

## BREAKING THE MYTH: THE CHALLENGES FACING CZECH TRAIL DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

Czech outdoor recreation is trapped. For decades, Czechs boasted about having "the most elaborate and longest network of tourist trails in the world," but this is merely a myth that is also harmful. While no one disputes that outdoor recreation is essential for public health, the actual conditions for recreation in Czechia are slowly deteriorating for various reasons. One of these reasons is that the public service apparatus, on the one hand, creates nearly impossible conditions for permitting close-to-nature trails. Yet on the other hand, it often approves projects that do not align with the principles of sustainable trails. In this article we aim to outline the criteria that public authorities should consider when permitting trail projects to ensure they are successful, long-term sustainable, do not harm nature and the landscape, and bring Czech recreation closer to meeting the demands of the 21st century society.

**Key words:** recreational trails, criteria of sustainability, public health, access to the landscape

### Introduction

The Myth of Perfect Trail Network and Its Harmful Impact

The claim of having the "most elaborate trail network in the world" has long been a source of national pride in the Czech Republic. However, this notion causes a false sense of complacency, overshadowing the real issues that impact current outdoor recreation infrastructure. In reality, it is not a network of trails, but a network of waymarked routes, that often mistakes extent for quality.

Policymakers and the public alike may feel there is no need for improvement since the Czech Republic already claims to have "the best." Even though authorities and the public recognize some issues within the system of waymarked routes—particularly in high-traffic areas—arguments for changing and adapting the system based on scientific knowledge and expert trail planning are often perceived as a betrayal of Czech national heritage.

The foundations of the Czech Tourist Club's (KČT) waymarked route network were laid in the late 19th century and have since remained largely unchanged. Meanwhile, society and recreational trends have evolved significantly. Massive developments in transportation, communication technologies, and active leisure preferences have profoundly changed how people use the network. These changes have led to issues that were not originally present in the 19th century but are increasingly causing problems today. Unfortunately, the waymarked route system is too rooted in historicized and romantic ideals of what hiking should look like to be able to adapt effectively.

In addition to specific, hard-to-solve problems—such as overcrowding on certain trails, vegetation trampling, erosion, or a shortage of volunteers maintaining the trail markings—this myth of a perfect Czech waymarked route network has almost entirely erased the awareness that recreation requires proper infrastructure, particularly well-designed trails. To put it bluntly, you need good trails to waymark in order to have a good waymarked trail system. If you don't have them, what is good about the system might apply to the waymarking, but not to the trails, which do not exist.

### Historical Roots of Trail Building in Czechia

To understand the current challenges, it is necessary to revisit the history of outdoor recreation in Czechia. The earliest initiatives in outdoor leisure activities were closely tied to trails. These trails, initially built in castle parks and spa towns, were designed to provide pleasant walking experiences while allowing visitors to enjoy the surrounding beauty. Aesthetically pleasing environments were believed to have health benefits, and this wasn't underestimated at the time. Later, hiking and strolling (termed 'turistika' in Czech, often mistranslated as tourism) emerged as a phenomenon, with an emphasis on opening up landscapes for public recreation through

the construction of trails. Many of these trails, some of which still exist today—such as the Rieger Trail near Semily and the Posázavská Trail—were constructed by local beautification or hiking societies and entrepreneurs in the tourism industry. These trails were often built in otherwise inaccessible areas, such as steep riverbanks or rocky terrain, and were designed not only to guide visitors but to enhance their experience of the environment.

By the late 19th century, the Czech Tourist Club (KČT) began marking existing trails in the countryside to make them suitable and interesting for recreation, sports, and tourism. Until the 1930s, trail building coexisted with the waymarking initiative. However, after World War II, the focus shifted entirely to marking routes. The tradition and expertise of planning and building recreational trails—and their associated construction methods—were largely forgotten.

The expansion of the waymarked route network was further facilitated during the state-socialist era in Czechoslovakia, when land ownership was of little concern to route planners. At a similar time, changes in agriculture and forestry also contributed to the creation of forest and field road networks in the countryside, many of which overlaid the original hiking trails. Only trails located in inaccessible areas, where building roads was not feasible, survived.

As a result, Czech tourists now have access to a vast network of waymarked routes. However, a significant portion of this network follows utilitarian transport corridors, such as local roads and forestry roads, which lack the aesthetic appeal of trails. A smaller portion consists of informal user-created trails, known in international literature as “desire lines,” which take the shortest route to a point of interest, often causing issues such as erosion, surface damage, and exposed tree root systems. The remaining purpose-built hiking trails—designed with both functional and aesthetic considerations in mind—are now rare exceptions.

### **Modern Implications for Trail Infrastructure**

Over time, the focus in the 'turistika' movement shifted from trails as joyful infrastructure to trails that simply lead to points of interest. On a broader social level, trails in Czechia are now seen primarily as a means to an end, and their aesthetic or experiential value is often viewed as incidental rather than intentional. Both KČT and the public are so accustomed to this approach that they do not question why many trails are dull, unpleasant, or damaged by erosion.

Additionally, the Czech landscape, while picturesque, lacks the dramatic and iconic features of regions like the Alps or Scandinavia. Czech tourism planners have responded by promoting smaller, less prominent attractions. However, these minor destinations tend to interest only niche audiences. Despite efforts to educate the public and encourage visits to lesser-known locations through guides and educational trails, most people continue to visit the country's most prominent natural and cultural landmarks, such as Sněžka, Praděd, or Lysá hora.

The only proven way to make ordinary landscapes more attractive is through the development of high-quality recreational trails. Historical examples, such as the aforementioned Rieger Trail, demonstrate how purpose-built trails can transform otherwise inaccessible areas into highly appealing destinations, creating a sense of wilderness and connection with nature.

### **Barriers to Progress**

Progress in recreational infrastructure is hindered by two key factors. On one hand, the myth of a perfect trail network breeds complacency and discourages efforts to improve the current state of infrastructure. On the other hand, bureaucratic hurdles and the attitudes of various authorities actively obstruct attempts to develop or improve trails and trail systems.

Recreation is declared to be one of the important remits of publicly owned forests in Czechia. Yet in practice, it is sidelined in favor of economic and environmental functions. Access to forests has remained free throughout history in Czechia. The downside is that it has not been subjected to any systematic approach by stakeholders.

On one hand, this lack of regulation, especially from the recreationalist's point of view, is beneficial. The so-far unsuccessful attempts to regulate have been limited to mandated restrictions. On the other hand, the long-term neglect of recreational infrastructure has led landowners and forest managers to perceive recreation as a nuisance that only brings problems. Meanwhile, on a national level, free access to forests brings benefits to the Czech state, producing public health benefits and boosting certain segments of national and international tourism.

The lack of interest from responsible authorities, coupled with the tendency to approach recreation emotionally or preferentially rather than from an expert perspective, has led to two

negative trends. The first is a strong resistance to implementing trail projects, both locally (due to individual officials' biases) and nationally (for example, the current guidelines from Lesy ČR, which set nearly impossible conditions for building MTB trails). This resistance often ignores the real qualities and impacts of proposed projects.

The second issue stems from a poor level of knowledge in the field of recreational trail planning among responsible authorities. Often, it is compounded by a degree of clientelism. In some cases, problematic projects—such as MTB trails with elevated structures, high-speed sections, or technically complex elements—are approved. These projects can pose safety risks to all forest users, disrupt forestry operations, and compromise the aesthetic and ecological values of the environment.

### Conclusion

Czechia's trail infrastructure is at a crossroads. The myth of a perfect system has stifled progress, while bureaucratic and legislative challenges prevent the sustainable development of new trail systems. Addressing these barriers requires a commitment to expertise in trail planning and a renewed focus on building trails that enhance both the journey and the destination. This will require a systemic change in the way recreation is addressed. Only then can Czechia fully unlock the potential of its landscapes for outdoor recreation.

### Souhrn

Outdoorová rekreace má v Česku významnou a dlouhodobou tradici. Společnost a životní styl lidí se proměňují, přístup k rekreaci však zůstává desítky let stejný. To způsobuje jak problémy s řízením rekreace a následnými negativními jevy, tak úbytek lidí, kteří aktivně tráví volný čas v přírodě, což se negativně podepisuje na veřejném zdraví. Pokud má dojít ke zlepšení, bylo by dobré racionálně prozkoumat mýtus "nejlepších turistických tras na světě" a začít tento systém postupně modifikovat vzhledem ke krajinným podmínkám České republiky a životního stylu obyvatel tak, jak se projevuje v posledních několika desetiletích. Soustředit se na kvalitu tras, nejen z pohledu turistických cílů, ale sledovat i aspekt kvality cest a stezek. Inspirovat se ve vlastních dějinách a začít opět stavět kvalitní rekreační stezky i pro pěší. Přiznat outdoorové rekreaci (a jejímu dopadu na veřejné zdraví) význam, jaký si zaslouží.

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