

Build a Blue Trail



SHUTTERSTOCK

BUILD FOR CONSERVATION

To have a successful blue trail you need to have a healthy water body. That is why, during your planning of your blue trail, you identified short and long term goals for making your water body healthier. It is important to work with your community early in the process to identify priority conservation goals. By doing so, there will be a greater sense of shared ownership and commitment to achieving these goals.

Be mindful of how you present this concept and use the words and reasoning you think are best for your community. In some communities, conservation can wrongly imply a host of private property restrictions.

Each water body and community faces unique threats. This section is meant to get you thinking about potential short and long term conservation goals and provide the tools to get you started working toward those goals.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather a starting point that provides basic information and resources for protecting and restoring your water body through your blue trail.

It is not too late to set conservation goals for an existing blue trail. Protection and restoration goals should be made for existing blue trails as well. This section provides tools for taking an existing blue trail and using it to protect and restore your water body and improve quality of life in your community.

There are many experts across the country that can help you with your specific issues and conservation goals. [American Rivers](#) can provide advice on many of these issues and put you in touch with other experts across the country as well.

Short term goals for protecting and restoring your blue trail

It is important to identify goals that you will achieve in the near future. These short term goals help to build awareness of and engagement in your blue trail and ultimately motivate people to work on the more meaningful and challenging long term conservation goals.

Clean up trash: Millions of tons of trash end up in our nation's waterways every year. Organizing and volunteering at a cleanup is a great way for your community to get involved in efforts to restore your hometown water body and provides an opportunity to connect with people who share your commitment to improving your community's environment. American Rivers is the sponsor of [National River Cleanup](#), the most popular stream cleanup program in the country.

To help guide you through the organizing progress, American Rivers created the [River Cleanup Organizer's Handbook](#). This handbook includes information on planning your cleanup (site selection, volunteer recruitment, turning your cleanup into a news story, and engaging civic leaders) to executing your cleanup (site preparation, safety, and handling and disposing of trash). For more information on organizing trash cleanups, contact [American Rivers](#).

Improve signage: Signs inform users about the blue trail and create a safer and more environmentally sensitive experience. They can raise awareness and support for your blue trail and attract more users by providing exposure to the resource. Signs can give warning to hazards and communicate site specific information about properly dealing with trash and human waste. They can also describe the natural, cultural, and historical uniqueness of

the area, which may inspire users to work to protect and restore the resource. To learn more about signage see [Promote a Blue Trail: Create Signs](#).

Improve vegetation management: Native vegetation filters runoff, controls flooding, reduces erosion, provides shelter and food for wildlife, and lowers water temperature creating more favorable conditions for native fish. Non-native plants generally create monocultures with no ecological diversity and provide little or no habitat compared to natives. Along the water body's edge and in the floodplain, native vegetation can be reestablished through a number of methods. Replanting native landscapes requires a complex process of analysis, planning, design, installation, monitoring, and maintenance. It should be undertaken by an experienced team that includes aquatic and plant ecologists, civil engineers, and landscape architects. Weed removal and control is equally important. Weeds may be removed by hand pulling (a good volunteer project), cutting, or selective use of herbicide. For more information on vegetation management in your area, contact your [conservation district](#).

Long term goals for protecting and restoring your blue trail

Long term goals often are our most meaningful and important goals. These long terms goals may be protecting against poorly planned development and pollution, protecting and improve water quality, reducing flooding, protecting and enhance wildlife, just to name a few. But by definition the achievement of these goals is usually far in the future. That is why it is helpful to plan for these goals early on in your planning and celebrate your smaller victories and improvements along the way. Below are some tools that may help you reach your long term goals.



Protect land through conservation easements:

Conservation easements are a useful tool to preserve private land by limiting land uses. They are used to prevent development or to preserve scenic, natural, or other values land may hold. Once in place, an easement runs with the deed, and, therefore, future landowners must abide by the terms of the agreement.

Landowners either donate or sell a conservation easement to a recipient that holds the easement and is responsible for monitoring the terms of the easement for compliance. When easements are sold, the price is often the difference between the value of the land if used for development and its value under current use.

When easements are donated, a federal income tax deduction can be taken. Typical easement holders are land trusts managed by non-profit organizations or governments. For more information on conservation easements contact the [Land Trust Alliance](#) or the [Trust for Public Land](#).

Improve zoning and buffer requirements: Buffers serve as natural boundaries between streams, wetlands, lakes, and floodplains, and existing development. Buffers are important for good

water quality. Buffers can reduce water treatment costs by preventing pollutants from entering drinking water sources, reducing erosion caused by uncontrolled runoff, and stabilizing riverbanks with vegetation. They provide shade that lowers water temperature and protects fish habitat. Buffers are visually appealing and can serve as excellent greenways, parks, and recreation areas. State laws and local planning ordinances can preserve buffers through development regulations. For more information on improving zoning and buffer requirements contact [American Rivers](#), the [Center for Watershed Protection](#), and the [Trust for Public Land](#).

Improve watershed planning: Watershed planning is a strategy for achieving water resource goals that provides assessment and management information for a geographically defined watershed. The premise of watershed planning is that impervious cover rather than population density is the best measure of growth impact and future stream quality. Watershed planning begins with an evaluation of current and ideal conditions for each body of water in the watershed, as well as comprehensive mapping of land-use practices. Planners then determine land uses that promote healthier rivers, streams, wetlands, and lakes. Public officials, residents, and other stakeholders create a watershed plan and land use ordinances that designate the locations, levels, and types for new development or redevelopment that will protect or enhance the watershed.

The U.S. EPA's [Handbook for Developing Watershed Plans to Restore and Protect Our Waters](#) is designed to help communities, organizations, and local, state, tribal and federal agencies develop and implement watershed plans to meet water quality standards and protect water resources.

Reduce impervious surfaces: Roads, parking lots, sidewalks, driveways, paved paths, and rooftops are impervious surfaces that prevent rainwater from filtering through soil and replenishing rivers and streams as groundwater. The impervious surfaces degrade urban rivers because they do not absorb stormwater and significantly increase the volume, velocity, and temperature of rainwater runoff. They contribute to pollution when stormwater washes surface oils, fertilizers, heavy metals, bacteria, and other contaminants into rivers.

Installing permeable and semi-permeable surfaces can help restore natural watershed functions, filter pollutants, and prevent erosion of banks and channelization of streambeds. More natural landscapes in new development can save money for local governments, developers, and homeowners and allow varying degrees of water infiltration.

For more information on ways to reduce impervious surfaces in your community, contact [American Rivers](#).

Enforce existing water quality standards:

Citizens using the support garnered from a blue trail to enforce existing water quality standards should be aware of several important tools available under the Clean Water Act. One of these tools is the “impaired waters list,” which requires each state to develop of list of polluted water bodies and set priorities for their cleanup. Water bodies that qualify for the list are too polluted or otherwise degraded that they no longer support their designated and existing uses. States must submit their impaired waters list, or [303\(d\) list](#), to Congress every two years.

Contact your state water quality agency or [regional EPA office](#) to find out if your water body is on the most recent impaired waters list.

If your water body is not on the list, do not assume it is healthy. It is possible that it was not monitored enough to detect problems or your state’s standards were too low to trigger a listing. Since a listing can lead to restrictions on new discharges, changes to existing permits, and improved management practices to reduce non-point source pollution, the effort to make sure that impaired waters lists are complete is worthwhile. Play an active role in ensuring that impaired waters lists are complete by making sure their standards are strong, the health of your waters are regularly monitored, and all reliable water quality data are considered by the state whenever the impaired waters list is updated.

Once a water body is placed on the impaired waters list, it becomes one of many in line for the [Total Maximum Daily Load \(TMDL\)](#) process. This process identifies pollution sources, determines pollution reduction needs, and assigns responsibilities for needed action. After a TMDL is developed, implementation must begin. Critical first steps include reducing permitted discharges and securing better control of other sources of pollution through whatever means available. These usually include a combination of education and voluntary measures, financial assistance, cost sharing programs, and regulations.

If a water body has problems, it will likely receive more attention and resources in the years ahead if it is placed on the impaired waters list. Consequently, it is critical that you provide information to your state to help identify newly impaired or threatened waters every two years. By providing valuable information to the agency responsible for listing, you can help improve the quality of the list. Information that is collected about the health of a water body may be useful to the state in determining whether designated and existing uses are being met.



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Read about how groups in San Diego enforced water quality standards and forced the clean-up of sewage.

For more information on the enforcing existing water quality, contact [River Network](#).

Improve water quality standards: The Clean Water Act requires each state to hold public hearings on the adequacy of its water quality standards at least once every three years. During this Triennial Review the entire state water quality standards system is up for analysis, debate, and revision. This is the public's best chance to comment on individual pieces of the system, including the state's designated uses and classifications; criteria associated with its classifications, classifications of specific water bodies and any site-specific criteria, anti-degradation policy and implementation system, and other general policies. Take this opportunity to comment on the adequacy of the standards and make specific suggestions for improvements.

States can, and sometimes do, weaken standards. Changes that seem innocuous to the casual observer can have a huge impact – for better or worse. Some members of the

regulated community put consistent pressure on state agencies to weaken standards. Consistent support for strong standards from an informed, involved public makes it easier for agencies to resist this pressure.

States can initiate changes by consulting with the EPA, notifying the public, and providing ample opportunity for public review and comment. The public review and comment process must include at least one public hearing. The public can also initiate standards changes. The rules for initiating changes vary from state to state and they should be available from your state agency or [regional EPA office](#).

One common state procedure for public initiated changes is a “petition for rulemaking.” Many states allow interested parties to petition state agencies to amend environmental rules. Don't be intimidated by the term “rulemaking petition.” They are simply formal requests for a state agency to amend its rules in a particular way. Corporations, associations, and public interest groups, and individuals can submit a rulemaking petition.

You should be able to ask for changes in any part of your state's water quality standards. You might request changes in classification of a particular water body, improvements in the criteria applying to one or more classifications, strengthening of the anti-degradation policy, or clarification of the anti-degradation implementation procedures.

If your state does not have a citizen petition procedure, it should have another method that provides for proactive public involvement. Your state environmental agency, [state attorney general's office](#), or [regional EPA office](#) can tell you how to find the rules and get started.

If you are not satisfied with your state's public involvement procedures, consider establishing better ones a key objective for the next Triennial Review. Or, take your concerns to the [EPA](#), your state environmental commission, governor, [attorney general](#), or legislature.

Learn how a community protected Atlanta's drinking water through anti-degradation requirements under the Clean Water Act.

For more information on improving water quality standards, contact [River Network](#).

Enhance flood control naturally: For decades, our nation has relied on structural flood prevention strategies such as dams, levees, and concrete-lined riverbeds that create a false sense of security for people in the floodplain, increase flood heights, and damage a river's natural ability to minimize flooding. Factor in climate change and the stage is set for repeated disasters of increasing magnitude. Our best hope to protect our communities against flooding lie in working with nature, not against it. Natural flood protection can be attained by protecting and restoring wetlands and floodplains and a river's natural flow and meandering channel. Giving some floodplain back to a river will give the river more room to spread out safely during periods of high water.

Wetlands act as natural sponges, storing and slowing the release of floodwaters after peak flows have passed. A single acre of wetlands, saturated to a depth of one foot, will retain 330,000 gallon of water – enough to flood thirteen average-sized homes thigh-deep. Coastal wetlands reduce storm surge and slow its velocity, minimizing damage to homes and businesses. Maintaining and restoring healthy rivers, wetlands, and floodplains provide a host of benefits in addition to reducing flood damages. They provide clean water, control erosion, sustain commercial fisheries, support

recreation, and provide vitally important habitat.

Read more about natural flood protection and the Napa River flood project.

For more information on enhancing natural flood protection, contact [American Rivers](#).

Remove a dam that no longer makes sense: Dams block fish migration, disrupt water flow, change water temperatures, and generally wreak havoc on the food chain in rivers. They limit public access to rivers and harm the natural and aesthetic quality of their setting. Efforts to remove unneeded, unsafe, or obsolete dams have been gaining momentum. Many communities have low-head dams that no longer serve a purpose, but block fish migration and cause hazards for boating and other recreation. In recent years, more than 465 dams have been removed across the country. Removing dams where the benefits of removal outweigh the benefits of repair or replacement is the most effective way to restore rivers, save taxpayer money, revitalize riverside communities, and improve public safety.

For more information on removing a dam that no longer makes sense contact [American Rivers](#).

Seek protective designations: Blue trails can lead to protective designations for rivers. One such designation comes under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. A Wild and Scenic River designation is one of the strongest tools available to protect outstanding, free-flowing rivers. Using this tool, you can permanently protect your river from federally licensed dams, federal water resources projects that would adversely impact your river's outstandingly remarkable values, and ensure water quality is maintained, a cooperative river management



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plan is created, and funding to manage the river is authorized. A Wild and Scenic Rivers designation does not grant federal authority over private land use or local.

Read how a New Jersey community protected their recreationally important river through a Wild and Scenic designation.

Outstanding Resource Water is a designation that provides the maximum level of protection under the Clean Water Act. It ensures our highest quality rivers and streams stay that way by prohibiting any activity that would degrade water quality. The designation does not stop development but helps shape and pace development to protect waters from pollution and runoff. It can increase property value by protecting clean, healthy rivers that attract homeowners. It can also help spur job growth in the tourism industry because healthy water and healthy economies go hand-in-hand.

For more information on Wild and Scenic River and Outstanding Resource Water designations, contact [American Rivers](#).

Restore wildlife habitat: Wildlife habitat restoration projects provide a host of benefits to your blue trail and community as they restore the functional aspects of an ecosystem to a semblance of its pre-disturbed state. The reasons for the disturbances vary greatly but are typically caused by humans. Habitat restoration does not simply refer to wild areas or places visited only by biologists or hikers. Important restoration projects can happen right in our backyards. These restoration projects might include installing bird boxes in backyards and parks, improving local fisheries, controlled burning in a needed area, or cooperating with agencies around the reintroduction of native species like river otters.

Habitat restoration also provides a strong force for social change, particularly in areas with lower socio-economic standing, which have historically been the hardest hit in terms of environmental problems. Restoration offers a way for people to take back control of their communities and affect a positive change.

For more information on restoring wildlife habitat, contact [American Rivers](#).

Information in this section comes from [American Rivers](#) and [American Planning Association's Ecological Riverfront Design: Restoring Rivers, Connecting Communities](#) and [River Network's The Clean Water Act: An Owner's Manual](#)