



NATIONAL
PARK
SERVICE

River Management Society



PREPARE TO LAUNCH!

Guidelines for Assessing, Designing, and Building
Launch Sites for Carry-in Watercraft



A Short History of Water Trails

The History of the Water Trail Systems

What is a Water Trail?

by Dave Getchell

What do you mean, a water trail? There are 369 water definitions, from “water” to “water yam,” in my *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, and only one—“waterway”—bears any relation to “water trail.” So it’s a made-up description, just as are thousands of other words in today’s maritime lexicon.

Right up until recently, waterway was the proper word to describe a route over water. Native Americans, voyageurs and Lewis-and-Clark types, in general traveled by water because land trails were few or non-existent, but they didn’t call them water trails. Let’s see if we can trace the name to its modern meaning.

Since World War II, a number of recreational waterways have been developed, many

along ancient inland routes, such as Maine’s Allagash Wilderness Waterway and Minnesota’s Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, to name just two of

the best known. In 1987, the Maine Island Trail, a 325-mile-long waterway winding along the state’s island studded coast, was established. It differed from all others, however, in that a private membership organization—the Maine Island Trail Association (MITA)—was created to operate it for its parent organization, the nonprofit Island Institute. Although the State of Maine was closely involved in the creation of the Maine Island Trail, care for the state’s wild islands in the trail became the responsibility of the users and not a government authority.

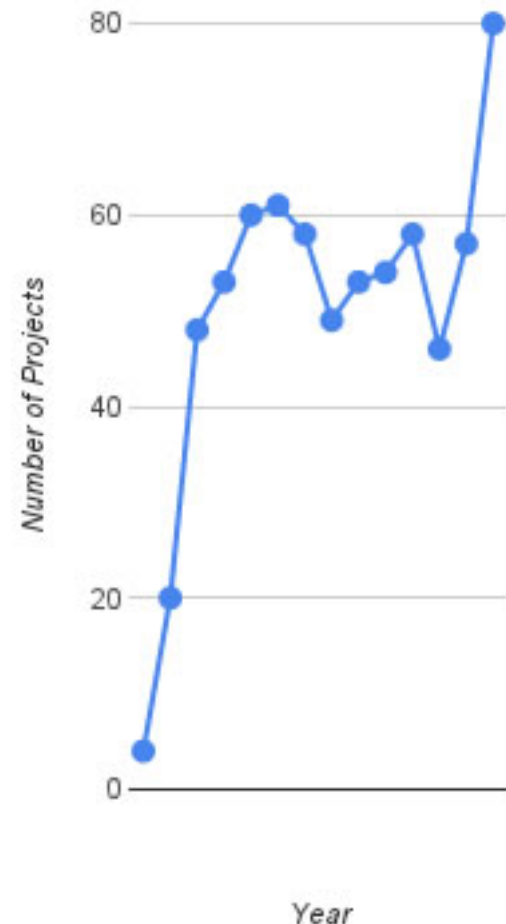


At the heart of the trail system were some two dozen state-owned wild islands for which MITA assumed care. Within a few months, three privately owned islands were added to the trail and were open only to members of the association, a powerful incentive for boaters to join MITA. The organization grew rapidly, and in the early ‘90s, spun off from the Island Institute to become an independent nonprofit. By 2005, it served 3,500 members and listed 156 sites on islands and the mainland.

MITA’s unusual approach emphasizing personal stewardship and responsible use of the resource prompted others to follow suit, and water trail organizations were soon established in Seattle (Washington Water Trails Association) and on New York’s Hudson River (Hudson River Watertrail Association). Notice that “water trail,” either as one or two words, was already in use. As near as this writer can determine, the word(s) seemed to cover the waterfront, so to speak, and had a natural, unremarkable and unknown birth.

What was important, one can see in hindsight, was the development of water trails specifically for (a) recreational use, that (b) emphasize stewardship and (c) are cared for by the users, the latter frequently members of a private organization set up for this task alone. Time, location and different circumstances saw this simple definition further broken down as water trails were created on salt water, lakes and rivers, and even over land/water routes such as the impressive 700-mile-long Northern Forest Canoe Trail. Some were started by private groups, others by state or regional government entities, but most by an amalgam of partnerships of

National RTCA Water Trail Projects



Why a Launch Guide?



Who Will Use *Prepare to Launch?*



To help facility and trail planners, and park and recreation project leaders when planning, building, or updating access sites that are tailored to the needs of the canoeists, kayakers, tubers, stand-up paddlers, rowers, or small craft sailors.

- **Understand Launch Locations**
- **Address Users' Launch Needs**
- **Understand Launch Design Criteria**
- **Promote Launch Projects**



How Was *Prepare to Launch* Developed?





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What is in *Prepare to Launch*?

Chapter 1. Characteristics of a Launch Site

- **Minimal Construction Designs**
- **Mat Launch Designs**
- **User Accessibility**
- **Site Location Appropriateness**
- **Cost Considerations**
- **Environmentally-Friendly**

Chapter 2. Three Steps to a Desired Launch

- **Step 1: Launch Location**
- **Step 2: User Assessment**
- **Step 3: Launch Development**

Chapter 3. Launch Design Types

- **Minimal Construction Designs**
- **Mat Launch Designs**
- **Ramp Launch Designs**
- **Stair Launch Designs**
- **Dock/Pier Designs**

1 | Characteristics of a LAUNCH SITE

User Accessibility

Site Location
Appropriateness

Cost
Considerations /
Trade-offs

Environmentally-
friendly

There are four primary questions to answer in determining a best-suited launch site: How will access be achieved? Which site location is most appropriate? What type of funding is available? Which environmental issues must be addressed?

User Accessibility: Broad + Practical



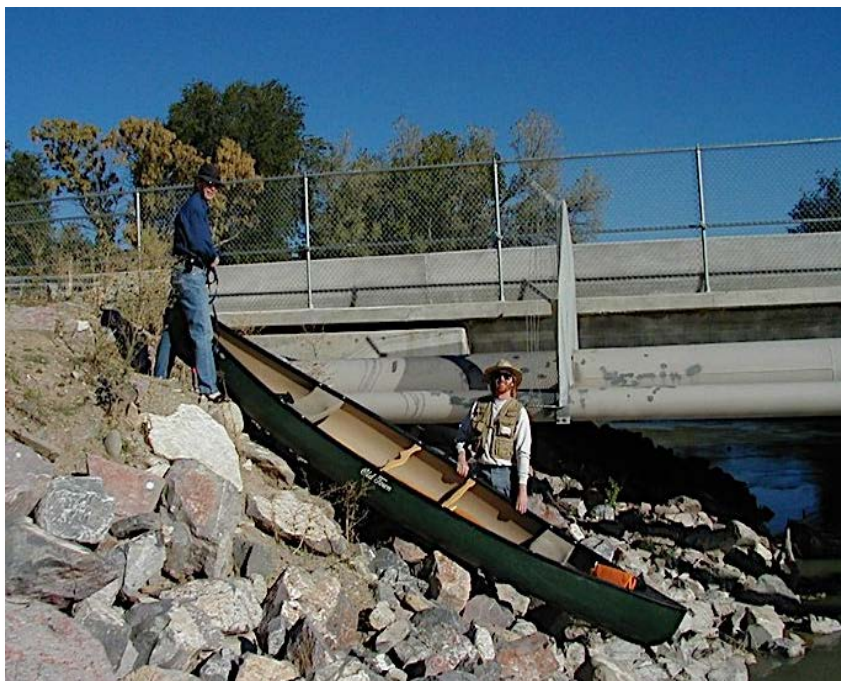
Accessible launch area in a dynamic river setting with high banks at the Charles City, Iowa waterfront.



Ideal launch environment



Site Location Appropriateness



Poor Design: Steep slope, rugged terrain



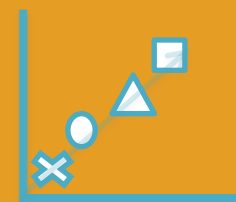
Good Design: Wide, sturdy staircase



Cost Considerations



Complexity
vs.
Cost



Natural Design - most cost-effective, when possible.

The more complex, the more expensive!



Environmentally-Friendly Launch Considerations



Existing Natural Site - Robinson Preserve, FL

Photo Credit: [Guidelines for Developing Non-motorized Boat Launches in Florida](#)



2

Three Steps to a **DESIRED LAUNCH**

STEP 1:
Launch Location

STEP 2:
User Assessment

STEP 3:
Launch Development
Considerations

To create an effective and sustainable launch, consider the following: launch location and the characteristics of the water body; the types of users accessing the launch and the craft they will use; and the permits and fundraising efforts needed to move the project forward.



Step 1: Launch Location Assessing Your Site Options

Launch Location: Bodies of Water

Design for Environmentally Sensitive Areas

Design for Fluctuating Water Levels





Step 2: User Assessment

Types of Users and Watercraft

Level of User Traffic

Accessibility Needs





Step 3: Launch Development Considerations

Permitting

Funding Resources

Professional Resources



3 | LAUNCH DESIGNS



Natural Surfaces

Geotextile Mats

Concrete Mats

Concrete Ramps

Wooden Stairs

Concrete Stairs

Docks / Piers

Cantilevers

Floating

Elevated Walkways

Portages

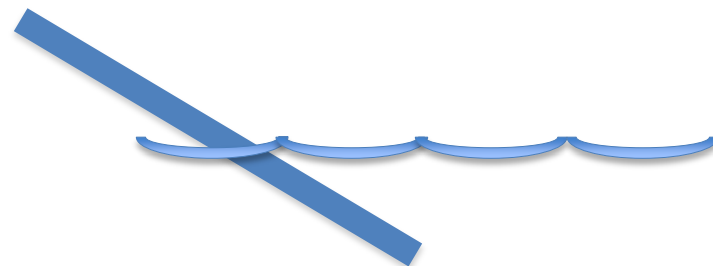
Many launch types are available to meet the needs of various environments. This section can help you choose the appropriate design and construction method for your site.



Launch Design Categories

Ramps

Perfect for gradually sloped banks. Various materials are used depending on the desired or necessary characteristics of your site.



Stairs

On sites where the banks are too steep to access by a ramp, stairs are an appropriate launch option.



Elevated

Elevated launches can be used to bypass environmentally sensitive areas or areas of unstable ground. They are an appropriate choice for bulk-head banks as well.



Natural Surfaces



The simplest and most cost-effective launches require little or no construction. Paddlers may use natural features (e.g., riverbanks, rock outcrops, banks adjacent to bridges) or existing shorelines with decks, [bulkheads](#) or boardwalks. Any of these can suffice as long as currents in the area are relatively modest, water depth allows for stable launching without damage to boats, and the bank or shore is close (vertically, above) to the surface of the water. Paddlers must also have enough space to place their boats in the water and easily step in or out of them.

Materials

Variations and Specifications

Advantages / Disadvantages

Photo Examples



Where to Find *Prepare to Launch*?

River Management Society



PREPARE TO LAUNCH!

Guidelines for Assessing, Designing, and Building Launch Sites for Carry-in Watercraft

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Gallery

Natural Surface Launch Designs



PTL! Navigation

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What Next?



Now that you are Prepared to Launch... Let's Go Paddling!

- Prepare to Launch! can be seen online, at www.river-management.org/library
- This is a joint publication between the River Management Society and the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program

