

Managing a Melting Easement: The Iditarod National Historic Trail

by Rick Elliott and Paul C. Costello, SR/WA

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Musher enters Rainy Pass on the way into Interior Alaska.



photo by Rick Elliott

GOLD RUSH TRAILS

The Iditarod National Historic Trail is one of many historic and scenic trails designated by the National Trails System Act, which became federal law on Oct. 2, 1968. The Act established trails to promote "public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open-air, outdoor areas of the Nation." Several national scenic trails, including the Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trail (the initial components of the System) were authorized and designated by this Act. The Act also provided for additional studies for the purpose of designating other trails as national scenic trails. The "Gold Rush Trails in Alaska" were specifically identified for additional study.

The National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978 amended the National Trails System Act to add historic trails to the system. Four national historic trails were added to the National Trails System by this Act. Included was the "Iditarod National Historic Trail, a route of approximately 2,000 miles extending from Seward to Nome, Alaska."

Today, the National Trails System consists of eight congressionally designated national scenic trails, which are continuous, protected, scenic corridors for outdoor recreation, and nine national historic trails, which recognize prominent past routes of exploration, migration and military action. The historic trails generally consist of remnant site and trail segments, and thus, are not necessarily continuous. Of the 17 national scenic and national historic trails so far established, 12 are administered by the National Park Service, four by the Forest Service and one by the Bureau of Land Management. The one trail administered by the BLM is the Iditarod National Historic Trail.

GLORIOUS DAYS

The trail—now called the Iditarod Trail—was first used by ancient Na-

tive hunters. Following them came the early 20th-century gold seekers. Now, the trail, as part of the National Trails System, is also used for recreational purposes, most notably for the running of the well-publicized Iditarod Sled Dog Race.

The Iditarod is a network of more than 2,400 miles of trails. The Trail takes its name from the 19th-century Athabaskan Indian Village on the Iditarod River near the site of 1908 gold discovery. By 1910, the gold rush town called Iditarod flourished and was the center of the Iditarod Mining District. Trails historically used for trade and commerce by Ingalik and Tanaina Indians were improved by and for the miners.

Seward was the southern terminus of the Trail. White settlers entering the Territory trekked through heavily forested lands, now part of the Chugach National Forest. The route eventually was surveyed by the railroad to connect Anchorage with Seward.

Gold seekers often bought provisions in Anchorage or the town of Knik as a prelude to sledding, hiking or snow-shoeing across Rainy Pass en route to the various mining districts following news of each new strike.

Other adventurers started their travels in Nome, the northern terminus of the trail. They may have worked the beaches panning for gold for a time before moving south. As the two-end portions of the trail developed, they met in the interior at the Iditarod Mining District.

The Iditarod Trail was officially surveyed by the U.S. Army's Alaska Road Commission (ARC) in 1910. It was used as a major mail route until 1924 when the airplane came into use. But, in 1925, dogs teams and drivers captured national attention with the relay of desperately needed diphtheria serum to Nome. Plans to send the serum by plane were thwarted by weather. So a relay of dogs teams was dispatched from Nenana down the Tanana and Yukon

River to the Iditarod Trail. Twenty mushers carried the serum the 674 miles in 127 hours. The mushers became heroes. President Coolidge sent each of the mushers medals, and Balto, the lead dog of the finishing team, was immortalized in statues across the country. The era of the sled dog as transportation came to an end in a blaze of glory.

The Iditarod Trail was basically forgotten for more than 40 years until the 1960s when interest in sled dog racing was kindled. In 1967, a race was staged between Knik and Big Lake on nine miles of the old Iditarod Trail. Another race was held in 1969. Then in 1973, the race was run between Anchorage and Nome. The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, now known as the "Last Great Race," is staged each March and includes competitors from around the world. Other sporting events that use the Trail include the Iditasport race for skiers, mountain bikers, and snowshoers and the Gold Rush Classic (formerly the Iron Dog) for snowmobilers.

MARKING ONE'S TRAIL

Before the invention of the airplane an extensive trail system had been developed between the communities in Alaska. The first trails were no doubt developed by Alaskan natives as they carried on trade and commerce between villages such as Kaltag on the Yukon River and Unalakleet on Norton Sound. Over time, prospectors and miners took advantage of these trails while establishing new trails in other areas. Some of these trails developed into wagon roads. Many of these wagon roads became today's all-weather roads. The U.S. Army, the Bureau of Public Roads and the Alaska Road Commission, among other entities, had the responsibility for surveying and marking most of the winter trails and wagon roads at one time or another. Often, the ARC contracted their winter trail maintenance to individuals.

After statehood, the State of Alaska assumed the responsibility to survey, mark and maintain trails. Over time, this effort dwindled as rural transportation construction, recognizing the growing importance of the airplane to the development of Alaska, concentrated on airports in the rural communities.

In some areas, the Alaska State Department of Transportation and Public Facilities still funds winter trail marking; however, state-funded trail marking is slowly coming to an end. Although trails, such as the Iditarod, receive a great deal of attention, in reality very little of the trail is permanently marked. This is typical of most of the winter trails in the state. Thus, local communities and organizers of competitive winter events, such as the Iditarod or the Yukon Quest, have taken on the responsibility to mark and maintain the winter trail system. To date, fewer than 100 miles of the Iditarod have been officially and permanently marked.

Today, public trails are marked by local people on an informal basis. However, one community in north-west Alaska is pursuing Inter Model Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) funds to inventory and maintain winter trails and construct emergency shelter cabins. Communities are becoming more active because winter trail use is increasing. Travel by snow machine is cheaper than airfare for villages that are close together. More younger people own snow machines and are traveling frequently. The machines can go faster, and their drivers are less experienced at winter travel and survival than their parents or grandparents. It is hard enough to see thin ice or overflow after a fresh snow when going slow. It is impossible, and often fatal, at 65 or 70 miles an hour. Thus, these young travelers are at greater risk in growing numbers, and their communities are responding to that need.

FROZEN BODIES

There is more to maintenance of a winter trail than meets the eye. The good news is that mosquitoes aren't a problem, since it is mainly winter work. In forested areas, the trails are "relatively" easy to mark and maintain. Maintenance consists of clearing the trail of brush and fallen trees and marking the route in some manner. The "relative ease" portion of that task disappears quickly when an area is devastated by a forest fire or heavy snows break trees and brush, all of which seem to end up on the trail. In open treeless areas such as alpine tundra or along Norton Sound, the job presents its own unique difficulty because there aren't many prominent reference points, and the wind often blows the trail clear of snow. In open areas, either tripods, limbed trees or surveyors lath are imported to mark the trail. On frozen water bodies, trees or other markers are often cut and placed in holes cut in the ice.

Most winter trails take advantage of frozen water bodies (lakes, streams, sloughs, coastal waters) as they provide smooth, relatively fast travel. Frozen water presents its own special problems. First, it may not be thick enough to support a traveler. Following a poorly marked trail on the frozen Yukon may result in a plunge through thin ice into 32-degree water, 50 feet deep, with a 10-knot current. Second, even if the ice is 10 feet thick, when the trail is not marked and the ice windblown, a traveler can still get lost on a mile-wide river. Often, when the trail is marked and well-used, a traveler may face "overflow." Overflow occurs when water is forced up through cracks in the ice and flows on the ice surface, either to find a way back or to freeze. What makes overflow especially dangerous is that it flows under the surface of the snow and is very hard to detect. One minute a musher is on a well-marked trail, and the next may be in two feet of overflow. At

any cold temperature, this becomes a life-threatening situation.

Regardless of where the trail is located, weather conditions one winter may leave users with no snow on the trail they used last winter. Therefore, a trail has to be relocated to an entirely different area that has snow and is usable. This new location may or may not be marked. Relocation presents two problems. First, if there is no entity responsible for marking the trail, the traveling public is exposed to greater risk and second, the new trail may be in trespass. Before the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), that would be no problem, but today a relocation may place a musher on property owned by another landowner whose land title may not reflect a reserved easement.

TRAIL OWNERSHIP

The Iditarod Trail crosses both public and private land. The largest underlying fee owner is the State of Alaska (44%). In a close second is the Federal Government (43%). The major federal landowners are the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service. Private landowners account for the remaining ownership (13%). Native corporations represent by far the largest group of private landownership. Of the primary Trail System, 283 miles of the Trail are on BLM-owned land, and 135 miles cross private land. BLM is responsible for managing the Trail not only on BLM land but also for the portion on private land. Some 513 miles of the Trail are on State land, while 144 miles are located on U.S. Fish and Wildlife administered land and 83 miles on U.S. Forest Service land.

TRAIL EASEMENTS

The 938-mile route, which was surveyed by the Alaska Road Commission in 1910-11, is considered the "primary route" of the Iditarod Trail.

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Branching from the primary route are hundreds of miles of land and water-based routes and trails. These trails were important during the entire Gold Rush Period in Alaska from the 1880s into the 1920s. Some of the trails are based on earlier Indian trails. In addition, other routes used yearly in the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race are also part of the Trail System. Collectively, the Iditarod National Historic Trail System covers approximately 2,450 miles.

Even though the Iditarod has been identified as a national historic trail, this does not mean that the Trail is automatically covered by a protective easement for its entire route. The historic trail designation applies only to federal land. So, the Trail is protected on federal land. But less than half of the land crossed by the Trail is in federal ownership. A major portion of the Trail is on land owned by the State of Alaska. The State is also committed to the preservation of the Trail and will reserve an easement on any land conveyed out of State ownership. Likewise, the Bureau of Land Management intends to reserve an easement for the Trail wherever possible when land is conveyed out of federal ownership.

However, in the case of *Degnan v. Hodel*, BLM was precluded from reserving an easement for the Iditarod Trail across three individuals' Native allotment claims. (These claims were filed under the Native Allotment Act of 1906.) The Federal District Court in Anchorage ruled that the allottees "had equitable title before enactment of the 1978 National Trails Act amendment." Since the allotments were administratively approved by BLM in 1975, the court ruled that the easement could not be reserved even though the final conveyance document had not been issued.

Under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), Native corporations received title to nearly 44 million acres of land. Before the land was transferred, existing and

proposed easements for access to other public lands were reserved as provided for in section 17(b) of ANCSA. If a segment of the Iditarod Trail crossed land to be conveyed to a Native corporation, an easement would be reserved to the United States in the conveyance document. 17(b) easements for the Iditarod Trail are normally 25 feet in width and are limited to travel by foot, dog sled, animals, snowmobiles and small all-terrain vehicles.

Most trail easements reserved in corporate land title are described by broad written descriptions supplemented by a line drawn on a USGS 1"= 1 mile quad map. The line may or may not represent the actual location of the trail for all the reasons mentioned earlier, including the fact that many of the USGS Quads are 20 to 30 years. This uncertainty of location will plague landowners and users for many years to come.

In the village of Knik, a portion of the Iditarod Trail—which was not protected under section 17(b) of ANCSA—was identified for public use under section 14(c)(3) of ANCSA. (This provision of ANCSA gave municipal corporations in Native villages the right to obtain certain land from the Native village corporations for public use.) The Matanuska-Susitna Borough decided that the reservation of an easement for the Iditarod Trail was one of the most important public uses for that area and negotiated with the Native corporation landowner to reserve an easement for a realigned portion of the Trail.

Some segments of the Iditarod Trail are on rivers. If the river is "navigable," the water body and bed is owned by the State of Alaska pursuant to the Submerged Land Act of 1953. Because most major rivers are navigable, public access is assured for winter use.

Portions of the route are on already existing rights of way. About 300 miles of primary and connecting

trails are covered with railroad or State highway rights of way. There are nearly 50 miles of developed recreation trails. Segments of the trail correspond to the Seward Highway, the Nome to Solomon Highway and the Alaska Railroad between Seward and Anchorage.

As contemplated in the Comprehensive Management Plan, BLM has entered into cooperative management agreements with the State, all federal landowners and several municipal corporations. BLM is also responsible for the management of trail easements on lands conveyed to native corporations and other private landowners. On lands held in other private ownership, where no public right of way or easement exists, BLM may enter into cooperative agreements to protect the Trail and public access. Other public land managers are also encouraged to acquire interest or enter into cooperative agreements with private landowners to assure continued public travel on Iditarod trail segments. To date, there have not been any formal cooperative agreements reached with private landowners.

If private landowners reject public use of the historic route, BLM encourages agencies to consider the identification of alternate routes to provide access between Trail segments. However, the National Trails System Act, as amended, stipulated that no federal funds could be expended for the acquisition or interests in lands for the Iditarod Trail.

COOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT

As a national trail, the Iditarod is managed under the terms of a comprehensive management plan prepared by the BLM—a federal agency that has been appointed as coordinator for the Iditarod Trail System. The Comprehensive Management Plan calls for *the Iditarod Trail to be improved and maintained by the U.S. Alaska Road Commission to provide a safe and sure way for early travelers to cross the wilds*

of Alaska, but it was the people who lived in the communities and traveled along the length of the trail who "managed" the route—often resetting tripods, repairing and clearing roadways for wagon, sled and foot travel, constructing roadhouses, and occasionally, better routes.

In the Comprehensive Plan, BLM reasons that "a cooperative management system similar to the one used during those early days seems most appropriate."

The Plan recognizes that "while Federal and State governments may take the lead in future possible re-establishment and reconstruction of certain important segments of the historic route, it is the trail users who can best maintain the historic Iditarod as a viable transportation link as well as a recreation and cultural resource in Alaska."

The management philosophy espoused in the Management Plan calls for a partnership between federal, state, local and private landowners, as well as concerned user groups and individuals who will work toward the common goal of management and protection of the historically significant Trail.

A NATIONAL TREASURE

The Iditarod National Historic Trail is unlike any historic trail in the United States. In comparison to the other national historic trails, the Iditarod is relatively new. Mike Zaidlicz of BLM related that "you can still talk to people who can give you a first-hand account of the history." Development and use of the Trail is also in the infancy stage. The undeveloped portions of the Iditarod Trail will likely remain a predominantly winter-use trail. Much of the route is not passable on foot by the casual user in the summer months. In many places the trail is not easily identifiable. There are problems to be resolved involving both the acquisition and management of easements. And, of course, there is a shortage of resources available to effectively deal

with these problems. The existence of the Iditarod as a national historic trail is not a widely known fact. While many people are familiar with the highly publicized Iditarod Dog Sled Race, most are not familiar with the history and nature of the Trail. Yes, the obstacles to development, management and use of the Trail are many, but the interest and excitement among trail advocates is impressive. Winter travel is still important in the lives of many Alaskans and will remain that way for the foreseeable future. The management issues facing the Iditarod represent a microcosm of those faced by every other winter trail in Alaska. The Iditarod National Historic Trail offers many opportunities for future public use and enjoyment of a truly unique and exciting national treasure.

SOURCES

1. *BLM Alaska Brochure, The Iditarod National Historic Trail*, September 1988, BLM-AK-GI-88-006-8351-912.
2. *The Iditarod National Historic Trail, Seward to Nome Route: A Comprehensive Management Plan*, March 1986, prepared by Bureau of Land Management, Anchorage District Office, Anchorage, Alaska.
3. *Department of Interior brochure, National Trails System Map and Guide*, GPO 1993.

Interested in reading more about winter travel? The authors suggest Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled, by The Reverend Hudson Stuck, The Last Great Race, by Tim Jones, and Fifty Years of Highways Alaska Dpt. of Public Works, Division of Highways, Nome, 1966.



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