

Horses

as Trail Users

by Chelle Grald



The outside is good for the inside of everyone. Whether we get onto the trails with our feet, skis, wheels, or hooves, the most important thing is that we help each other to get there. Different trail users have varied goals, needs and impacts, so thought and planning are needed to accommodate everyone. In our quest to understand each other and work together effectively, we will have to learn new things and keep our minds open.

This article is for trail users who don't use equines (horses, donkeys, mules) as their means of transport. My hope is that it will help you to respect and appreciate what is unique about the horse-human partnership as a means of transport into natural places. If you are an equestrian, my hope is to help you to articulate your reasons for being on the trail to others who may not understand or may be trying to restrict your access.

The Vehicle That Thinks

Horses are the only means of transport into the wilderness that has a mind of its own. Because they are large animals with finely-tuned instincts, they can become frightened enough to override their training and in that state become a danger to their rider, themselves and anyone else involved or nearby. This makes equestrians a 'vulnerable user' requiring understanding and consideration. Trail etiquette rules specify that other users yield to horses when they are encountered on the trail. This is for everyone's safety. On the other hand, remember that horses can be trained to charge cannons and are very effective in policing riots. With thoughtful training, they can adapt to most anything. With consideration and education, there is no good reason why horses can't share suitable trails with both bicycles and ATVs.

Silent and Environmentally Friendly

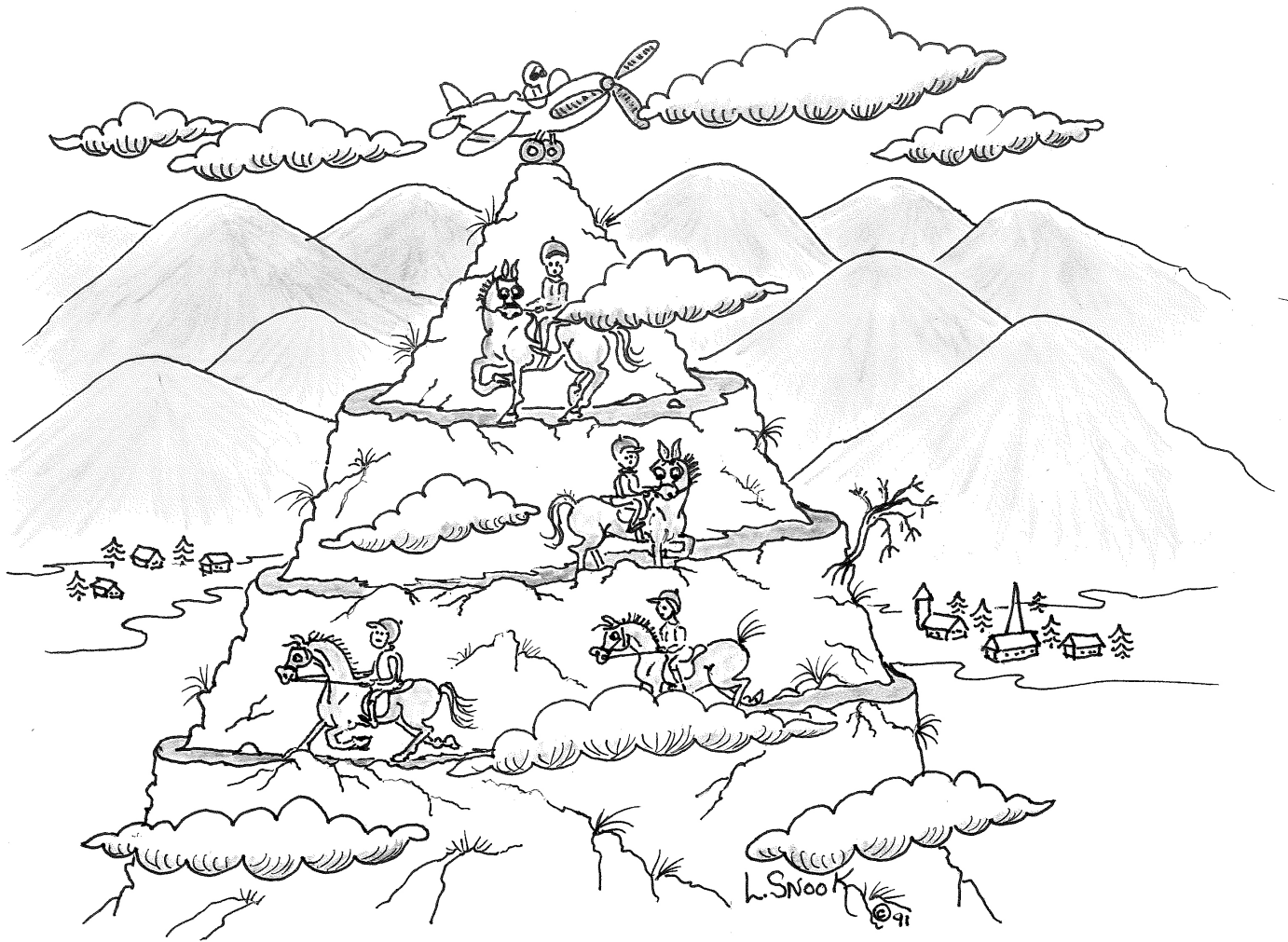
Horses don't have loud motors and don't consume fossil fuels. Owners of horses inherently help to make the landscape more beautiful by purchasing large tracts of land, keeping it open and providing a local market for hay and wood shavings that keeps land open and forests managed.

No Rear View Mirrors

Horses have a blind spot directly behind them and directly in front of them, though they have unusually good peripheral vision. This means that if you approach them from behind silently, they will easily be startled. This also means that they will turn their head and neck to see things directly in front, positioning their body sideways to flee quickly if alarmed. When startled, horses do not move in a straight line but rather in a zigzag pattern. This is instinctive as a way to evade predators. This means that passing them at speed puts YOU in great danger. A scared horse is more likely to land right on top of you than to run away from you.

Domesticated

Horses *like* people. People feed them and care for them. They put an amazing amount of trust in humankind. If you encounter a horse on the trail, your job is to identify yourself as human. A horse doesn't automatically identify a whizzing bicycle as a human, nor does it identify a person with a large backpack or pushing a baby carriage as a human. A helmet and goggle clad ATV or motorcycle rider looks even less like a human to a horse. Speak! Announce your presence and talk to the horse and its rider. Stop and let the horse study you. Be friendly and relaxed. Give the



Lucy Snook

horse enough time to recognize that you are just a human that looks a little different. Avoid doing anything that makes you seem predatory. Predators approach at speed. Predators are silent. Predators hide behind things.

Four on the Floor

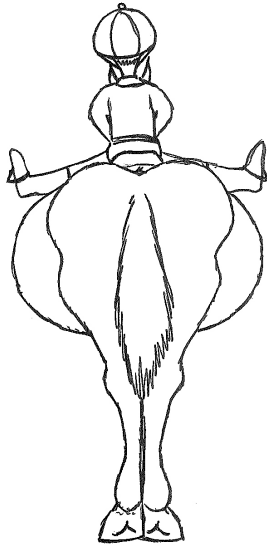
Horses have four feet. Those feet are designed to dig into the ground to provide traction. Sometimes their feet are shod with metal for protection. They weigh about 1,000 lbs. This means that horses will have more impact on the trail surface, particularly in wet areas, than an individual hiker or biker.

An Outdoor Industry Association study in 2003 estimated that nationally there are 73.3 million hikers (57% of the total), 43.1 million single track mountain bikers (25% of the total) and 4.3 million equestrians (7% of the total) with the remainder in various other uses, such as trail running. Most studies indicate that trail damage by mountain bikers is somewhere in between that of hikers and horses.

So, if the trail traffic on a given day equals 57 hikers, 25 bikers and 7 horses, which user group is doing the most damage? This is why, in virtually every mixed use trail reference in the nation, the horse has been defined as a passive, low impact or light weight user, even in the most sensitive environments. Their unique feet give them great traction on grass and dirt, but they tend to slip on pavement or flat rocks.

Native Guides

As grassland herd animals, horses are designed to cover terrain efficiently and continually. Traveling on trails is natural for them and most enjoy it. They are remarkably sure-footed and strong. Horses can negotiate steep slopes, ford streams and pick their way through rocky areas. They can go almost anywhere a hiker can go that doesn't require hands to climb.



Shirley Pierce

Wide Bodies

The average horse is about 1.5 the width of the average person, with a leg at each corner. This means that horses need a wider trail tread than hikers or bikers. A tread width of three feet is the minimum. Four feet is ideal. It is good to have some cleared area to the right and left of the trail tread to provide for trail yielding and passing whenever possible. In general, horses do not like to be in tight spaces and may not tolerate being in close quarters with other horses that they don't know.

They Walk and Poop at the Same Time

Horses can defecate while motoring down the trail. This means that their riders, who are facing the other end of the horse, will not always know when they do it. Because horses don't have rear view mirrors, it is unfair to expect their riders to know every time and dismount to clear it off the trail. It is reasonable to expect horse owners to clean up after their charges in the trail heads, parking lots and other gathering areas where the riders are not moving forward. Horse manure breaks down very quickly and repeated studies have shown that it is not hazardous to humans or other wildlife and no more likely to carry invasive plant species than the soles of feet or bicycle tires.

They Walk on the Wild Side

As prey animals, horses are not seen by wildlife as a threat. Their footfalls identify them as harmless members of the animal kingdom. Their presence is far less disturbing to wildlife than humans on foot, bicycle or on motorized vehicles. Dogs, whether on or off leash, are seen as far more threatening to wildlife.

Water Crossers

Horses can easily cross water up to 3 feet deep as long as the currents are not too extreme. They can cross bridges, but they need to be built wide and solid enough, with no large cracks that can catch their hooves. Horse trails should have some non-bridge crossings, so that horses can drink along the trail.



Heather St. Clair Davis

Tall Walkers

A rider on a horse sits about 10 feet in the air. This means that they may have a longer field of vision than a hiker or biker. Trails should be designed with this in mind. Signage should be placed higher for better visibility by all users. Also, horse trails need to be cleared vertically to a taller height. Because of this height, equestrians with hand-clippers can do a great job of keeping the vertical space of the trail open.

Mobility Enhancers

Not everyone can enjoy the backcountry without some transportation help. Horses help those with physical challenges that prevent them from hiking, biking or cross-country skiing to enjoy a day in nature. Horseback riding is classified as moderate exercise, particularly good for strengthening the core and enhancing flexibility. The activity required to care for horses is also healthy for their owners.

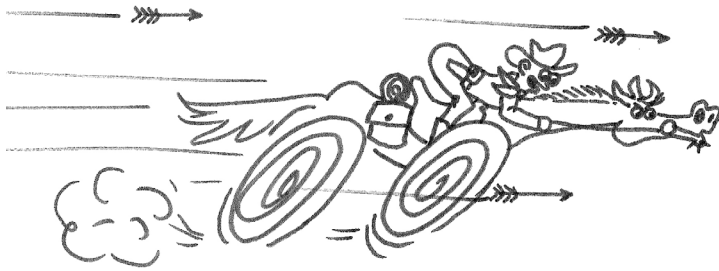
Companions and Friends

Horses and their riders enjoy a relationship, mutual respect and love. Studies have documented the benefits of this relationship as a healer of trauma, developer of emotional resiliency and other good character traits. Horses and horseback riding are used as therapy for veterans suffering from PTSD, troubled kids, prisoners and more. Riders enjoy their horse's company and vice versa. The trails are where they share that time in a peaceful setting. It is natural for a horse to cover miles of terrain every day. It is

not natural for them to go in circles in an arena, though they do it for their owners. Trails are good for the horse, too.

Horses Are Our Heritage

From Paul Revere's midnight ride to the wagons going west. From the Erie Canal Towpath to the Pony Express. Horses lived and died beside us as our nation was built. There are 10 million horses in the U.S. and about 2 million horse owners. Mostly, horses are owned and loved purely for the joy of riding and knowing them, though some work for their oats, in racing, agriculture and law enforcement. Horse ownership and use contributes over \$100 billion to the national economy. It is a strong supporter of rural life, bringing jobs, business and tax revenue to small towns everywhere.



Shirley Pierce

There will never be more horses on the trails than the other user groups. The economics of owning horses and the sacrifices involved will keep their numbers modest. But the horse-human partnership is a unique and beautiful way to access nature. It has firm roots in our past and deserves a place in our present and future.



Chelle Grald is the Trails Manager at the Green Mountain Horse Association in South Woodstock, Vermont, where she oversees a network of multi-use trails covering over 400 linear miles and manages several organized trail competitions each year. She is also the Vermont State Trails Advocate for the American Endurance Ride Conference, an AERC certified Trail Master and is active with the Vermont Horse Council and the Trails Committee in her home town of Weathersfield, Vermont. She enjoys and appreciates all forms of trail recreation and actively participates as an equestrian, trail runner, hiker, skier and ATV user.