

BECHYNĚ DECLARATION ON **THE MARKING OF WALKING ROUTES IN EUROPE**

Under the auspices of the European Ramblers' Association (ERA), delegates of 24 walking and path marking organisations from 17 European countries met at Bechyně in the Czech Republic from 28 April to 2 May 2004 for the first European conference on the marking of walking routes. A delegate from the Israel Trails Committee also attended this conference as an observer. Among its total membership, the ERA represents more than 5 million walkers.

The participants agreed unanimously on the importance of design, implementation, maintenance and appreciation of marked walking routes and footpaths in Europe.

They declared the following:

- Over the course of the past hundred years, marked walking routes have become an integral and widely recognised element of the European landscape. They contribute in an important way to the protection and understanding of the natural environment, to our knowledge of historic places and to our joint European history and heritage in the widest possible sense.
- Path marking, which began in some parts of Europe more than 130 years ago, is carried out in the majority of cases by walking organisations, thanks to the voluntary efforts of many thousands of people. Over the years these people have made up one of the most important groups of volunteers in Europe. The walking organisations are proud of this tradition.
- The systems of signing and waymarking found in the various regions of Europe have now become a part of the heritage of those regions.
- Since 1969, the various member organisations of the ERA have worked on the creation of a network of 11 European Paths (E-paths) that today is almost complete. This work has significantly contributed, and continues to contribute, to the mutual understanding and friendly relationships between European nations by

developing cross-border and international connections. Importantly, it also reflects the rapid and significant development of relationships between the major walking organisations in the new member states of the European Union and those from already established member states.

The conference participants unanimously agree on the following general principles for the development of walking routes in Europe:

1. The existing marking systems must be developed in such a way that all walking routes meet the basic requirements of walkers and the standards for marked walking routes. These requirements and standards are described in the appendix to this declaration. The marks and signs used by the member organisations of ERA should be protected and respected.
2. In order to maintain and extend the network of marked walking routes, it is necessary to defend and support rights of access for, and opportunities for access to, the countryside for everyone, at least to the extent to which these exist today in the various European countries.
3. The diversity of marking systems in different parts of Europe is not an obstacle to the mobility of walkers along marked paths. But notification of changes in the marking system should be given on the boundaries between two different systems, as well as publicised more generally to walkers.
4. Eventual standardisation of marking systems between European regions or countries cannot be effected except through mutual agreement. Any external pressure for standardisation can only worsen the situation, resulting in increased costs, confusion, loss of volunteers and loss of the historical identity of the marking systems.
5. To ensure the coherence of path marking in Europe, it is enough that the same basic principles are applied on all marked footpaths (see point 1).

6. To implement these principles, to establish fully the infrastructure of European paths (E-paths) and to extend these paths east and southeast into the countries that are to join the European Union, the support of the EU will be necessary. This in turn will support the development of cooperation between European countries and regions, the protection of the natural environment, the appreciation of cultural heritage and the value of tourism.

This declaration has been agreed unanimously by the first European conference on the marking of walking routes. It will be submitted for approval at the 35th annual meeting of the European Ramblers' Association ERA (EWV, FERP) at Brilon, Germany, 9 October 2004.

Bechyně (Czech Republic), 30 April 2004