



STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK



Schoharie Aqueduct by Stefanie Obkirchner

Introduction



Welcome Aboard! Thank you for volunteering to steward the NYS Canalway Water Trail. We hope you enjoy caring for the Water Trail, meeting and greeting paddlers and visitors, and sharing your knowledge and enthusiasm for the waterway with others. Being a steward should be fun and rewarding.

Iconic trails and waterways rely upon stewardship efforts to develop and maintain destination appeal. It is this intentional, ongoing maintenance and care that make quality trails – and lasting memories – possible.

New York State and the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor (Erie Canalway) will mark a special year in 2025 - the bicentennial of the completion of the original Erie Canal. In anticipation of this momentous occasion as well as projected increased use of the 450-mile NYS Canalway Water Trail, Erie Canalway launched the Canalway Water Trail Stewardship Program in 2021. Our goal is to grow to full coverage (450 miles of stewarded trail) by 2025. Like the Water Trail itself, the program will include the Erie, Cayuga-Seneca, Champlain, and Oswego canals, but does not include the Cayuga and Seneca lakes. The Canalway Water Trail Stewardship Program will focus on general upkeep of launch sites and the waterway, improving public access, and interacting with and educating trail users.

Stewarding the Water Trail

Stewardship sections are divided into approximately 10-mile stretches of the NYS Canalway Water Trail. Each section includes one or more launch sites. Your efforts will center primarily on launch sites -- including parking areas, picnic tables, and other surrounding infrastructure-- in addition to the Water Trail itself.

Your stewardship also includes an ambassadorship role with the public. Interacting and educating visitors should be a fun yet important part of your job.

Time Commitment

We ask that you visit your stewardship section(s) at least twice a month between **May 1 and October 31** for at least one calendar year. The recommended level of effort is 4-6 hours a month per volunteer. When a section is adopted by a group, each volunteer should still plan on volunteering 4-6 hours a month. Group members can communicate via their Primary Steward.

Responsibilities

Stewards have four main responsibilities. This checklist is intended to serve as a guide. You may decide you are not able to perform all of these tasks. We encourage you to use your own unique strengths and interests as you perform your stewardship activities.

1 MONITOR AND PERFORM LIGHT MAINTENANCE and cleanup at launch site and parking areas

- ☐ Check on launch/access areas: light maintenance, landscape clean-up, litter pick-up
- ☐ Prune and maintain portage trails and/or shoreline
- ☐ Identify and report invasive species (landside & aquatic) – specific training required
- ☐ Pick up litter – informally or organized landside clean ups
- ☐ Preventative maintenance, checks of facilities (excluding locks)

2 CLEAN UP LIGHT DEBRIS that has accumulated on the water

- ☐ Collect accumulated debris around the docks and along the shoreline
- ☐ Pick up debris and trash in the water
- ☐ Identify and remove invasive species – specific training required

3 BE THE “EYES AND EARS” on the trail and report issues

- ☐ Identify and report dangerous water conditions:
Strainers, high water levels, mud-covered or otherwise unusable ramps
- ☐ Inspect and monitor section, including access areas, campsites, and any portage trails
- ☐ Communicate about damage, vandalism to launch areas, and stolen signs
- ☐ Communicate updated information for guidebooks, online resource, etc.
- ☐ Communicate positive occurrences in terms of volunteer accomplishments:
Trail user interactions, issues corrected, trail use trends, and so forth
- ☐ Identify and report invasive species – specific training required

4 ACT AS FRIENDLY AMBASSADORS

- ☐ Greet and interact with canal users
- ☐ Answer common questions and share information about the Water Trail

In addition to launch sites, you may encounter paddlers at locks. When interacting with Water Trail users as a friendly ambassador, the most common topics you are likely to encounter are:

- The Water Trail, nearby launch areas and locks, and available services and points of interest in local communities
- Safety measures, such as current water levels, movable dams, the importance of life vests, carrying a whistle, creating a float plan
- Basic information about going through a lock, how to prepare, and who to call
- Canal heritage
- “Leave No Trace” principles, limiting the spread of aquatic invasive species, and other conservation messages
- Share “Clean, Drain, Dry” aquatic invasive species messaging/education

Please note: Stewards are not allowed to remove trees or landscaping, signs/sign posts, picnic tables, docks or ramps, and any other fixed structures. If you see safety hazards or maintenance or repairs that are beyond your scope, please notify us right away (*see Reporting below*).



What to Have on Hand

- Steward T-shirt - Wear your shirt so that people can identify you. Your shirt also sends a visual message that people are caring for the waterway.
- *NYS Canalway Water Trail Guidebook & Map Set* – Use it as a reference or show it to paddlers so that they know it's available.
- Supply kit, including trash bags, gloves, masks, and first aid kit.
- Mobile phone – Helpful in case of emergency.
- Equipment and Tools – Bring the tools you need for the job at hand. Here are things that will be especially helpful: hedge clippers/pruning shears, rake, broom, small saw, wheelbarrow.
- Kayak or canoe, life vest, whistle, light – if going in the water.

Not Allowed: Chainsaw, heavy machinery or equipment, other power equipment

It is recommended that Stewards have the first aid kit available. Stewards should be familiar with nearby transportation and emergency service facilities and providers; a mobile phone is also recommended.

How to Communicate

Once you get started with your volunteer tasks, if you have concerns or questions, please contact the Program Manager at Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor.

If you encounter a situation requiring immediate attention, such as an injured person or the need for water rescue, call 911 right away.

If you notice an issue that needs attention such as downed trees, damage to docks, or vandalism, you will submit the online **Water Trail Issue Report**, which will be forwarded to the appropriate agency.

Each month between May and October, you will submit the online **Water Trail Steward Report** to let us know of the hours you spent, what tasks you performed, how many people you encountered, and additional information that will help us with the program. Each volunteer within a group will submit their own report.

Both the Water Trail Issue Report and the Water Trail Stewardship report can be found on our website, www.eriecanalway.org/watertrail.

Reporting

Please use the **Water Trail Issue Report** to provide safety hazards or maintenance needs that you see that need immediate attention or are beyond the scope of your stewardship duties. We will contact the appropriate agency to respond.

Please use the **Water Trail Steward Report** to provide a report each month summarizing your volunteer activities. Each volunteer within a group can submit their own report.

Insurance and Liability

As a steward, you are accorded insurance protection as provided by law and liability insurance coverage, provided that you are acting within the scope of the Stewardship Program.

All volunteers must be at least 12 years old. Minors (ages 12-17) shall be supervised at all times - one supervisor is required for every six minors. Minors may not operate power equipment of any kind.

Emergencies & Risk Management

If you, someone in your group, or a visitor encounters an injury or medical issue, please contact 911 or get someone else to do so. If you have first aid/CPR certification, you may offer assistance after you have called 911. You are not expected to provide first aid to others.

Be familiar with nearby transportation and emergency service facilities and providers in case you or a trail user is in need. Do not drive or park your motor vehicle on the Canalway Trail unless necessary to respond to a medical emergency.

How to Handle Difficult Encounters

As volunteer stewards, you are in the position to assist and educate Water Trail users.

While you can expect to have positive interactions with the public, it is helpful to be prepared in case you encounter an aggressive or upset person while volunteering. It is even possible that your attempt of sharing advice or intervening in a person's activity may become upsetting to them. If you approach a Water Trail user to offer help or advice, please do so with respect and without making any assumptions about their level of

outdoor experience. If they are receptive to your recommendation, great! If not, please do not resort to persistence or an authoritative approach.

However well intended, volunteers do not have the authority to direct the public to correct behaviors. The most that you can do is make a request or suggestion. Volunteers must know when to walk away from a situation. If conversations become heated, please remember that both you and the person you are communicating with are visiting the Water Trail to have a positive experience. Do your best to de-escalate a situation and walk away if you feel unsafe or if the person is not receptive to your suggestion or request.

Remember that 911 calls are intended for emergency situations only. Think carefully before calling 911 as to whether the situation constitutes an emergency.

Resources like [Verbal Judo](#) (which emphasizes de-escalating situations) and the [“Authority of the Resource”](#) technique recommend gently persuading trail users to make better choices. Tactics such as giving people the benefit of the doubt, building a rapport, and approaching situations with empathy are encouraged within these frameworks. Volunteers can investigate these as well as [Mental Health First Aid](#) to learn more about helping and interacting with others while in the outdoors.

Recognition

Erie Canalway will recognize the work of stewards at the end of the season. Help us spread the word about the great work you and your fellow Stewards are doing. Let us know who in your group is doing great work and also feel free to post on social media.

Social Media

Share photos and stories from your stewardship activities on social media to foster excitement, interest, and awareness of the NYS Canalway Water Trail and the Stewardship Program. You can share on Facebook at [Facebook.com/groups/NYSCanalwayWaterTrail](https://www.facebook.com/groups/NYSCanalwayWaterTrail) and Instagram (@eriecanalway).

Contacts & Communication

Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor

Report monthly volunteer activities using the online **Water Trail Steward Report**. Report issues or problems using the online **Water Trail Issue Report** or by contacting program manager Mona Caron. Canal Corp Division and Section Office information is included below for your reference, but please make Erie Canalway your first point of contact. For medical emergencies or water safety/rescue, always call 911. Please don't hesitate to contact us with questions, concerns, or information about your section or to request additional supplies. Contact:

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Mobile: 518-429-9068

Website: eriecanalway.org/watertrail

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/NYSCanalwayWaterTrail

NYS Canal Corporation

Albany Division Office	518-449-6036
Fort Edward Section	518-747-4613
Waterford Section	518-233-8575
Fonda Section	518-853-3823
Syracuse Division Office	315-423-2080
Utica Section	315-733-9530
Lysander Section	315-695-2210
Lyons Section	315-871-4300
Buffalo Division Office	716-686-4400
Albion Section	585-589-5689



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