



Keys to Establishing and Promoting A Paddling Trail or Blueways System

By Doug Alderson, Florida Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT), with input from Hank Brooks, Ed Schessl, Carol Sheppard, Jim Wood, Liz Sparks and Betsy Clayton.

Before Beginning

While the purposes of establishing a paddling trail are many fold—raising environmental awareness, creating a sense of place, promoting good health through outdoor recreation, bringing young people outdoors, and boosting eco-tourism—each individual paddling trail has unique qualities. Some are suitable just for day trips while others can feature overnight opportunities utilizing primitive campsites on public lands with little investment or river hubs and developed river camps with a higher investment, such as the [Suwannee River Wilderness Trail](#). If primitive campsites are small, fragile, and in high use areas, composting toilets or port-a-lets may be desired, adding to cost. Creating a vision for a paddling trail and a list of assets and challenges will help determine the budget and tasks required. Also, it may be important to decide whether the trail and associated amenities will be designed for paddlers only or open to other users, such as boaters.



Maps and Guides

- Create clear maps and guides that delineate launch points, distances, amenities such as water and restrooms, camping and campgrounds, nearby motels, restaurants and outfitters, and points of interest. Add waterfront lodging that has kayak-friendly docks and/or kayak launches, and add Great Florida Birding Trail designations. Provide gps points. Ground-truth maps and GPS coordinates.



- Ask someone new to the area to follow maps and guides to see if there are any points of confusion.
- Add safety information, historical and environmental background, wildlife spotlights, Leave No Trace guidelines, available shuttle services, ideal water levels if applicable, specific restrictions on adjoining lands, and potential environmental conditions (currents, extreme tides, obstructions, etc.).
- [The National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program](#) provides technical assistance to communities seeking to establish trails:
- More info about paddling trail creation is available from the [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission](#).



Raising the Profile

- Pursue state designation of trail(s) through the [Florida Office of Greenways and Trails](#). If maps and guides are accessible online, a direct link can be made to your website. The trail(s) can also be included in the OGT [Online Trail Guide](#).
 - Work with your community and the Florida Paddling Trails Association to become part of their [Blueway Community Program](#) and with the Office of Greenways and Trails for your community to become a [Florida Trail Town](#). Encourage trail users to file trip reports on the [Paddling.com website](#).
- Apply for [National Recreation Trail designation](#) with the Department of the Interior.

Trail Management

- Designate a local person as trail manager to maintain and promote the trail. This person would also work closely with the area tourism development councils, chambers of commerce and volunteers in promotion endeavors and they can represent the trail at paddling festivals, conferences and other gatherings.
- Encourage paddling clubs to utilize the trail(s), do volunteer work, “adopt a trail,” and to spread



the word. Designate a handful of volunteers to routinely patrol the most popular or most remote access points and have them file e-mail reports to a designated person. Such e-mails/reports can prove valuable when making a case to the state or prospective sponsors or other entities that the trail is actively monitored and used.

- Support existing outfitters and the development of new outfitters where there might be a void. Work with these outfitters to promote your trail by supplying them with free promotional material.

Branding and Advertising

- Develop a trail logo to be used on promotional literature and signage. Consider the development of a catchy trail name and motto.
- Allocate or raise funds to promote the trail(s) with rack cards, printed guides, and an interactive website. If budget permits, advertise in paddling publications such as *Canoe and Kayak*, *Sea Kayaker* and a host of others. Less expensive are advertisements on paddling club websites and in their newsletters.
- Install signs at trail access/ launch points. Use trail logo on signs.
- Create a short description (300 words or less) to use when replying to e-mails and/or requesting partnerships and other uses. This quick word picture describes what it's like on your trail(s) and who uses it in what ways.
- Create a PowerPoint program or film about the trail(s) that can be shown to a wide variety of groups around the region and state such as paddling clubs, environmental groups and civic organizations. The Florida Trail Association, although primarily a hiking group, is also interested in paddling trails, and they have chapters throughout the state.

Media Outreach

- Invite travel writers and bloggers on guided trips of the trail(s) so they can feature them in





publications (e.g. *Canoe & Kayak*, *Sea Kayaker*, newspaper travel sections). For film crews, an accompanying motorboat will likely be necessary.

- Reach out to a waterfront hotel, RV park or campground and get them to agree to put up the invited journalists free of charge for a night or two. Travel writers rarely come without free lodging.
- A library of outstanding photos and video clips that is available to the media can be very helpful. Encourage volunteers, paddling clubs and trail users to take photos and have a designated e-mail address where they can submit them. Photos can also help to woo travel writers, enhance press releases, and document active trail use for grant applications. Paddlers depicted in photos should be wearing life jackets and photo release forms should be used if subject's face is showing.
- A talented local freelancer or staff member can be encouraged to write articles to submit for publication.
- Create an ongoing trail newsletter.
- Put out periodic press releases about trail happenings and improvements. Include stock photos.

Events

- Sponsor paddling festivals, kayak and canoe races and other events to help promote the trail(s). Establish at least one annual event that tourists can plan their vacations around. Work with local paddling clubs on these events.
 - Work with groups such as Paddle Florida on establishing multi-day excursions for large numbers of paddlers down the trail(s) if possible.



Long-term Support

- Seek grants or matching funds for capital park projects and land purchases along the trail(s) and for trail events.
- Support or help develop a certified green guides



program. For example, the Tallahassee Community College teaches a green guides program in Wakulla County every semester, and the Florida Green Guide Association came about as a result.

- Gauge annual trail usage and economic impacts over several years. This will go a long way towards developing political support and gaining funding for trail improvements. Universities will sometimes help with these studies as part of class projects.
- From Betsy Clayton, former coordinator of Lee County's Calusa Blueway: "If you build it, they will come' doesn't always apply to paddling trails at the beginning. Get a local club, outfitter or a parks & rec department to set up a trilogy of free 'learn to paddle' sessions along the trail during the tourist season/ good weather so you attract tourists and locals. Tell them you'll teach them the basics of kayaking and only keep them on the water 45 minutes. Use 15 minutes of that session to explain your blueway, what it is, what a blueway is, how to get maps, how to help, etc. Basically, you set up a situation where you teach a bit and then anoint a group of ambassadors to go out and do word-of-mouth advertising."



Supporting Economic Facts and Trends

- According to the Outdoor Industries Association in 2017, outdoor recreation in Florida generates \$58.6 billion annually in consumer spending. More specifically, a 2017 recreational use study by Balmoral estimates that paddling activities in Florida bring in almost \$3 billion annually.
- Wildlife viewing in Florida is the second most popular outdoor activity for both residents and visitors, bringing in almost \$5 billion annually to the state's economy. Many view wildlife from a kayak or canoe.
- Kayak fishing is extremely popular, part of Florida's \$4.3 billion fishing industry.
- In June of 2020 during the Covid 19 pandemic, dollar sales of paddle sports increased 56%



versus the same time the previous year (The NPD Group).

- Since the first phase of Lee County's Calusa Blueway was established in 2003, the number of outfitters doubled and there was a significant rise in the number of "micro-entrepreneurs" in the form of various types of guides and interpreters (fishing, fossiling, photography, Calusa lore). Bed tax money is used to help support the trail.

