



Rail Trail Establishment Guidelines

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REV	DATE	COMMENTS
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Front page image: Construction of the Bentley to Lismore section of the Northern Rivers Rail Trail. Courtesy of Lismore Council.

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1 Introduction

1.1 About the Guidelines

These guidelines provide an overview of what is involved to establish, maintain and promote a rail trail.

More specific detail is contained in the reference documents from established rail trails and other associated organisations in the appendices. However, despite there being more than 100 rail trails in Australia, remarkably there are almost no two with the same set of circumstances. Each rail trail is constructed and managed a little differently so there is no exact prescription for success. **The information that best suits your situation needs to be applied and your rail trail construction and management plans must be prepared by suitably qualified people.**

This document will be updated as required and any suggestions for its improvement are welcome and can be emailed to admin@railtrails.org.au.

1.2 What Are Rail Trails

Rail Trails Australia (RTA) defines a rail trail as a trail that closely follows (preferably on) the formation of a former railway line or runs beside an active railway for most of its length. What sets rail trails apart from other trails are that they are gently graded and have a history.

All should at least be suitable for walking and depending on the surface can also be used by road bikes, mountain bikes, hybrid bikes, prams and wheelchairs, and even four wheel “gophers”. Some rail trails allow horses while others don’t.

The rails and sleepers should be removed, and a surface of gravel or bitumen applied for best results. Ideally a separate dirt path besides the main trail should be provided for horses.

As a matter of note, in the early days there was discussion on whether the term “trail” or “track” should be used, some people regarding “track” an Australian term and “trail” an American term. Trail won out as it was already used extensively overseas and rail track sounding very much like a train could still use it. There was also debate whether it should be one word (like railway) or two words. Two words won out.



1.3 Why Are They Popular

Rail trails are popular because they are:

- A car free space for people to walk or ride bicycles (or horses on some trails) in safety to school and the shops, or just to enjoy the scenery, providing health benefits.
- Ideal for families.
- A great asset for visitors to come and enjoy exploring the area.
- A pleasant experience even in hilly country because trains, like walkers and cyclists, don’t like steep gradients.
- Keeping the rail corridor in public ownership and a long continuous natural heritage corridor (native vegetation rehabilitation and weed control is a major activity of committees of management).



10 Appendix of Useful Resources

The below appendices that have not been prepared by RTA were/are available freely on-line but have been compiled with these Guidelines for convenience. They are provided as files rather than links as most are no longer readily available.

	TITLE	AUTHOR	COMMENTS
	The Great Victorian Rail Trail Story (2013)	Mansfield Shire Council	A great summary of what it took to deliver one of Australia's largest rail trail project, formerly known as the Goulburn River High County Rail Trail
A	Studies on the benefits of rail trails and users		
A1	Brisbane Valley Rail Trail (BVRT) Visitor Profile - 2020	BVRT, Queensland Government, Somerset Regional Council, University of Queensland	Detailed analysis of rail trail users
A2	Brisbane Valley Rail Trail (BVRT) Visitor Research Program Report - 2021	McColl-Kennedy, Solnet, Benckendorff and Ritchie (The University of Queensland)	Detailed analysis of rail trail users
A3	Northern Rivers Rail Trail: Tweed Section Economic Impact Assessment Report - 2024	Muller Enterprise	Assesses the economic impact of the trail and makes recommendations about maximising benefits to the local community
A4	Rail Trails for NSW Evaluation Summary - 2022	NSF Consulting and NSW Government	Identifies learning experiences from existing rail trails and what may need to be done differently for future rail trails in NSW
A5	Wallan to Heathcote rail trail cost benefit analysis - 2017	Mitchell Shire Council	Assesses the economic impact of the trail based on comparisons with existing experience.
A6	The Yarra Valley Trail: Economic and Tourism Impact Assessment - 2016	Yarra Ranges Council	Assesses the economic impact of the trail and makes recommendations about maximising benefits to local communities
B	Initial proposals		
B1	Eumundi to Cooroy Rail Trail Preliminary Assessment Final Report - 2012	Mike Halliburton & Associates	Basic discussion of issues to be considered when developing a rail trail
B2	Monaro Rail Trail Pre-feasibility Assessment Final Report - 2018	RC Tourism Pty Ltd, Monaro Rail Trail Inc.	High-level overview of the likely experience, potential markets and economic benefits of a rail trail
B3	Northern Rivers Rail Trail Product & Experience Development Project Audit Report - 2021	Wray Research & Planning, Destination North Coast NSW	Identifies opportunities for new products and experiences in and around the rail trail

	TITLE	AUTHOR	COMMENTS
B4	Tweed stage of Northern Rivers Rail Trail Economic Assessment in support of Building Better Regions Fund Submission - 2017	Business Sense, Tweed Shire Council	Cost-benefit analysis and economic impact assessment of the rail trail
B5	NSW Rail Trails Framework - 2022	NSW Government	Framework for NSW rail trail proposals
B6	Common questions about and Benefits of rail trails for NSW - 2020	Rail Trails for NSW	Summary of concerns particularly relevant to NSW rail trail proposals
C	Feasibility studies		
C1	Mary Valley Rail Trail Community Engagement Summary - 2023	Gympie Regional Council	Good 2-page community summary of the rail trail
C2	Casino to Eltham Business Case - 2019	Northern Rivers Rail Trail	
C3	Castlemaine Maryborough Rail Trail Feasibility Study – 2025	Castlemaine Maryborough Rail Trail Inc	
C4	Great Australian Wine Trail Concept Feasibility Report - 2021	Regional Development Australia	Detailed concept report covering a wider tourist concept utilising two existing rail trails in South Australia. Includes health benefits.
C5	High Country Rail Trail Shelley to Corryong Masterplan - 2022	Towong Shire Council	
C6	Mareeba to Walkamin Rail Trail Feasibility Study Final Report - 2019	Mareeba Shire Council	
C7	Monaro Rail Trail Feasibility Report - 2019	Snowy Monaro Regional Council	
C8	New England Rail Trail Business Case - 2020	New England Rail Trail Incorporated	Cost-benefit analysis of turning an underutilized asset into a tourist attraction.
C9	North East Tasmania Rail Trail Revised Business Case 2024	Dorset Council	
D	Rail Trail Management		
D1	Lilydale to Warburton Management Plan - 2013	Shire of Yarra Ranges	One of the most popular rail trails in Australia.
D2	Atherton Tablelands Rail Trail Management Plan 2015	Atherton Shire Council	
D3	Otago Central Management Plan - 2012	Otago Central Rail Trail Trust	One of the most popular rail trails in the southern hemisphere.
D4	SEQ Draft Active Trails Implementation Guide - 2010	Queensland Government	Another summary of all the factors to consider for a trail.
D5	Recreational Trail Planning Design and Management Guidelines - 2020	TRC	Case study analysis of how to plan and deliver sustainable trail experiences.
D6	Facilities plan - 2005	Coast to Vines Rail Trail	
D7	Tumbarumba rail trail biosecurity risk assessment - 2017	Murray Local Land Services	Example for NSW.
D8	Tweed Rail Trail Biosecurity Risk Assessment - 2019	Northern Rivers Rail Trail	Example for NSW.

	TITLE	AUTHOR	COMMENTS
D9	Council Delegation - 2007	Murray to Mountains Rail Trail	Example of a multi-council rail trail delegation authority. Note this is no longer in use for this rail trail.
D10	Rail Trail Crown Reserve Management Policy - 2007	Murray to Mountains Rail Trail	Example for rail trail on Crown Land. Note this may be superseded.
D11	Application form to conduct event	East Gippsland Rail Trail	Example of a form for a volunteer committee of management.
D12	Rail trail Maintenance Costs	Rail Trails Australia	Some indicative costs for the biggest question on rail trails.
D21	Visitation Marketing Plan - 2022	Great Southern Rail Trail	
D22	User Counting	Rail Trails Australia	Article on automatic user counting.

E Technical References

This appendix contains numerous documents obtained over time that may assist in the technical aspects of constructing or maintaining a rail trail.

An important one for design of paths for cyclists is Austroads Guide to Road Design Part6A which is in the Appendix and the latest version can be found at <https://austroads.gov.au/publications/road-design/agrd06a>.

There are also local, state and territory or other authorities with relevant local information.

F Resources from Overseas

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), the peak rail trail body in the United States of America, has a wealth of information for rail trails there. There may be some documents of interest in the Resources section of <https://www.railstotrails.org/>.

Other resources noted below.

	TITLE	AUTHOR	COMMENTS
F1	D & L Trail (USA) User Survey and Economic Impact Analysis - 2012	Rails-to-trails Conservancy (RTC)	Discusses preserving rail corridors for future use
F2	Missisquoi Valley Rail Trail User Counting and Economic Impact Analysis - 2020	SE Group	Detailed modelling of user numbers and the resultant economic benefit of the trail
F3	The Value of Cycle Tourism - Scotland - 2013	Ivan Zovko / Sustrans Scotland	Quantifies the anecdotal evidence of the benefits of cycle tourism
F4	The Great Rides of the New Zealand Cycle Trails: Some Benefits in Relation to Costs - 2016	Antong Victorio and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment	Cost-benefit analysis and economic impact assessment of cycle trails in New Zealand
F5	Otago Central Rail Trail User Survey Analysis 2015	Otago Central Rail Trail Trust	Another example of a detailed actual user study
F6	Economic impacts of a Taieri Gorge extension to the Otago Central Rail Trail - 2023	Otago Central Rail Trail Trust	Pondering a semi-rail trail expansion

Other Resources

The following may be of interest

	TITLE	AUTHOR	COMMENTS
G1	E-Bike Subsidy Report - 2021	We Ride Australia	
G2	The Australian Cycling and e-scooter Economy in 2022	We Ride Australia	
G3	Bike Tourism in Queensland Research Report - 2023	Queensland Government	
G4	Bike Tourism in Queensland Supplementary Report-Holiday Riding - 2023	Queensland Government	
G5	Growing Cycling Tourism in Victoria - 2015	Victorian Government	
G6	Great Ocean Road Regional Trails Strategy DRAFT - 2024	Great Ocean Road Coast & Parks Authority	Strategy for region that incorporates 4 rail trails.