

*For immediate release:
April 1, 2005*

*For more information contact:
Angela Smith @ 850.748.7317*

Northwest Florida Unveils Online Interactive Trail Map

Outdoor Enthusiasts Invited to Let Their Fingers Do the Walking

Santa Rosa County, FL – Recognizing a demand for outdoor recreation and a rise among Internet users turning to the Web for travel information, Santa Rosa and Escambia Counties in Northwest Florida recently unveiled an online interactive trails map that addresses both of these trends.

The map covers Blackwater River State Forest, Historic Milton and Inland Santa Rosa County, Gulf Islands National Seashore and Coastal Region, Pensacola and Inland Escambia County. It features scores of trails for hiking, biking, canoeing, kayaking, and horseback riding.

While some people might not draw a link between enjoying these nature-based activities and surfing the Web, tourism leaders in Northwest Florida view them as closely related. The fact is that tens of millions of Americans are letting their fingers do the walking, *then* their feet. In other words, they are researching hiking and a variety of other recreational activities online before they embark on their travels.

More and more these travels are focused on the great outdoors. Eco-tourism is the fastest growing market in the tourism industry with an annual growth rate of five percent worldwide, according to Travel Industry Association of America (TIA).

Northwest Florida with its sugar white beaches, emerald coast waters, protected pine and hardwood forests, pristine rivers, and charming towns, is a haven for eco-tourists. The region's new interactive trails map, underwritten by VISIT FLORIDA, provides a channel for communicating this to tourists.

“We saw an opportunity and, moreover, a responsibility to share our natural resources with outdoor enthusiasts even before they touch the ground,” said Kathy Newby, Executive Director of the Santa Rosa Co. Tourist Development Council.

—MORE—

“We want to share our passion for nature with the rest of the world,” she added. “Our hope, of course, is that once people experience our trails online, they will want to experience them firsthand.”

While exploring trails and parks in Santa Rosa and Escambia Counties, visitors to the Northwest Florida Online Interactive Trails Map, can also learn about location, trail length/surface, skill level, landscape, possible encounters with wildlife, birding tips, and more. The trails map is located at www.beaches-rivers.com/trailsmap. It is also accessible through Santa Rosa County’s official visitor information website www.beaches-rivers.com by clicking on the “trail maps” link.

—30—

NOTE TO EDITORS AND REPORTERS:

We are happy to facilitate interviews upon requests. We have people who know the ins and outs of this region – in terms of the great outdoors – like the back of their hands. We can also provide quality photos.

Also, here are some story ideas/angles you might want to consider:

- Americans are increasingly DEMANDING recreational activities. They want to escape the hectic pace of every day life and enjoy nature. They want to get back to basics.
- Family hiking: Hiking has taken on a whole new meaning. It’s not just about serious hikers. It’s about families wanting to enjoy the great outdoors together. It’s about fun.
- Leave no trace behind. Why more and more people are taking care of the earth. How can people enjoy nature without disturbing it? And, what Northwest Florida is doing to protect nature and educate tourists.
- The Panhandle Trace Walk: see attached. A once-a-year tradition that makes for an excellent story. Consider joining the hike, following one person’s experience, or doing a photo journal.
- High tech hikers: The Web is only the beginning. Outdoor enthusiasts are increasingly toting a whole bagful of gadgets from GPS devices to mobile phones to MP3 players. See what outdoor experts in Northwest Florida have to say.

- The health benefits of hiking, biking, canoeing, and kayaking. How getting in shape can be not only fun but also unbelievably beautiful. Take Northwest Florida for instance.