



7 Planning a Self-guided Trail

Trails are marked routes or paths which lead through an area. Self-guided trails provide interpretation at a series of stops along the trail, either in the form of a brochure, booklet, interpretive sign or by means of an audiotape. Although self-guided trails are not as dynamic as walks with a personal guide, they have the advantage of being available to visitors at all times.

Trail design

Trail length and layout

Self-guided trails are usually short (0.5 to 1.5 km) and shouldn't take much longer than half an hour to complete at a leisurely pace. Their main purpose is not to test people's fitness, but to stimulate their interest and enhance their appreciation of the area.

If you are laying out a trail for the first time, you can decide whether it will be circular or linear. Visitors tend to prefer circular (loop) trails because they know that they'll finish where they started off. Loop trails have the additional advantage that they can be designed to be followed in one direction with sequential stops. Linear trails may lead to a specific feature of interest such as a viewpoint or waterfall. This requires visitors to come and go on the same trail which creates two-way traffic.

Stopping points

Self-guided trails usually include numbered stops where visitors can look at special features of interest. These include scenic viewpoints, places of cultural or historical value, rivers, caves, striking examples of plants, animals or ecological interactions, fossils and geological features.

How many stops should there be along the trail? There is no rule, but anything from five to 15 stops (maximum) is usual. Bear in mind that it requires effort and concentration to read a brochure or sign and that visitors are there primarily for their enjoyment. In general, stops are spaced out so that

Visitors at a stopping point along the Dassie Trail (Pretoria NBG).



they are not in full view of one another. They should be on fairly level ground, with enough space for two or three people to pause without blocking the trail.

Accessibility

An important consideration in trail design is accessibility. Every effort should be made to plan trails without barriers or obstacles so that they are accessible to *all* visitors, including the elderly and people with disabilities.

A trail with steps or with an uneven surface will automatically exclude parents with prams, people in wheelchairs, those who are frail and the temporarily disabled (people on crutches, pregnant mothers). Accessible trails are those which can be approached, entered and used by *everyone*. In practice this means:

- Paths which are wide enough for wheelchairs (minimum width 1.2 m). Wider paths benefit everyone as they allow people to walk next to each other and chat.
- Ramps instead of steps.
- Path gradients not steeper than 1:12.
- Pathways with a hardened, non-slip surface.
- Accessible, level rest areas.
Wheelchairs have a turning circle of 1.5 m.
- Clear signage and directions with text large enough for poorly sighted people to read.
- Signs, posters and exhibits which are within easy reach of children and people in wheelchairs.



Wide paths with an even surface benefit everyone.



A trail marker along the Dassie Trail (Pretoria NBG).

Consider access and barrier-free design from the start. It is much easier to do this at the planning stage of trail design than to do it later. It is advisable to consult people experienced in barrier-free design (e.g. Eco-Access) *before* and during the planning stage.

Interpreting the trail

Interpretation may be provided along the trail in the form of a brochure or booklet; on interpretive signs; or by means of an audiotape. This chapter will focus on brochures and signs.

Brochures or Signs?

Brochures and signs each have certain advantages and disadvantages, depending on the circumstances. When choosing which would be best for your trail, think about your situation and consider the following:

Consideration	Brochures	Signs
Initial setup	Numbered stops along the trail Weatherproof brochure dispenser filled with brochures OR sell brochures at the entrance point Printing/copying of brochures	Production of outdoor signs Installation of signs at stops along the trail
Maintenance	Replenish brochures (daily or weekly) Reprint/photocopy when necessary	Check regularly for vandalism and replace when necessary Clean signs
Advantages	Can be offered in different languages Visitors can take them home	Interpretation available at all times to everyone Easier to read
Possible disadvantages	Littering (of brochures) Reading a trail brochure requires more effort (to match the text with numbered stops) Cost: printing/photocopying large numbers of brochures is expensive	Visual impact of signs (detracts from natural scenery)

Choosing a theme

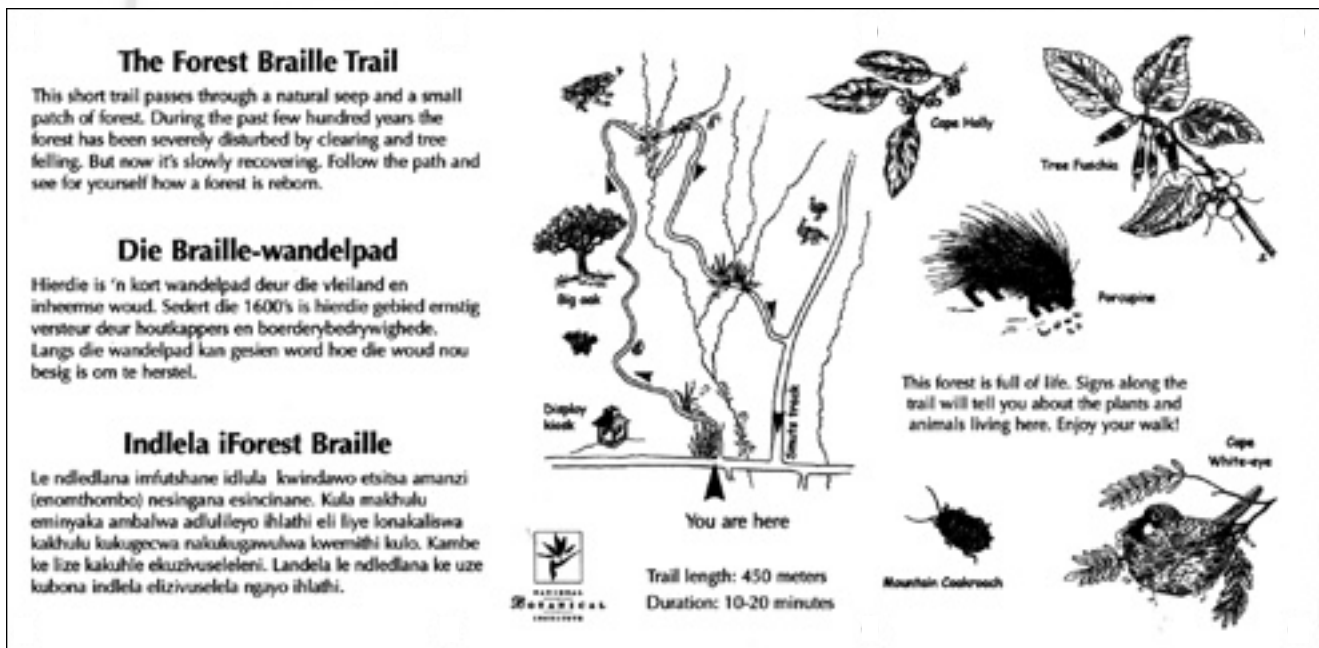
A good self-guided trail has a theme and *each stop is related to that theme*. This will have a much greater impact and will be more memorable than a trail with unrelated stops.

Start by walking the trail several times and make a note of anything unusual or interesting which catches your eye. Create a sketch map of the trail and mark in all the potential stops. Remember that plants are seasonal, so make sure that each feature will be clearly visible throughout the year.

Then start brainstorming ideas for different themes (as discussed in chapter 3) and look at your potential stops. The theme is like a story thread running through the trail and shows the relationship between the stops. Choose a theme which links most of the stops, and leave out the ones which don't fit in.

You will also need to think of a name for the trail. Remember that this name will help to advertise it and needs to appeal to your visitors. Simple names such as 'Waterfall Trail' and 'Forest Trail' are boring and unlikely to get many people excited. Names such as 'Trail of the Forest Giants' or 'The Kettlespout Falls Trail' refer to some outstanding feature along the trail. 'The Enchanted Forest' creates a sense of mystery.

Introductory sign to the Forest Braille Trail (Kirstenbosch NBG).



The Forest Braille Trail

This short trail passes through a natural seep and a small patch of forest. During the past few hundred years the forest has been severely disturbed by clearing and tree felling. But now it's slowly recovering. Follow the path and see for yourself how a forest is reborn.

Die Braille-wandelpad

Hierdie is 'n kort wandelpad deur die vleiland en inheemse woud. Sedert die 1600's is hierdie gebied ernstig versteur deur houtkappers en boerderybedrywighede. Langs die wandelpad kan gesien word hoe die woud nou besig is om te herstel.

Indlela iForest Braille

Le ndledlana imfutshane idlula kwindawo etsisa amanzi (enomthombo) nesingana esincinane. Kula makhulu eminyaka ambalwa adlulileyo ihlathi eli liye lonakaliswa kakhulu kukugcwisa nakukugawulwa kwemithi kulo. Kambe ke lize kakuhle ekuzivuseleleni. Landela le ndledlana ke uze kubona indlela elizivuselela ngayo ihlathi.

Trail length: 450 meters
Duration: 10-20 minutes



Start with an introduction

Whether you are using brochures, signs or audio tapes, it is a good idea to have an introductory sign at the beginning of the trail. This sign has to 'advertise' the trail and usually contains the following elements:

- Welcome to (the name of the trail)
- A brief introduction to the theme of the trail and why this is of interest to visitors
- Length and duration of the walk
- A plan or map of the trail route, showing starting and finishing points

If brochures are only available from the entrance paypoint, this could be mentioned on the introductory sign.

Writing the text

This is similar to writing interpretive signs and the same guidelines apply (see Chapter 6). It is important that each interpretive stop refers to a feature along the trail which is clearly visible throughout the seasons. The purpose of the text is to draw attention to this feature, to explain its significance and how it relates to the theme of the trail. As always, the most successful texts are those which relate the subject to something which the reader has personally experienced. A humorous title also helps to draw attention.

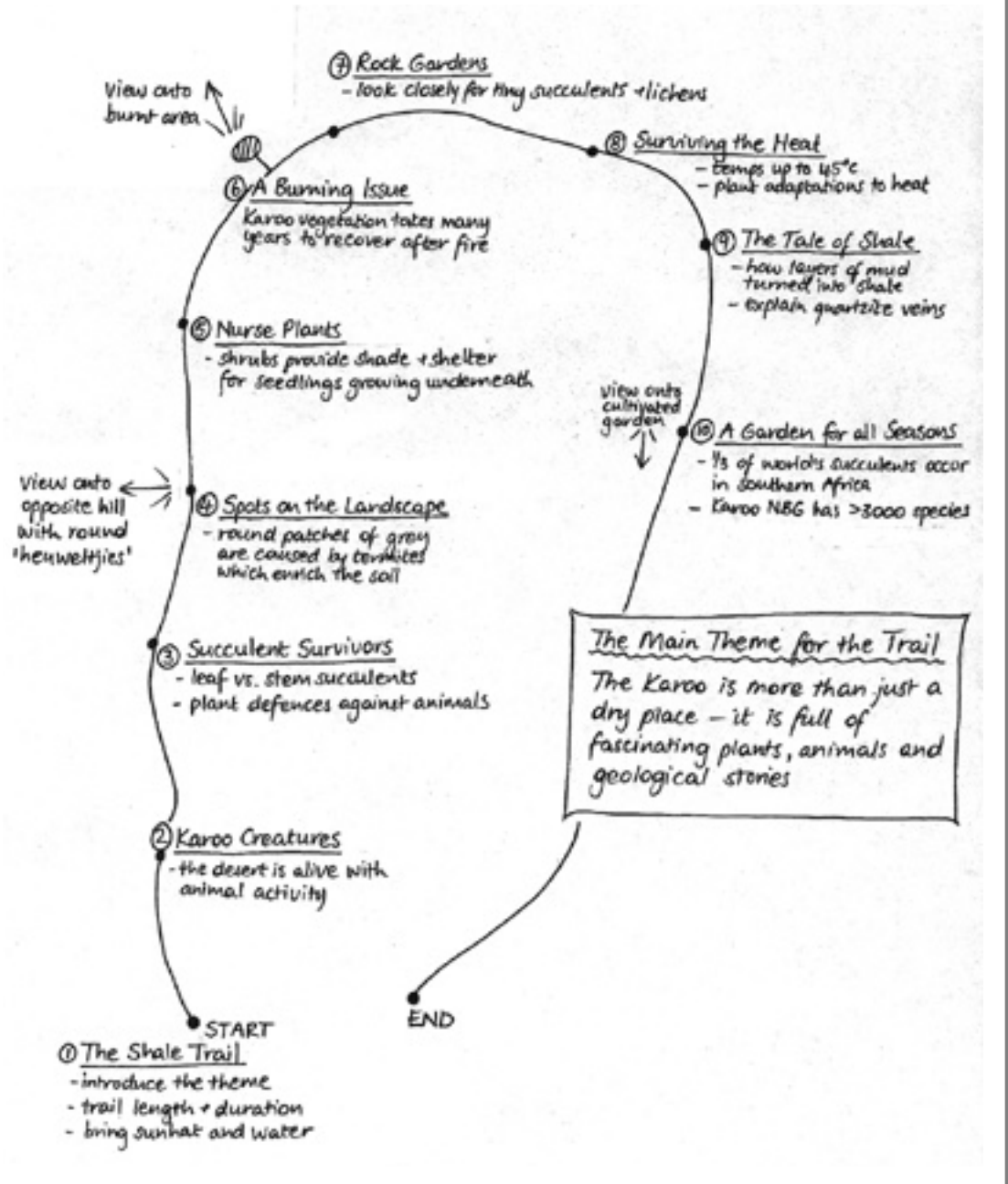
Trail maintenance

Interpretive trails require special attention in addition to regular maintenance of the paths. You need to ensure that the sign subject is clearly visible at all times of the year and not overgrown by vegetation. In many cases this requires some careful trimming, otherwise the subject itself may be removed!

It is advisable to walk the trail with the person or team responsible for maintenance and ensure that they understand the purpose of each sign and what it refers to. In this way, they will be sensitised to the interpretive role of the trail, and help to keep the living displays in shape.

Planning an Interpretive Trail

The Karoo National Botanical Garden lies in a semi-desert region of South Africa. The garden is famous for its succulent collection and spectacular displays of flowers in spring. There is a short circular trail which leads up a 'koppie' (hill) to a viewpoint, but for much of the year the natural vegetation is dry and looks rather boring. We decided to develop a self-guided trail which would encourage people to look closely and discover the 'secrets' of the Karoo – the animals, flowers and tiny plants hidden among the rocks.



The Turraea Trail

The Turraea Trail is a section of the Natal National Botanical Garden which receives a lot of visitor traffic. It is therefore an excellent route as a self-guided trail. We have set up a series of interpretive signs on this trail with a focus on the ecology of the area, trying to inspire in visitors a sense of wonder and interest in nature. We have found that the signs which are written in English and in Zulu are very well read. Vandalism has been a small problem, mainly on those signs in the more remote hidden areas.

The most popular sign is one titled "A real stinker!", which invites visitors to smell the leaves of a particularly odiferous plant. I think the sensory involvement makes this sign very effective. Signs do need to be right in front of whatever they are interpreting. Any confusion as to the subject of a sign causes visitors to lose interest quickly. We've also found that the signs need regular cleaning and maintenance.

We are developing another self-guided trail in the garden called the Forest Footpath. This also follows a fairly popular trail through some indigenous forest in the garden. Using a brochure and corresponding numbered poles, we hope to draw visitors who don't usually explore the forest into this area. The brochure has about 12 stops along the trail, and the emphasis is on a hands-on approach as far as this is possible. We haven't got the trail going yet, and one of the challenges still facing us is how to distribute the brochures. They should ideally be paid for by the visitors. We've found that interpretation is not easy, but remembering our goals and trying to head towards them has kept us going.

John Roff – Interpretive Officer, Natal NBG.

