

Orienteering and Environmental Stewardship

For many who grew up with an appreciation of the outdoors, "Stay on the trail!" is the most clear and direct message for proper trail usage and preserving the environment in a park; repeated trampling in the same spots weakens vegetation, crowds out wildlife habitat, and exposes the whole area to increased erosion as bare soil is exposed. So how can an organized event that intentionally sends people off trail in a natural park possibly be a good thing?



Orienteering is a managed outdoor recreational activity or competitive sport in which participants use a map and sometimes a compass to navigate to a series of predefined red-and-white checkpoints (called controls) placed in a natural area. Beginner course controls are nearly all on trails; advanced controls are often off-trail, allowing more flexibility in navigational route choice.

Occasionally, a well-meaning but uninformed park visitor may decide independently to move a control from an off-trail location to the nearest trail during an event, thinking that he or she is helping the park. And yet, each participant's map continues to indicate the original location, radically increasing the foot traffic as everyone on that course is now forced to circle the original spot multiple times in search of a now missing control. A far better solution is a realistic public understanding of how orienteering impacts the environment.

Orienteering differs from other off-trail park activity in four significant ways:

- 1. Careful placement for a limited time.** Working with rangers and other naturalists, we identify areas that are more rugged than others—no steep hillsides, recent or current restoration, or environmentally sensitive areas—and place some controls off-trail in places that can support half a day of foot traffic. Then we pick them up later in the day, not to return for another year or more. And when we do come back, the controls go in different locations. This is why, for the last 30 years, international ecological studies about orienteering have consistently ranked the sport as among the *lowest* impact of all recreational activities in parks.
- 2. Enforcing the map.** Every participant carries a map of the park, with environmentally sensitive areas such as marshes and restoration zones clearly marked out of bounds. Courses are set



Some checkpoints on orienteering courses are deliberately—and safely—set off-trail.

to logically avoid those zones, and a warning is sent out that anyone seen in those zones will be DISQUALIFIED. Participants learn to appreciate what environmentally sensitive areas look like and treat them with care.

- 3. Load balancing across courses and features.** Although an orienteering meet may have up to 400 participants, the course designer splits these participants among up to seven courses. Existing trail usage is built into the course design as a way of routing participants around the park with minimal impact.



- 4. The individual nature of orienteering.**

Orienteering, unlike most other sports, is based on individual decisions and route choices. So although there may be dozens of participants on a single course, they are also taking dozens of individual routes through the park, with little or no repeated trampling of vegetation.

Orienteering meets in Europe often have thousands of participants, and yet are held to high ecological standards. Ours are much smaller. Yet Cascade Orienteering Club is committed to being ecologically sound in scientifically specific ways, adhering to the best practices identified in environmental studies of international orienteering.

Orienteering is an ecologically friendly way to get people together outdoors, enjoying and appreciating our natural spaces. Some of these are “first-timers” who become nature lovers while immersed in the woods. Others are teenage youth in an orienteering league who are getting close to nature at a time when many of their peers don’t have time for ecology or conservation or even parks. All participants come away with a deep appreciation of the unique and natural beauty that each park has to offer. Ultimately, we’re all behind the same goals of environmental preservation and appreciation.

See the **Cascade Orienteering Club** website at www.cascadeoc.org. Or, if you have specific comments or questions about orienteering in our parks, don’t hesitate to contact us at info@cascadeoc.org.

