

PROPOSED NATURE TRAIL CHANGES

For several years the problem of self-guiding Nature Trails in our parks has produced nothing in the way of a satisfactory solution. It is generally recognized by every Park Naturalist that our present system of metal trailside labels is lacking in appeal, and is entirely inadequate to perform the task we wish it to do. Thus, it was with the idea of stimulating new thought on the subject that studies on the effectiveness of our present Nature Trail program ~~were~~ inaugurated in Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks during the past summer.

These studies were carried on in conjunction with regular guided trips along the Narrows Trail in Zion---a self-guiding Nature Trail. En route up the trail a special effort was made to learn which details were essential to clearly portray the canyon story to the visitor. The return trip was spent attempting to analyze the visitor reaction to the small metal trailside labels located at various points of interest. Ofttimes several visitors---not members of the guided trip---would be asked to tell me what information he or she gleaned from reading a designated label. The results of these studies were extremely enlightening but somewhat disappointing. It was immediately apparent that, in the main, the labels served only a minor purpose. As long as someone was present to explain the thought back of the label, the visitor was very much interested. However, as a normal thing, the visitor lacked sufficient background to fill in the untold details so essential in obtaining a complete understanding of the label and its story. To the person who composed the text, the meaning of the label was childishly clear, but to the untrained visitor it was only vaguely understandable. A simple label giving the common name of a plant was easily grasped, but the significance of the plant's presence or the part it played in the geological and biological stories was usually missed completely. With rarely an exception, this inability to get the main story behind the label was due to the limited amount of detailed information that could be placed on each sign.

In summarizing the weaknesses of the present label system a few points stand out above the other defects. These include such things as:

1. Because the sign must necessarily be small and the letters on it large enough to be easily read, our present label is seldom able to do justice to the subject being brought to the visitor's attention.
2. The text of the metal label is seldom attractive. Lines never end where they should, and individual words have a habit of being off "center" on the line itself. Titles and sub-titles that are centered with the explanatory text are the exceptions rather than the rule.

3. The text of our present labels tend to be entirely too technical. Even the simplest language is still tough enough for the average park visitor when discussing rock formations, plants and other natural features.
4. The present labels are very difficult to maintain. Each spring it is necessary to repaint a number of these metal labels, buff off the letters and make them as presentable as possible for the coming travel season. Try as one may, the second and third paint jobs never look as good as the first.
5. The labels now in use are small, easy to move, carry away, or bend. Each week along a Nature Trail equipped with such signs, one constantly finds labels moved to new locations by helpful visitors or playful pranksters. Here at Zion I have even found one such sign posted conspicuously along the roadside as far as seven miles from the park. Such labels invariably serve as foot rests or rock targets, and are often found either badly bent or driven into the ground. Initials were often found scratched through the paint. Obviously there was little in the appearance of the sign to promote a feeling of respect for it. By comparison, the Mather Plaque, found along the same trail, is unmarred and attempted abuse or defacement of it has not been noted.

It is my belief that the Nature Trail is a very important part of the educational program of the park and thus merits the same serious consideration that is given to the planning of a museum display or the preparation of a campfire talk. In all three cases it is clearly a problem involving the best method of presentation. With this basic fact as a guide, the following modifications of our Nature Trail system is proposed for consideration:

1. Determine the story each trail is best equipped to tell.
2. At the beginning of the Nature Trail construct a Trailside Exhibit, in which would be told the important story or stories of this particular area. Throughout this exhibit there should be carefully implanted the thought that important details of this story will be demonstrated along the trail itself. The Trailside Exhibit building at the Temple of Sinawava in Zion is an example, although somewhat larger than necessary, of this type of structure.
3. Carefully select sites along this trail where important phases of this story can best be told.
4. These sites should be restricted to the least number possible and still include the essential portions of the story to be told.
5. Construct at each site chosen a miniature trailside exhibit. This should be made of native stone or other suitable native

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materials. The overall height of such a structure should not exceed 50 inches and its other dimensions should be only wide enough and thick enough to insure stability of the structure and present a pleasing appearance. Insofar as possible a relatively uniform size should be adhered to in all parks so that visitors will know the significance of such an exhibit whenever encountered. In the top of this structure, set in an inclined position and countersunk into the rock face, would be found a panel approximately 4" x 20" in which would be placed hand lettered labels and any simple charts needed to explain the parts of the story as seen from that particular site. Over this panel of label material would be a heavy shatter-proof glass cover, to fit flush with the surface of the surrounding rock structure. The entire panel would necessarily have to be made waterproof, with moisture drains and air vents where needed, and with a "sunshade" of rock or other suitable material to protect it.

With structures of this type the two greatest objections to our present system are removed. The small panel exhibit gives sufficient space to present neatly and clearly the essential details of the story being told at that point. The small "exhibit in place" can be made attractive in appearance. In addition, it should be easy to maintain. The addition of a Trailside Exhibit shelter at the beginning of each trail will allow for carefully directed thought, and the visitor's attention can be pre-focused upon the story ahead before he starts out along the trail.

It is my belief that seldom, if ever, should a trail require more than four small panel exhibit structures to supplement the Trailside Exhibit building. For example, it is believed that the one mile long Narrows Trail in Zion would require only four such structures to assist its present Trailside Exhibit building in telling the important story found along this trail---and additional study may show that three will be sufficient. Certainly one objection to the present system---the great numbers of metal trailside labels----would be and should be completely eliminated. Such an exhibit system would also eliminate the present lack of organization in the presentation of the details of the story being told. Designed to take the place of a guide, the present system is a failure and should be replaced by methods of a more effective nature. Not until then will this part of our program be interpretive instead of a program devoted only to staking out inadequate metal name bearing labels. In that light it is hoped that this proposal, whether acceptable or not, will stimulate new thought on the subject

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