

# Making a Nature Trail - Getting Started

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## Introduction

So you have decided to make an educational nature trail. This will be fun! If you have access to a GPS to map your trail area that is great, but it is not at all necessary for an enjoyable and educationally effective nature trail. Even schools with no forest available can use hedgerows, field edges and a few trees grouped together to see some interesting sights. If your school has no land for a nature trail, ask an adjoining museum, public park, graveyard or state forest for permission to develop a nature trail through their green space. You might be surprised at how excited people are about having a nature trail on their property.

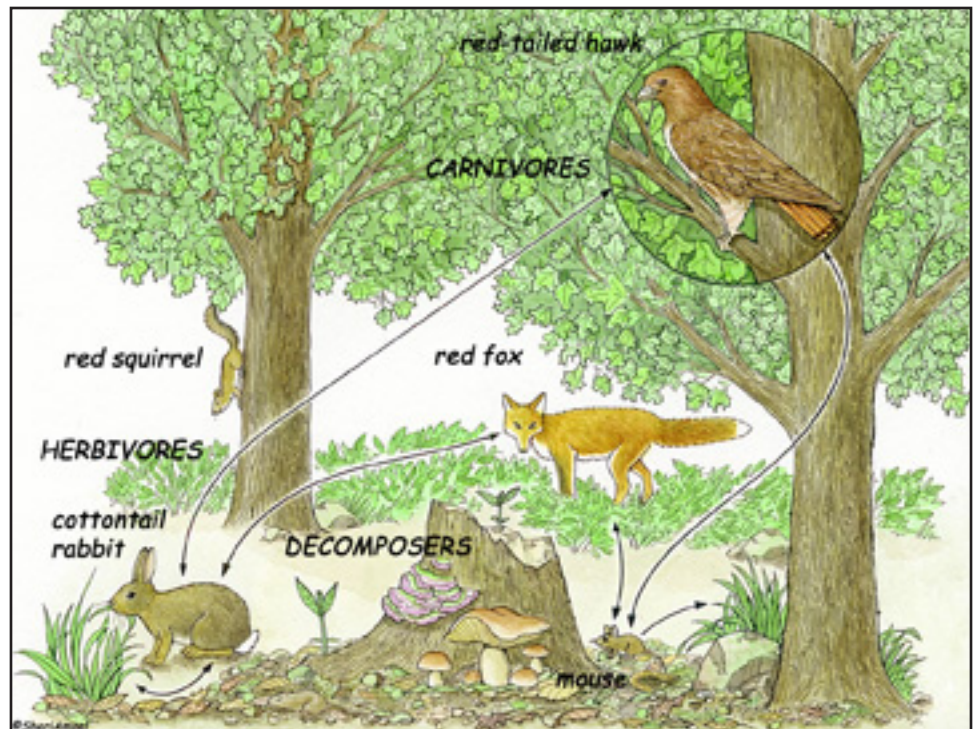
## Site Inspection

- 1) Carefully walk your site.
- 2) Take into consideration the accessibility of the path you choose. This will be tread by groups. Many if not most of the walkers will be children.
- 3) Take into consideration the erosion potential of your path. Millions of little feet will wear away whatever protects the topsoil of this path. If the path is exposed to rain and snow (and not under the protection of the trees), make sure the trail is not too steep. Eventually this would lead to serious erosion problems. In the Western U.S. where trails can be more out in the open, they often make steep sections in “switchbacks” to minimize erosion in steeper grades. If you can’t avoid a steep spot, after many years you may have to add stone steps to shore up an eroded area.
- 4) When choosing the actual pathway through the area, look for interesting sites that offer an educational perspective to the trail and later can be made into “Educational Stations” (see below).

a) Look for animal signs to feature — woodpecker trees, squirrel mid-dens, beaver stumps, birds’ nests. Some of these features will only last a season, but their presence suggests the animals will make another nearby for more viewing. Other signs last a long time (woodpecker damage and beaver signs).

b) Look for features that lend themselves to descriptions of cycles, energy flow, habitat variation, succession, species identification, erosion, disease, etc.

c) Look for a variation in habitat type. If you can include some woods, some field, a stream crossing and a cattail area if you have them.



## Getting Started

1) Marking your Trail - Start by flagging the trail with survey tape. If you have time watch a full year pass and walk the trail in different seasons to make sure you include aspects that show themselves in all the changing season. If you don't have time for this (most people don't), you can add little side trails later to show features you discover that are off the main trail section.

2) Clearing your Trail - When clearing the trail take into consideration the height and width of the vegetation. Consider eventual erosion. Do not come too close to fragile sites you are trying to view, as trails will widen over time. If you have room try to clear about a three-foot wide pathway. If the trail is not used a lot, you may have to keep clearing until foot traffic keeps it open.

3) Wet Areas - Unavoidable wet areas may need big flat rocks to cross on or small plank walkways. Traffic will increase the effect of wet areas, so over time more may need to be done to keep these areas passable.

4) Dangerous Plants - Watch for poison ivy, stinging nettles and brambles. They often invade disturbed areas over time. If poison ivy becomes a problem, you can cut it back to the ground repeatedly to try to eradicate it (wear protective clothing!) or you may be forced to reroute your trail to avoid it. Some choose to treat it with herbicides in extreme cases, but this depends on your school's rules and your feelings about such things.

## Species identification

1) Identify the trees, shrubs and plants on the trail. The plant life will change from week to week from March (in Southern climates) right through September.

2) It would be beneficial to map the trail AND to develop a calendar (atlas) over time as well. It can be fun to have students anticipate the arrival of certain plants, wildflowers and birds every year from your own atlas. Students also should be encouraged to discover new plants on their own and bring them to your attention. This is a great way to get kids outside and to really looking at the species on their trail.

3) You can post stakes in the ground where you know the lady slippers and other brief wildflowers will come up in the spring so you can watch for them.

4) It would be worthwhile to get a large bundle of wooden stakes (at least 100) from a lumberyard and dip the tops in different color paints for making sites on your trail. (i.e. green for trees, red for wildflowers, yellow for ferns and other

non-flowering plants, purple for animal signs, etc.) Make sure to use outdoor paint, like latex house paint so the colors will last.

