

How difficult can signs be?



Trail Protection

By **Dana Hendricks**, PCTA Regional Representative

Last year, a PCTA member donated \$5,000 specifically to improve trail signage. That's an amazing gift to the trail, and we'd like to specifically thank our donor for seeding this important project.

Jennifer Tripp, PCTA trail operations manager, had the job of collecting orders for new signs from along the **Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail**.

"It sounded so easy," Jennifer mused, after the process was finally done. "How hard could it be to order signs?"

Turns out, trail signage can be a lot more complicated than you'd think. For example, among the requests Jennifer received from agency partners, regional reps, and volunteer leaders, the trail's name was to be carved into wood in a variety of fashions: PCT, PCNST, P.C.T., P.C.N.S.T., Pacific Crest Trail, Pacific Crest NST, Pacific Crest Tr. No. 2000.

Well, it didn't seem right to pass up a chance to promote consistency in PCT signage, since promoting consistent trail management

is part of what we do. So, Jennifer took the question to **Beth Boyst**, the **U.S. Forest Service's** PCT program manager: What exactly is the standard for the trail's name on signs?

Beth didn't have an easy answer. For one thing, PCT signs often have followed the customs of the underlying land management agency, of which there are at least four. And even if we stick with Forest Service regulations, since it's the lead agency for the trail, we still have the problem of whether to follow the agency's 2005 sign manual or the outdated - but nonetheless PCT-specific - Comprehensive Management Plan from 1982.

What is TR. NO. 2000?

Prior to the PCT's designation as a National Scenic Trail in 1968, a traveler along the Pacific Crest Trail System might have been walking from Forest Service trail number 101, to State Park Trail number 6902, and so on. These trails became connected, along with a fair dose of new construction and road walks, to make what we now

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A comforting, but out-of-place, PCT reassurance marker on a weathered post in the Goat Rocks Wilderness.



Trail Protection *(continued from inside front cover)*

know as one continuous route. Subsequently there was a push to standardize trail marking from Canada to Mexico. Every trail has to be assigned a number for agency records, and it was determined there ought to be a consistent logic in the numbering of national scenic trails. Hence the Appalachian Trail, in cross-agency nomenclature, became trail number 1000, and the PCT number 2000.

However, this numbering system has not been used consistently on signage or maps, and it has sometimes been a source of confusion for the public.

“When I saw signs saying Pacific Crest Trail 2000, I thought, gosh, isn’t it closer to 2650 miles?” said triple-crowner and PCTA Regional Representative **Anitra Kass** of her PCT thru-hike.

Nonetheless, in some areas the local custom and/or maps refer to trails by number, not name. The direction in the Forest Service sign manual says: “Route identification may include trail name, number, or both,” acknowledging that local customs may vary. So, perhaps it’s best to include both name and number when ordering PCT guide signs for trailwide use.

Now what about the question of abbreviations? The manual states that abbreviations are to be avoided if possible; however, “TR.” is a Forest Service-approved abbreviation for trail, and “NO.” for num-

ber. After considering all this, Beth and Jennifer determined that new directional signs naming the PCT should say PACIFIC CREST TR. NO. 2000.

Why don’t all PCT junctions have guide signs naming the Pacific Crest Trail?

Besides the regular culprits of rot, fire, wind, heavy snow, fast-growing brush and souvenir collectors, there are other reasons trail junction signs may appear to be “missing.”

The PCT’s Comprehensive Plan makes it clear that the “marker” ought to be visible at trail junctions, but it is less clear on the subject of directional guide signs of the nature discussed above.

The uniform marker, or reassurance marker, is the famous PCT logo triangle. There are 9-inch and 18-inch markers for road and highway intersections. The 3.5-inch marker is for trail intersections, and its purpose is to identify the trail to the person on the trail or approaching from a side trail. And furthermore, the plan states that: “Signs on the Pacific Crest Trail will not have the identifying words ‘Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail’ or the acronym ‘PCNST.’ The uniform marker is for this purpose.”

That reassuring feeling

Some agency trail managers follow this directive strictly, interpreting it to mean that directional guide signs spelling out the PCT’s name are prohibited. Instead, they expect trail users to look for the

3.5-inch triangular PCT logo marker. This implies the plan's authors believed trail users could be conditioned to seek the PCT logo, often on a nearby tree, and not need the words spelled out on a guide sign.

The markers are called "reassurance" markers because, if you are standing at a trail junction (or confusing spot), you should be able to clearly see a marker just a little way down the PCT in either direction, and be reassured that you are on the trail.

Not knowing to look for, or not seeing the reassurance marker, has caused user confusion. Some people have altered signs on their own. Recently, the Deschutes National Forest spent stimulus dollars to replace all PCT junction signs between Windigo Pass and Mount Jefferson, many of which were missing or decayed. New guide signs were made with the names and numbers of connecting side trails.

Volunteer **Kate Beardsley** led the massive effort to install these signs at dozens of remote Wilderness locations. Kate and her crew also carefully replaced PCT reassurance markers within sight of junctions. But within just a few weeks, someone came along with a Sharpie and vandalized the new signs. These signs can cost \$50-\$100 each, not including the hardware, posts, and labor it takes to transport and install them.

In cases where users seem confused despite reassurance markers, is it OK to install directional guide signs that say PACIFIC CREST TR. NO. 2000? The 2005 edition of the Forest Service sign manual has a special section on the National Trails System, and it either contradicts or provides an alternate interpretation of the passage in the PCT Comprehensive Plan quoted above, depending on how you look at it.

In the sign manual's illustration of standards using the Continental Divide Trail as an example, reassurance markers and directional guide signs with the national trail's name spelled out are used at the same junction. Some forests have been doing it this way all along. Others might not have read this part of the relatively new sign manual, or might believe that the PCT's plan trumps it. Either way, the Comprehensive Plan does allow directional guide signs to be placed along the trail "to meet the needs of the user and management," so there will always be a degree of local trail manager discretion involved.



This page: A Sharpie pen mars a new sign in the Deschutes National Forest.

Previous page: Hauling new signs into the Oregon backcountry. (top)
A very old reassurance marker. (inset)

The Appalachian Trail is marked with continuous white paint blazes. Why not the PCT?

The PCT's plan makes it clear that reassurance markers are only for use at junctions, or other confusing spots, and are not to be used as "blazers." While the plan discourages the old practice of ax-blazing on trees, it does allow the use of an unmarked, white, diamond-shaped placard to be used as a "blazer" in the rare case of need for continuous marking in non-Wilderness, where the trail tread is non-existent or cannot be seen.

The PCT, routed as much as possible through designated Wilderness, was envisioned to provide a more primitive trail experience, one in which the traveler is expected to be self-reliant in

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route finding. Today, because the PCT is so well-established, blazers are rarely used and some trail managers recommend removing the existing ones in order to de-clutter the trail.

Keeping it wild

You might have noticed that PCT signage is even sparser when you are in designated Wilderness.

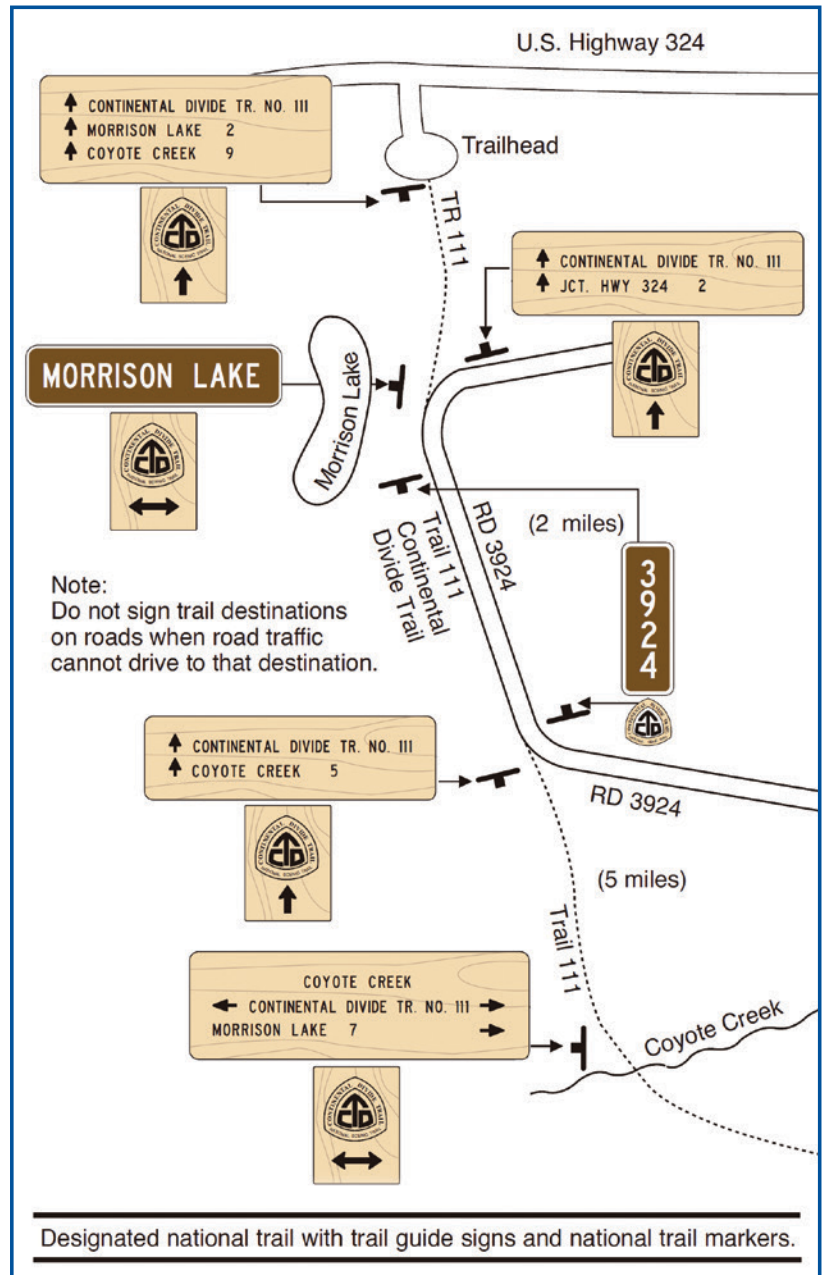
“Signs inside Wilderness areas differ significantly from those outside Wilderness,” said **John Schubert**, who works seasonally with the Forest Service and is the author of PCTA Trail Skills College curriculum.

“In general, installation of signs is minimized in Wilderness areas. More specifically, guide signs inside Wilderness at trail junctions never include mileages, and destinations are optional; only trail names and/or numbers are commonly used. This is because Wilderness areas are designated by Congress to provide natural landscapes in perpetuity, as little marred by humans as possible. Because Wilderness travel is meant to provide adventure and require greater skill, use of a map is assumed – thus the minimal signs.”

Also, in Wilderness, reassurance markers are to be made with branded or routed wood, which is more rustic and natural-appearing than colored plastic or metal markers. As a side effect, this contributes to sparser signage in Wilderness – markers that don’t fall prey to fires or souvenir collectors will still fade, crack and disappear. In short, signs, like the trail itself, require regular refreshing and maintenance. With limited funding, we are sometimes constrained to prioritize urgent tread repairs over new signage.

You may have noticed that the really photogenic plastic color PCT marker on the old, battered wood post in the Goat Rocks Wilderness is out of place.

Sorry. I’ll take the blame for that. I was up there scouting, and I only had a plastic sign with me at the time. I’ll try to replace it with a proper wooden marker when I’m up there this year. 🐾




The Forest Service’s sign manual uses the Continental Divide Trail as an example of optimal signage.

For more information:

Course 208: Trail Sign Installation and Inventory, PCTA Trail Skills College Curriculum: <http://www.pcta.org/volunteer/trail-skills-college/trail-skills-college-course-curriculum/> written by John Schubert.

Sign and Poster Guidelines for the Forest Service, 2005: <http://www.fs.fed.us/t-d/pubs/htmlpubs/em7100-15/> See Chapter 5 on Trail Signing, and 5.9 on specific direction for National Trails.

“Criteria for Location, Design, Signing and User Facilities,” from the 1982 Comprehensive Management Plan for the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail http://www.pcta.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/PCT_Trail_Criteria.pdf



The PCTA MISSION

The mission of the Pacific Crest Trail Association is to protect, preserve and promote the **Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail** as an internationally significant resource for the enjoyment of hikers and equestrians, and for the value that wild and scenic lands provide to all people.