



# Trail Maintenance and Management

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## State Proposes Closing Historic but Underused Jenny Wiley Trail

*A little-used trail in eastern Kentucky shows the need for supporters to be involved for the long haul in caring for recreation routes.*

By **Scott Learn**  
Northeastern Kentucky Bureau

### Here was the dream:

The Jenny Wiley Trail, finished in 1980 with \$550,000 in government money and the sweat of hundreds of volunteers, was going to draw hikers from as far as Chicago and New York City. They'd wander the old Indian warrior path, past wildflowers, limestone cliffs and waterfalls. They'd admire the foresight of a state that would build a 200-mile trail that hooks up with three state parks. And maybe they'd learn that Eastern Kentucky is about more than moonshine and feuds.

Here is the reality: The trail, from South Portsmouth to Jenny Wiley State Resort Park in Prestonsburg, is sparsely used, the state says. Some private landowners are citing problems with hikers and off-road vehicles. Logging and asphalt roads have decimated some sections.

Last month, the state proposed closing the historic trail. Department of Parks officials want to use the \$25,000 they spend on it each year to improve trails in Eastern Kentucky's state parks. "Those of us who worked in the early days knew what it could be," said Soc Clay, one of the trail's founders. "That's the tragedy of it."

Few supporters? Carey Tichenor, a state naturalist whose duties include overseeing the trail, stressed that the decision isn't final. If state officials hear from enough people who want to keep the trail open, they'll drop the plan. So far the state has heard from only two supporters: Clay and the mayor of Portsmouth, OH. "The public notice went out to Eastern Kentucky newspapers with a total circulation of more than 100,000, and all we got back were these two letters," Tichenor said. "I don't know what that says." The state gets about 50 requests each year about the trail, Tichenor said. That's not enough interest to warrant spending taxpayer money to keep it open, he said.

"The Jenny Wiley Trail Conference, a volunteer group set up to support the trail, has dwindled in the last 15 years to two active members: Clay and chairman Denver Moore. Strong volunteer groups are crucial to maintain and promote trails— and lobby for more money, national trail

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leaders said. But Clay and Moore said the state should shoulder much of the blame for the lack of interest. States such as Minnesota and Colorado heavily advertise their trails, but Kentucky does not, they said.

"It's a hell of a trail, but it was never promoted," said Clay, an outdoors writer who lives in South Shore. "It has been a stepchild for the state. I think people gave up because Kentucky didn't step in and keep it alive." When the state took over the trail in 1981 from the FIVCO Area Development District, it cut funding from \$100,000 a year to \$25,000. That's barely enough to cover maintenance, Tichenor said. The state does not have a brochure for the trail, although it has maps and trail descriptions.

There are few places for hikers to leave their cars. A scenic trail head near the Ohio River with plenty of parking was destroyed when U.S. 23 was widened to four lanes. It was never replaced. "As a department there's always more you could have done," said Tichenor, who began managing the trail in 1987. "But basically the Parks Department had other functions: we have 47 state parks to maintain."

### **Vanishing space**

The trail started as an Eastern Kentucky success story. Volunteers chipped in, helping to carve out the trail and build overnight shelters every 10 miles.

Jenny Wiley, the trail's namesake, was abducted by Indians in 1789 from her home in southwest Virginia. The trail follows the route the Indians traveled while holding her hostage, passing spectacular cliffs and a 50-foot waterfall in Elliott County's Devil's Canyon. Two connector trails run to the Carter Caves and Greenbo Lake state resort parks. Hundreds of private landowners in nine counties agreed to let hikers follow in Wiley's footsteps, some signing 25-year easements.

But not everyone signed easements. And some new landowners worry about hikers stealing or damaging their property, Tichenor said. Doug Caudill, A Rowan County farmer, said he worries about theft. He also wants to build a house near one of the shelter sites. "I haven't tried to put a stop to anybody coming on my property, but it's getting up to that," Caudill said, "I've got to put a stop to it one way or another, even if it has to go to court."

Stuart Macdonald, chairman of the National Association of State Trail Administrators, said trails and public lands nationwide are running into conflicts with private landowners. The solution, Clay and Moore said, is for the state to patrol the trail, follow up on landowner complaints and buy easements when necessary. Tichenor said the department probably doesn't have the money for that.

Kentucky does have another long-distance trail— the Sheltowee Trace through the Daniel Boone National Forest, Tichenor noted. Backpacking also is declining as an outdoor activity, he said. But Macdonald said trail use is increasing overall, particularly by mountain bikers and eco-tourists, many from overseas. Jeff Vansant, chairman of the Sierra Club's northeastern Kentucky group, said he hiked the Devil's Canyon portion of the trail in the spring and plans two more trail outings this fall.

Eastern Kentuckians who can walk out their back doors and into the woods might not use the trail now, Vansant said. But their children might not have the same access. "As the open spaces vanish," he said, "people are going to wish they had the freedom to get on a trail and walk 5 miles without having to worry about property lines."

***For information on the Jenny Wiley Trail, contact Kentucky Department of Parks, 5100 Mero Street, 11th Floor, Capital Plaza Tower, Frankfort, KY 40601***

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