

Imagine walking up to a trailhead... There's a sign with the expected trail map, a bear advisory posted last spring, and some rules tacked up behind plexiglass. But there can also be an instant link to a wealth of current information using the smartphone in your pocket. Welcome to the trailhead QR.

Quick Response (or QR) codes are a rapidly emerging media tool. You've seen these square-shaped black-and-white codes in stores and magazines. Are you ready to put QRs to work in your favorite outdoor space? It can be simple.

You can use QR codes to quickly and easily put information on the trail. The code is a picture that smartphones can translate into a web address. Users just point a smartphone's camera at the QR code, and in a moment (if there's cellphone coverage) the phone will access current trail information, tips, interpretive materials, a trail user census or questionnaire... or anything relevant to using that particular trail. See how the North Carolina Arboretum is using QR codes, or this short video from Lake Metroparks in Ohio that explains how their new system works.

To create your own QR, you just need a web address and content of your choosing, and a free QR code generator app. There are several sites out there like these, <http://www.qrstuff.com/>, or <http://qrcode.kaywa.com>. All you have to do is follow the instructions on the generator app, and you just created a code that you can print for use at the trailhead, a visitor center, nearby lodging, or bike rental and sporting goods stores. QR technology is license free, so you can easily adapt this free tool for use within your organization. It's easy to add QR codes as an image to your website, blog, or printed publications too.

There are a number of different ways to read QR codes. The easiest is to take a smartphone and use a QR code reader app like the Google Goggles, which can scan any code and immediately launch the content in a web browser.

The possibilities are wide open. A QR code at the trailhead can allow quick access to a digital trail map. At an interpretive sign, a QR code can enable visitors to learn about history or local wildlife, or post to Facebook that they are visiting the site. You can start turning users into advocates by using QR codes to share your organization's membership invitation. QR codes can be installed as easily as putting a small sticker on existing signposts, and the information they channel can be changed at any time just by keeping the associated web page up to date, without anyone needing to run out and re-post the trailheads! If you've seen a QR in the wild, send us a note and tell us about it!

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