

## Submitted Abstract

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## Abstract

Marked trails, whether in the mountains or in the lowlands support recreational sports like hiking, running, mountaineering, climbing and serve many other users. Trails connect people across countries in the same way as streets or railways and therefore serve an important function for European cohesion. Basically, walking, hiking, and mountain trails are footpaths in the public interest for the purpose of walking, running, or climbing, located in all landscapes, visible and clearly recognised in the terrain and are physically marked and signposted.

Proper management is required to keep trails in appropriate condition which is done by national hiking and mountaineering associations which are represented by the European Union of Mountaineering Associations (EUMA) and the European Ramblers Association (ERA).

Trails have a very important function for visitor guidance in each European country. They guide people with the help of markings and signposts through difficult terrain, complex landscapes, or environmentally sensitive areas. The latter is highly important since it helps people to stick to a certain route without damaging the nature. This function has become very important, especially since the demand for relaxation and exercise in nature has increased and amplified the pressure on nature in the last couple of years.

The existence of trails is at stake due to missing legal status in many European countries. Trails lose their attractiveness due to sealing or merging in urban structures. Furthermore, ownership conflicts and the lack of funds are generally leading to the closure of trails while the impact of climate change increases the maintenance effort. A fundamental problem is the lack of understanding they facilitate the wellbeing of a society. They are generally taken for granted without knowing about the efforts standing behind.

There are more than 1,5 million km of trails across Europe which are mostly voluntarily maintained by national associations. There is no European-wide trail register which could ensure a sustainable European-wide trail management system to preserve nature and allow individuals' a responsible outdoor experience under the free right to roam.

The study which was conducted in 30 European countries where data was retrieved from 37 leading hiking and mountaineering associations revealed results on existing national trail management systems. These comprise details about structure, costs, composition, legal status, and major obstacles for trails. From these rich data, recommendations for sustainable trail management were derived to develop a more nature sensitive approach to trails management.