forest Processes** quietly occurring can be explained and illustrated. Like animal life these may not be “seen” but are occurring all around. Having them illustrated and explained greatly enhances nature trail users understanding of the ecosystem in motion. Plus bringing in key scientific concepts that are at work in one of your nature trail ecosystems is a great way to make the trail attractive to school trips, i.e. nurse logs, forest decomposition, the food web, life cycles, forest succession, erosion, the water cycle, lichens pioneering rocks, etc.

5) **Interesting Sights Explained:** i.e. golden rod galls, wasp’s nests, cancerous growth on trees, woodpecker trees, webworm nest, bird nest, beaver dam, life in a beaver lodge, beaver trees, granite potholes, glacial remains, etc.

6) **Historic and Economic Points** brought out in trail signage is a great way to enhance the learning aspect to your trail. Old homesteads, mining camps and abandoned forges represent a past of pioneers who battled an existence out of a once vast wilderness and can be thought provoking for hikers. To include modern day sustainable economic values of the forest also is a great educational tool. For example, when pointing out a mature sugar maple, a trail sign can describe maple syrup production in the region or the approximate age of the tree and what was going on in the region historically when that tree was a seedling.

7) **Traditional and Medicinal uses of Plants** by native and early Americans also lends another educational aspect to your trail. Many common drugs used every day were developed from their herbal roots. For example, salicylic acid in aspirin is a derivative of willow, digitalis, an important heart medicine was developed from the wild flower foxglove.

8) **Rare and Endangered Plants:** For their own protection and for the enhancement of your trail, endangered plants can be pointed out. They emerge at different times throughout the spring and summer so stakes to mark the spot they will be helps protect the site and gives you something fun to look forward to!

