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Wissahickon Trails director: Staying safe means sometimes skipping your hike | Opinion

by [Gail Farmer, For The Inquirer](#), Updated: April 6, 2020- 1:42 PM



People everywhere are looking for new ways to stay connected, as work from home and virtual calls become the new normal.

Hiking trails are nature's way of fostering connections between land, water and people. And, recently, they have become an outlet for many to escape – even if for just an hour – from that new normal. Trails can be the gateway people need during these unprecedented times, but as more and more people explore the trails, one can't help but wonder whether trails are the answer or if they are becoming a part of the problem?

Dramatic increases in trail use are being recorded across the United States. The Rails to Trails Conservancy conducted [an analysis of 31 trail counters for the week of March 16–22](#) and observed a nationwide trail usage increase of nearly 200% from that same week in 2019.

Locally, my staff and I have observed similar increases in trail use at our 12 nature preserves and 24 miles of trails in Greater Philadelphia. On a sunny weekend in March, the

trails were jam-packed. At one trailhead, a full parking lot caused cars to line up on the street. Crowded trails make it difficult to maintain physical distance, making trail use an unsafe activity.

In the last week, parks and trail managers in [Chicago](#), [Los Angeles](#), and [many National Parks closed](#) trails due to overcrowding. These closures put additional pressure on nearby trails that remain open, increasing the risk of overcrowding. I fear there will be more closures in the weeks to come if we don't make more of an effort to reduce crowding.

How do we prevent trail closures?

In the short-term, we must prevent crowding, which is quite simple really. The trick is that all trail users have to do their part. For starters, try visiting the trail alone or in pairs and wear a face mask. Similarly, if you arrive at a trailhead to find that the parking lot is full, take that as a sign that the trails are also full and either head home or try a different trail. The most important thing we can do is to make sure we can consistently maintain six feet between ourselves and other trails users. If you can't, then please leave the trail.

Another thing people can do is visit during less desirable times. Our infrared trail counters indicate that for these last two weeks of March, average daily visitation on weekends was more than double that on weekdays and peak visitation hours during the week are between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. Avoid visiting the trails during these peak days and times.

It's a bummer to have to leave a trail due to crowding, especially because the trails are a lifeline for so many people right now. The ideal solution to this problem is more trails. That's easier said than done, but with resident support, we can make it happen.



First, if you love your trails, let people know. Get to know your elected officials and tell them that you support funding for more or improved trails. Attend municipal meetings to

vocalize your support of the trail project. Municipal decision making is greatly influenced by the voices in the room during these meetings.

Second, your financial support is not only helpful, but necessary. Most trails are free for public use, but maintenance has a price tag. At Wissahickon Trails, our most basic trail maintenance costs about \$1,000/mile of trail per year. With 24 miles of trail under our care, we need to raise \$24,000 annually to maintain what we have – under normal conditions. With the radical increase in trail use during COVID-19, I expect that basic maintenance is going to skyrocket.

By taking these simple actions today, we can ensure that trail use remains a safe activity with little threat of spreading the novel coronavirus. By supporting and partnering with your local trails organization, we can invest in a trail system that will better meet the needs of our communities today, tomorrow, and into the future.

See you on the trails – from a distance, of course.

Gail Farmer is Executive Director of Wissahickon Trails.