

WHERE DO YOU RIDE?

Part V

The purpose of this series of articles is to acquaint our riders with background information on agencies where equestrian trails can be found and how their missions differ from one another.

MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

In the previous installments of this series, national land management agencies were addressed. The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) is the first of our state managed lands to be featured. The MDC was formed in 1937 and funded mostly from hunting, trapping, and fishing licenses sales. In 1976, through its “Design for Conservation” legislation was passed to grant a 1/8 of 1% sales tax to help fund the agency. The Governor appoints four individuals to the Conservation Commission that is to oversee the recommendations from the agency as to its mission, regulations, and over-all administration. MDC is unique in this constitutionally protected source of funding and the envy of many other states. Along with this comes a strong responsibility to all Missouri citizens who provide this protected tax source.

The MDC MISSION STATEMENT: *“To protect and manage the forest, fish, and wildlife resources of the state and to facilitate and provide opportunities for all citizens to use, enjoy and learn about these resources.”*

So, what does this have to do with equestrian trails? Let’s take a closer look at the mission statement. The strong emphasis is on protection of forest, fish, and wildlife. Secondary is the *“to facilitate and provide opportunities for all citizens to use, enjoy and learn about these resources.”* So looks like we as horseback riders are going to be facilitated and provided opportunities to use and enjoy! Whoa, now. Not so fast. Yes, it does say that and it says it applies to ALL citizens, but...(don’t you hate to see “BUT” in a sentence) not all citizens like or are knowledgeable about horses like we are. We are a small minority group of citizen trail users clammering to be heard among all other trail user demands to use public lands. There is a growing demand for trails from all groups and a limited source of land.

Currently the MDC manages has 41 conservation areas with equestrian trails. There are conservation areas that do not have equestrian trails with the acreage to support the longer distance trails needed for horseback riding. What we don’t know is if these areas can ecologically support horse use.

Now, let’s take a look at the MDC VISION STATEMENT: *“The Department shall be a forward looking agency ... implementing solid core values ensuring integrity and trust...using adaptive learning and creative thinking ... embracing technology and providing superior public service—to be the national leader in forest, fish, and wildlife management proactively advancing our mission through understanding natural resource and social landscapes”*

As an organization of trail riders we certainly are for integrity and trust, creative thinking, superior public service, and are certainly a part of the social landscape. However, with the privilege of having public lands comes the responsibility of the public. If we want good horse trails, we need to help protect and keep them that way. If we want more horse trails, it is our responsibility to know our local land manager and start a conversation about the particular area. Just as with the national land managers, the MDC has to deal with environmental laws and legal issues. Trail impact is high when dealing with fragile or ecologically sensitive areas. However, if we as an organization live up to our mission to protect

access to horse use through service, education, and advocacy and the MDC follows their mission and vision, there is an avenue for growth and continuing the positive working relationship that was been nurtured and developed.

Every conservation area with equestrians trails needs a champion! They need an equestrian group to step up and take responsibility for the trails to keep them cleared and clipped to standard. New chapters need to be formed for this very purpose. Hopefully some of our members-at-large will concentrate on forming a chapter to fulfill this need.