



Rail Trails Australia Strategy 2023 to 2025

June 2023

Strategy purpose and timeframe

This 3-year strategy will guide Rail Trails Australia's (RTA) priorities and activities.

Our Vision

Our vision is for Australia's disused rail corridors to be preserved for their heritage and natural values and enjoyed by the community and visitors, including for active recreation, such as walking, cycling and horse riding.

Our goals

- 1. More and higher quality rail trails
- 2. More people using rail trails
- 3. Connected and effective rail trail organisations
- 4. Rail Trails Australia is the peak body for rail trails

What we do

- ightarrow advocate for new and improved rail trails
- ightarrow promote rail trails and provide high quality information
- ightarrow support and connect stakeholders involved in current or potential rail trails
- ightarrow maintain a sustainable volunteer-driven organisation



RTA volunteers at the opening of the Northern Rivers Rail Trail





Summary Objectives, Measures and Actions

Goal 1. More and higher quality rail trails

1.1 Increase in new rail trails developed Measured by

- increase in total length of new trail developed in each state (km)
- **1.2 Increase investment in rail trails** Measured by
 - \$ publicly announced funds spent annually on new trails and improvements
 - Number of rail trail improvements involving with RTA involvement
 - Number of RTA funded projects on rail trails with projects undertaken by community organisations funded through RTA

-----ACTIONS------

- → Committee and regional representatives actively engage with state governments to advocate for investment
- → Directly fund small scale community projects through grants
- → Publish information outlining rail trail benefits to advocate for investment

Goal 3. Connected and effective rail trail organisations

3.1 Organisations value RTA support, advice and information

Measured by

- Satisfaction reported at forums (via survey)
- Increased use and satisfaction with RTA technical information (e.g. downloads, via

survey) 3.2 Regional representatives are actively connecting rail trail organisations

Measured by

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 Increased number of open and potential rail trails with organisations actively engaged with regional representatives

-----ACTIONS------

- → Continue to develop and support a network of regional representatives
- → Update the technical guide to an on-line tool for rail trail managers and developers, including maintenance
- → Host rail trail conferences and participate in other events

Goal 2. More people using rail trails

2.1 Increased number of people using RTA information

- Measured by
- Webpage use and satisfaction rating increasing
 Social media following and interactions increasing
- 2.2 More businesses supplying rail trail users Measured by
 - Number of businesses and rail trails providing direct services (bicycle hire, transportation etc.) increasing
- 2.3 Rail trail usage is measured and increasing Measured by
 - Results from counters are being used to support rail trail development (via survey and feedback)
 ------ACTIONS------
- → Prepare and fundraise for next website redevelopment
- → Develop and implement an integrated Communications Plan to promote existing rail trails and RTA, including a Social Media Plan
- → Conduct rail trail photography competitions
- → Investigate options to promote and support businesses
- → Collate user counter data from rail trails around Australia to support advocacy work

Goal 4. Rail Trails Australia is the peak body for rail trails

4.1 Membership satisfied and increasing

- Measured by
- Increased member satisfaction (via survey)
- Increase in RTA members (target >1500) by end 2025

4.2 RTA Committee is healthy and effective Measured by

- At least 1 new Committee member each year
- Increased diversity on the Committee (at least 1 woman and 1 member under 40)
- The mix of Committee skills and experience is supporting RTA goals

4.3 RTA is financially stable

Measured by

- % and \$ increase in income
- Income exceeds operational costs

4.4 Volunteer base is increasing

- Measured by
- Increased number of active volunteers supporting implementation of the strategy
- Volunteers reporting satisfaction via survey

4.5 RTA is identified by stakeholders as the peak

body for rail trails

-----ACTIONS------

- → Increase diversity in the committee by actively seeking at least two female and two younger (<40) members</p>
- → Continue to produce Connections magazine, as an option for members
- → Actively seek and support volunteers
- → Prepare a financial plan to support the strategy implementation

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Reflecting on our 2020-2022 strategy to inform our work

This strategic plan built on our last strategy and considered its implementation along with changes and learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Investment in rail trails continued over the last 3 years, with several new trails opened or underway across the country, particularly in NSW where a lot of effort has been expended. Flood damage will likely deflect some investment in the few years, but momentum continues. Providing excellent technical advice to improve the quality of trails continues to be important.

The new website was the most significant achievement over the last 3 years and we are grateful to those who donated funds which enabled this to happen. Feedback on the new website has been very positive, with members welcoming the introduction of the ability to keep a personal record. Its design is also better from an administration perspective. It was accessed by 242,000 Users in 2022, and our growing number of followers on social media and email subscribers is testimony to the interest in and use of rail trails.

Our program to support more counters did not progress as planned, and we will evaluate the approach and effort needed whilst collating information. However, for those rail trails with counters we generally continued to see a growth in use (except during lockdown periods). Cycle tourism and e-bike usage both continue to grow in popularity. To build on the momentum, a focus on communications and marketing - of rail trails and RTA - will be key to achieving our goals.

We strengthened our regional representation. We now have 21 regional representatives who have been instrumental in connecting relevant people in their areas and updating the copy in our refreshed website. RTA has supported regional representatives and local rail trail advocates in preparing submissions and providing information and advice. This will continue to be a core part of our work.

Our membership has grown, more than doubling in 3 years. Our new membership model introduced a lower cost option which has been supported, and based on uptake and survey results will be maintained to enable more people to join our organisation and support our work. We welcomed generous donations from members and others and will consider how to leverage the support for rail trails to enable some of the wonderful rail trail projects to progress.

Our committee has welcomed new members, particularly from NSW, and embraced technology to enable people from across Australia to be effectively involved in our (now) on-line meetings. The majority of the committee was able to attend the opening of the Tumbarumba-Rosewood Rail Trail, at which RTA co-hosted a successful rail trail seminar. We would welcome more diversity on our committee to bring a broader range of skills, particularly in marketing and communications, and better represent the community in terms of gender, age and cultural diversity.

We are a volunteer-led organisation and volunteers are crucial to our success, and we thank the many people who volunteered over the last three years. Our recent survey uncovered more volunteers and we will be looking to them to help us progress the actions in this strategic plan.



Where are we heading?

Looking beyond the next 3 years, RTA Committee envisages rail trails playing a more significant role in Australia's tourism industry as well as continuing to be important for local communities. With government and community recognition of their value and contribution, RTA's role will shift - less about advocating and more about being the number one authority for users, managers and communities. We expect to continue to be a small, passionate organisation, but with more members and several employees, providing a high quality service for all Australians and supporting the wonderful community assets which are rail trails.

To reach our goals we need to coordinate our effort, including administering our organisation and activities, and our communications. We aim to have two staff - a part-time administration officer and a new part-time communications officer. To deliver the action we aim to increase the number of active volunteers from 36 to 40, and increase our paid membership to at least 1500.



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Rail Trails Australia - rail trails connecting communities

Goal 1. More and higher quality rail trails

Objective 1.1 - Increase in new rail trails developed

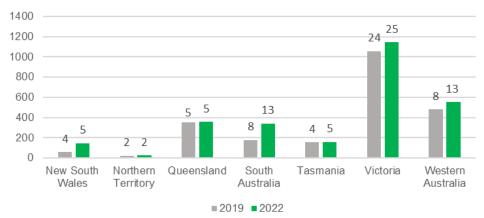
There remain significant opportunities to develop new or expanded rail trails in all states, particularly in NSW, Queensland and Tasmania where there has been limited development to date. The table and figure below outline the progress in the last 3 years.

	2019	2022	Change	2019	2022	Change
New South Wales	4	5	1	59	146	147%
Northern Territory	2	2	0	23	28	22%
Queensland	5	5	0	349	356	2%
South Australia	8	13	5	179	341	91%
Tasmania	4	5	1	156	160	2%
Victoria	24	25	1	1,056	1,144	8%
Western Australia	8	13	5	483	553	14%

Table 1 - Rail trails in each state

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Figure 1 - Change in extent and number of rail trails in each state



Length of rail trails (km) and Number of rail trails

The benefits of rail trails are now generally understood - by communities, businesses and all levels of government, but local promotion is always required. One of the keys to RTA's success is the promotion of the benefits of rail trails, particularly to local and state governments and to members of local communities who are initially sceptical. Focus has centred around the benefits for community development, improved health, economic development, tourism and promotion and protection of cultural and railway heritage. The preparation of accessible, evidence-based information will support this advocacy where there is resistance and limited funding.

Increase in total length of new trail developed in each state (km)



Measured by

Objective 1.2 - Increased investment in rail trails

The quality of rail trails and associated infrastructure is also important. This includes improved surfacing, restoration or construction of bridges, heritage restoration and ancillary infrastructure, including facilities, directional and interpretive signage, seating, etc. Whilst investment should be efficient, expenditure is a general indicator of development.

A stocktake of the condition of rail trails, as well as the level of support from local government and community, could enable a focused approach to investment and advocacy in future years. However, RTA will support any rail trail with a high level of local community/government support.

RTA advocates directly and indirectly for rail trails. We support rail trails through formal submissions, meet with governments and proponents and support regional representatives to do so. This important advocacy work will continue. We prepared a <u>video of the benefits of the Tumbarumba Rail Trail</u> and we will build on this and other work to better understand and communicate the economic benefits of rail trails.

RTA ran a successful community grant program in 2019, and this approach will be used to support strategy implementation, when funding permits, and may be supported through RTA fundraising campaigns.

Measured by

\$ publicly announced funds spent annually on new trails and improvements Number of rail trail improvements involving RTA. Number of RTA funded projects on rail trails by community organisations

Goal 1 Actions	Obj	Priority	When
1a) RTA Committee and regional representatives actively engage with state governments to advocate for investment	1.1 1.2	MED	2023 and ongoing
1b) Directly fund small scale community projects through grants	1.2	MED	твс
1c) Publish information outlining rail trail benefits to advocate for investment	1.1 1.2	MED	2024





Goal 2. More people using rail trails

Objective 2.1 - Increased number of people using RTA information

RTA's role in promoting the use of rail trails is a broad one - connecting potential and current users with relevant information to enable and encourage use. RTA's role is also to promote them more broadly to Australians and international visitors.

To increase the use of rail trails, people with a potential interest need to be aware of rail trails, have the desire to use them and know where to get the information they need. An integrated and coordinated approach to communications and promotion will focus on a range of audiences, including people with disabilities, younger users and walkers. It will use relevant content and communications tactics, including the website, social media, mainstream media, and public relations. Fundamental to the success of this strategy is an increased awareness of RTA's brand and growth in the supporter base; both will also be sought through an Integrated Communications Plan.

After significant investment in time and money, RTA's new website went live in September 2021. It had 242,000 users in 2022 (191,000 in 2019) with 99% of survey respondents who used the website finding it satisfactory (37%) or very satisfactory (62%), a significant increase from our previous survey. Ongoing improvements and updates to the website will be necessary over the coming years. The rapid development of "Artificial Intelligence" powered search engines in 2023 will possibly affect when the next significant upgrade is necessary.

Social media may be an efficient and effective way of sharing information and engaging with current and potential rail trail users. RTA has focussed on this in the past 3 years. Followers at the end of 2022 were Facebook (9622), Instagram (3273), Twitter (1232) and YouTube (87). RTA's social media content could be more integrated and planned and attract people who are yet to engage with RTA. Survey responses from those currently engaging with RTA (see Table 2 below) demonstrate satisfaction when engaged (although lower satisfaction rates with Twitter) but with the majority of respondents not engaging with the social media platform at all. The survey was promoted through social media, however the responses may partly be affected by the older age group represented in the survey data. Regardless, this indicates that RTA needs to consider how to better use social media to promote rail trails to a broader audience. This may include other platforms such as Tiktok.

Platform	Respondents	Satisfied or very satisfied	Not satisfied	Not engaged in this way
Facebook	896	380 (42%)	15 (<1%)	501 (56%)
Instagram	811	84 (10%)	35 (4%)	692 (85%)
Twitter	494	11 (2%)	3 (<1%)	480 (97%)

Table 2 Responses to RTA's social media presence

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Guidebooks were critical to the early success of rail trails and RTA, with over 22,000 copies sold and contributing significant income. Whilst most of the guidebook information is now available on the website, there continues to be interest in this product, with reasonable 2022 sales of the updated Victorian guidebook (349 printed and 132 PDF). The Victorian guidebook will be reproduced for sale in 2023. Further work on guidebooks requires a significant amount of skilled work and will be considered for the next strategy.

High quality images can have a real impact. RTA's photography library could be enhanced by drawing on the many photography enthusiasts using rail trails. Photography competitions, such as those trialled on social media, not only promote RTA and enable supporters and users to engage, but could build the photograph bank for use in RTA communications, publications and on-line.

Measured by: Webpage use and satisfaction rating increasing Social media following and interactions increasing



Objective 2.2 - More businesses directly supply rail trail users

Visiting rail trail users typically require a range of business services, such as food, accommodation, transport and bicycle hire. Businesses and communities benefit economically from providing these services and users benefit from having access to more local services.

Cycling is not the only way people enjoy rail trails, but it is very popular. Most Australian rail trails require people to bring their own bicycles and typically ride on the trail and return to the original point, as there are few bicycle hire or transportation services. This contrasts with other countries where such services are common (e.g. Otago Rail Trail in New Zealand, Cape Cod Rail Trail in the United States) and attract both domestic and international visitors.

Australia's rail trails offer beautiful scenery and, with improved services, outstanding tourism experiences. Direct services in the form of bicycle hire and transportation services will be important to grow visitor numbers, leverage best value rail trails and grow local economies. To date, businesses have been slow to provide these services and RTA has limited understanding of why investments have been stronger elsewhere or why businesses have succeeded (or failed).

Of the businesses who responded to the survey, the majority were interested in case studies about successful businesses. RTA is uniquely placed to understand and communicate the needs of rail trail users to inform current and potential businesses. RTA can also engage with relevant organisations, such as regional development bodies, advertising agencies, associations supporting related activities (such as mountain biking, etc.) to understand how best to support and promote businesses.

Until this work is completed in the later part of the strategy, RTA will continue to advertise and promote businesses through its communications.

Measured by:

Number of businesses and rail trails providing direct services (bicycle hire, transportation etc.) increasing

Objective 2.3 - Rail trail usage is measured and increasing

Measuring rail trail use not only enables the benefits of rail trails to be measured and communicated, it will also enable us to measure the impact of improvements and promotion. Counters are effective and relatively low cost, and data can be digitally captured and analysed. However counter maintenance and collection of data can be problematic.

There are approximately 15 rail trails with user counting systems.

RTA should continue to encourage rail trails to count users and provide information on how to do this. But based on the experience during the last 3 years there was limited value in RTA actively trying to facilitate user counting so this is a low priority for this strategy period.

RTA should continue to collate and analyse user counting data from rail trails that can provide this information usefully. Based on data gathered to date, RTA has been able to authoritatively say that usage has increased on many rail trails and continues to increase year on year. It has been very useful to demonstrate this to a wide audience at forums and RTA is the only organisation placed to do this. It also allows us to know that there are many rail trails that have a much greater potential for usage, which is the basis for our objective of increasing the usage of rail trails.

RTA should communicate information at a national level, to support investment in rail trails.

Measured by: Results from counters are being used to support rail trail development (via survey and feedback)





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Goal 2 Actions	Obj	Priority	When
2a) Prepare and fundraise for next website redevelopment (approx 2028)	2.1	HIGH	2023 and ongoing
2b) Develop and implement an integrated Communications Plan to promote existing rail trails and RTA, including a Social Media Plan	2.1	VERY HIGH	2023
2c) Conduct rail trail photography competitions	2.1	MED	2023 and ongoing
2d) Investigate options to promote and support businesses	2.2	MED	2024
2e) Collate user counter data from rail trails around Australia to support advocacy work	2.3	MED	Ongoing



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Goal 3. Connected and effective rail trail organisations

Objective 3.1 Organisations value RTA support, advice and information

High quality rail trails can be accessed by a wide range of people, including local communities and visitors. RTA is uniquely placed to provide advice and information to those developing, improving and maintaining rail trails, to facilitate effective engagement with local communities and government organisations and for infrastructure designs and standards that meet the needs of all people, are fit for purpose, low maintenance and provide good value for money.

RTA's technical guidelines, advice and contacts across the country have been drawn on by many community organisations and local governments. The technical guidelines need to be updated - including costings, information on increasing accessibility, reflect new approaches and case studies and could be made more readily available.

RTA recognises that there is significant expertise around the country in developing and maintaining rail trails and is well placed to bring people together. Rail Trail Conferences at Tumbarumba (2021) and Murwillumbah (2023) welcomed both locals and people from around the country and provided a valuable opportunity to showcase rail trails, connect people and share information. These forums had other advantages - raising the RTA's profile as a key organisation facilitating rail trails and enabling RTA volunteers to meet, build relationships and share knowledge, in contrast to the less effective virtual interaction. RTA should facilitate more of these, at least once a year, and obtain funding to do this.

Measured by

Satisfaction reported at forums (via survey) Increased use and satisfaction with RTA technical information (e.g. downloads, via survey)

Objective 3.2 Regional representatives actively connect rail trail organisations

RTA has supported many proponents of rail trails, both directly and through supporting regional representatives to work with community organisations and local governments within their region. RTA has grown the number of regional representatives and will continue to focus on ensuring that all parts of Australia have a regional contact. As this aspect of the organisation grows, RTA will work with the representatives to determine how this support network can be most effective and ensure that the RTA engages effectively and consistently to support rail trail organisations, including local governments, to promote and develop rail trails.

Measured by:

Increased number of open and potential rail trails with organisations actively engaged with regional representatives



Rail Trails Australia – rail trails connecting communities

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Goal 3 Actions	Obj	Priority	When
3a) Continue to develop and support a network of regional representatives	3.2	HIGH	Ongoing
3b) Update the technical guide to an on-line tool for rail trail managers and developers, including maintenance	3.1	MED	2024
3c) Host rail trail conferences and participate in other events	3.1 3.2	HIGH	2023 and ongoing



Goal 4. Rail Trails Australia is the peak body for rail trails

Objective 4.1 Membership is satisfied and increasing

RTA is a member-based organisation; financial membership is stable at around 1200 after significant growth over the last few years supported by the new website and better communication with supporters. Many community organisations, most web users and other supporters are not members. A further expanded supporter base will build financial sustainability, enable RTA to draw on a broader volunteer base, share information about rail trails, and build RTA's profile.

In the 2022 survey, 58% were not members, and 42% either members or lapsed members. This suggests a significant number of people engaging with RTA who may be interested in being a member. Of these "potential" members, the most important reasons they would become members are:

- 77% to hear about rail trail developments
- 75% to support RTAs work
- 61% to protect rail heritage

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- 53% to keep the website going
- 26% to receive the magazine

RTA introduced a low-cost membership model, without the magazine, in response to survey responses. Introduced in July 2022, this membership option now comprises 7% of our current membership. Supporting RTA is a significant driver for current members and hearing about rail trails and their development is equally important.

Promotion of RTA and the value of becoming a supporter via membership will be a key element of the Communications Plan.

Rail trail organisations are composed predominantly of volunteers, many of whom are individual RTA members and are encouraged to continue this support. These organisations are fundamental to RTA's goals and reciprocal supporter status should be offered to reflect this interdependent relationship, with a complimentary digital copy of the magazine.

Measured by: Increased member satisfaction (via survey) Increase in RTA members (target >1500) by end 2025



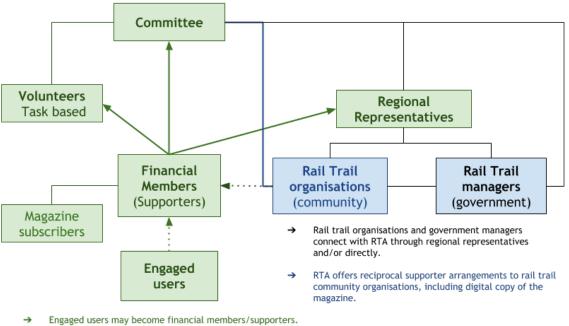


Figure 2 Connections between the Committee, members and other organisations

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 Members may want to contribute time as a volunteer, regional rep and/or on the Committee

Objective 4.2 RTA Committee is healthy and effective

RTA has a formal structure. The Committee is elected at an Annual General Meeting, with a President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer, but no skills-based or operationally specific roles. The Committee reflects the broader member demographic and includes people who have served for over 10 years. The Committee currently covers both executive and operational functions, with non-Committee members joining meetings.

The Committee will provide oversight and support to achieve the strategy, with Committee members having responsibility for oversight of actions. New Committee roles, reflecting the elements of the strategy, will be introduced. These may include:

- Regional Representatives Coordinator supporting representatives, facilitating virtual meetings
- Communications overseeing the Communications Plan
- Digital website and data systems
- Volunteers Coordinator task-based volunteer communications and promotion, on-boarding, coordinating/supporting teams
- Strategy measuring progress, surveys as needed, annual report.

Whilst some skills and knowledge may be sought to provide advice and implement specific actions in this strategy, a Committee with a broader range of skills and more representative of rail trail users, including more women and younger people, would likely both increase effectiveness and bring different perspectives. Communications will continue to actively seek to fill new roles and bring a more diverse range of skills and attributes to the Committee.

Measured by

At least 1 new Committee member each year Increased diversity on the Committee (at least 1 woman and 1 member under 40) The mix of Committee skills and experience is supporting RTA goals





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Objective 4.3 RTA is financially stable

RTA has been financially stable, with income of approximately \$100,000 and expenditure of \$80,000 in 2022 (excluding the website development costs) and bank balance of around \$75,000. RTA will monitor costs and ensure that the organisation remains viable.

To deliver our strategy, we need to maintain our core operations and have sufficient funds for additional activities. Our operational expenses to date have been matched by income. However, even with volunteers undertaking many tasks, additional funds will be needed to deliver the 2023-25 strategy, refer table below.

	Operational and strategy specific costs
Current	 Website – software maintenance and numerous annual fees etc. (<i>Note - on-line advertising to be increased</i>) Committee and organisational administration (paid, part time staff) Supporter administration - including email update Magazine (<i>cost recovery through membership fees</i>)
New	 Grants for strategy actions- e.g. \$5000 to \$15,000 per program Hosting forums Communications coordination (paid, part time staff)

A financial plan will be developed to identify how this could occur and ensure our core work and this strategy is implemented within RTA's financial means. Potential income sources to be considered include: advertising, grants, sponsorship, sales of RTA products and donations. Linking specific projects (such as grant proposals) with crowdfunding approaches may be investigated.

Measured by

% and \$ increase in income Income exceeds operational costs

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Objective 4.4 Volunteer base is increasing

Volunteers have been fundamental to RTA's success and will continue to be the driving force behind RTA. However, the Committee alone cannot achieve the objectives and others are needed - to bring in additional skills, ideas, connections and effort. Whilst paid staff or contractors may be engaged for some tasks, funds permitting, RTA will be reliant on volunteers and the volunteer base needs to grow to achieve the goals and undertake the following key activities.

Regional representation

The volunteer regional representative model has worked well in states where volunteers have been sufficient. We now have approximately 20 volunteer regional representatives and a structured onboarding process. This requires constant ongoing liaison with the admin officer and president. A committee position dedicated to this task would be desirable.

Communications

The Communications Plan will require specific skills, some of which are already held by volunteers. Whilst it will improve efficiencies, additional effort will be needed to both develop the Plan and to maintain ongoing communications. Ongoing tasks will likely include:

- Magazine production
- Social media and web content writing and coordination
- Email update/s
- Advertising and sponsorship

Strategy actions and tasks

This strategy identifies specific, time-bound tasks, some of which will involve small teams, including:

- Website administration
- Collating User Counting Data
- Grants program
- Updating the Technical Guide
- Collating Benefits of Rail Trails documentation
- Running Photography Competitions
- Conducting Rail Trails Conferences
- Fostering new businesses providing direct user services to rail trails
- Increase advertising for website and magazine

RTA will actively seek volunteers with a range of skill sets and interests from the supporter base and elsewhere to complete both discrete projects and ongoing tasks, noting volunteer lifetime is reportedly on average approximately 3 years. This will be an element of the Communications Plan and through direct engagement with people involved in rail trail organisations.

To support volunteers, clear task descriptions and roles will be developed as needed, support will be available from the Committee and volunteers will be covered by RTA's insurance (as members). RTA will continue to recognise and celebrate the contribution of volunteers.

Measured by

Increased number of active volunteers supporting implementation of the strategy Volunteers reporting satisfaction via survey





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Goal 4 Actions	Obj	Priority	When
4a) Maintain requirements of an incorporated body	4.2 4.3	n/a	Annually
4b) Increase diversity in the committee by actively seeking at least two female and two younger (<40) members	4.2	HIGH	2024
4c) Continue to produce <i>Connections</i> magazine, as an option for members	4.1	HIGH	Ongoing
4d) Actively seek and support volunteers	4.4	HIGH	Ongoing
4e) Prepare a financial plan to support the strategy implementation	4.3	VERY HIGH	2023

Objective 4.5 RTA is identified by stakeholders as the peak body for rail trails

All the actions in this strategy support this objective, and will be considered in the communications plan.

Implementation and Review

The RTA Committee will oversee and coordinate the implementation of this strategy. Progress of actions will be monitored, and support provided as needed. If resourcing is inadequate or situations change, the actions and timeframes will be prioritised and/or updated. The strategy will be reviewed after preparation of the financial plan and communications strategy.

Progress of the strategy actions will be provided to supporters annually at the AGM, and be on the website. RTA will also share significant milestones as part of the communications plan.

To understand the impact of the strategy, RTA will conduct a survey and use other data and will share the findings. In 2025 the strategy will be evaluated and RTA will determine the next steps.





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