



The Power of Volunteerism: Preserving Public Lands and Motorized Access

Overview

Volunteerism is a cornerstone of American civic life, providing billions in economic value while fostering community pride and stewardship. On public lands—where agency budgets are perpetually strained—volunteer partnerships are not optional; they are essential.

The Adopt-a-Trail (AAT) Model

- Originated in the San Bernardino National Forest (SBNF) under the leadership of Greg Hoffman.
- Organizes OHV clubs and recreation groups to adopt trails, committing to long-term maintenance, monitoring, and education.
- Widely replicated across National Forests, BLM districts, and state parks because of its proven success.

Key Results from SBNF AAT Program

- Since 2016, 50–75 OHV clubs have contributed tens of thousands of volunteer hours annually.
- Volunteers clear trees, repair erosion, replace signage, remove trash, and monitor illegal activities.
- Assist with Search and Rescue, aid users in need, and donate for tools and materials.
- Hundreds of miles of OHV routes remain open that otherwise faced closure.
- Rapid recovery after storms and fires enabled by volunteer labor.
- Example: Inland Empire 4 Wheelers logged 3,000+ hours in one year.

Lessons Learned

1. Force Multiplier – Volunteers expand agency capacity.
2. Shared Stewardship – Trust builds accountability and pride.
3. Sustainable Access – Partnerships protect resources and keep trails open.

Recommendations

- Congress should adopt AAT as a best-practice model across agencies.
- Expand beyond OHV to include hikers, bikers, and equestrians.
- Encourage BLM to adopt structured volunteer programs.

Conclusion

The San Bernardino Adopt-a-Trail Program shows how empowered citizens preserve public lands, reduce costs, and sustain access. It is a model of civic stewardship worth national support.

See full briefing: “The Power of Volunteerism: Preserving Public Lands and Motorized Access Through Expansion of Volunteer Programs” (Utah Public Lands Alliance).



UTAH PUBLIC LANDS ALLIANCE

*Together We Will Win,
But We Can't Do It Without You*

The Power of Volunteerism: Preserving Public Lands and Motorized Access Through Expansion of Volunteer Programs

Volunteerism as a Pillar of American Civic Life

Volunteerism is one of the most enduring strengths of American society. Every year, millions of citizens contribute their time and energy to improve communities, protect natural resources, and support public institutions. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the value of a volunteer hour now exceeds \$30, meaning that volunteer efforts provide billions of dollars in cost savings to federal, state, and local governments.

Beyond the economic benefit, volunteerism fosters community pride, creates bonds between citizens and public institutions, and instills a spirit of stewardship that government resources alone cannot replicate. On our public lands, where budgets and staffing are perpetually stretched, volunteer partnerships are not just beneficial—they are essential.

The Adopt-a-Trail Model

One of the most effective frameworks for channeling this civic energy into tangible results is the Adopt-a-Trail (AAT) Program, pioneered in the San Bernardino National Forest (SBNF). The program organizes clubs, nonprofits, and community groups to formally “adopt” specific trails, committing to their long-term care through maintenance, monitoring, and education.

This model has since been replicated in National Forests across the country, as well as in a few Bureau of Land Management districts and state parks. The reason is simple: it works.

The San Bernardino National Forest Adopt-a-Trail Program

The SBNF Adopt-a-Trail Program stands as a national model for volunteer stewardship of motorized recreation routes.

Origins & Leadership

The program was championed and implemented for many years by Greg Hoffman, Adopt-a-Trail Coordinator, who successfully built trust between the Forest Service and the OHV community. Under his leadership, dozens of clubs were brought into the program and given the training, tools, and agency support to make a real difference on the ground.

Scale of Participation

Since its beginnings in 2016, between 50 and 75 OHV clubs have participated in the program. These include Jeep clubs, motorcycle groups, ATV riders, and mixed OHV organizations.

Results & Impact

- Tens of thousands of volunteer hours have been logged annually. Due to the availability of state grants, those volunteer hours actually turned into cash back to the Forest to further support efforts at making it one of the premier OHV recreation areas in the state.
- Volunteers performed tasks such as clearing downed trees, repairing erosion structures, replacing signs, and removing trash. They are often better equipped to travel into remote or difficult areas for Forest Service vehicles to reach, and in inclement weather. Because they visit these trails often, they are often the first to notice changes in the trail and immediately report their findings to the AAT Coordinator, whereas the general public will generally not notice changes that may affect safe travel. Volunteers are often recruited from AAT clubs when Search and Rescue requires a widespread search area.
- Law enforcement seldom visits many of the trails, so having extra sets of eyes in the Forest to observe and report illegal activities such as illegal dumping, campfires, shooting, stolen vehicles, and creation of new trail routes has been very beneficial. AAT volunteers know the best way to contact the Forest to expedite responses.
- Volunteers often are able to provide assistance to other users in need of directions, breakdowns, even water and food shortages from hikers.
- Clubs contributed financial donations to purchase equipment, tools, and materials otherwise unavailable due to budget shortfalls.
- This enormous combined effort has kept hundreds of miles of motorized OHV routes open, routes that would otherwise have been closed.
- When natural disasters happened such as severe weather or fires happened, the AAT allowed the Forest to quickly reopen as a result of volunteer efforts.

Community Engagement

The program has created a sense of ownership among the OHV community. By taking responsibility for specific trails, volunteers not only maintained them but also patrolled, reported misuse, and educated other users on responsible recreation.

Inland Empire 4 Wheels: A Case Study

As a member and former President of Inland Empire 4 Wheels, I had the privilege of leading one of the largest and most active volunteer groups in the SBNF Adopt-a-Trail Program. Our members collectively contributed many days per year, often bringing in entire families for trail workdays. In one year, IE4W logged a little over 3000 hours of volunteer efforts.

We specialized in post-storm clearance, trail stabilization, and public education, all under the guidance of the OHV Trail Coordinator. By supplying our own tools, winches, and equipment—and even raising funds to purchase additional materials—we helped ensure our adopted trails remained safe and accessible.

Our efforts, and those of dozens of other clubs, are proof that when user groups are empowered to be partners, not adversaries, they deliver meaningful results that protect resources and preserve access.

Broader Lessons for Public Lands Management

The SBNF Adopt-a-Trail Program demonstrates:

1. Volunteerism as a Force Multiplier: Small agency staff can oversee and empower large volunteer networks, multiplying their impact.
2. Shared Stewardship: When the public is trusted with responsibility, they respond with dedication, pride, and accountability.
3. Sustainability of Access: Many OHV routes in the SBNF would no longer exist if not for this program.

Specific Recommendations

Congress should view this program as a best-practice model worthy of replication and support across all federal land management agencies. By investing in volunteer partnerships, America can preserve its public lands for future generations while continuing its long tradition of civic stewardship. It is recommended that the AAT model be expanded in Forest Service lands, and initiated and promoted on BLM managed lands. The AAT model should not be exclusive to OHV use, groups should be similarly organized for other recreation groups such as hiking, mountain biking, and equestrian users.

Conclusion

The San Bernardino National Forest's Adopt-a-Trail Program powered by the commitment of 50–75 OHV clubs, is living proof of the transformative power of volunteerism. It has saved taxpayer dollars, preserved access to public lands, and built lasting partnerships between recreationists and land managers.

While some BLM offices encourage volunteerism and have formal programs, replicating the successful AAT program could dramatically assist BLM.

About the Author

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