

# MiSustainable Holland

## About this series

The MiSustainable Holland column is a collection of community voices sharing updates about local sustainability initiatives.

## This Week's Sustainability Framework Theme:

**Environmental Awareness/Action:** Environmental education and integrating environmental practices into our planning will change negative outcomes of the past and improve our future.

## Watch where you step: Hiking muddy trails can damage more than shoes

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As we near the spring season, a lot of wet sand, dirt, and debris is left behind from melting snow. Trails used in the winter by skiers and hikers may now be free of snow, yet still icy and slushy in the shade or, worse yet, muddy.

When trails are muddy, it's best to stay on the drier sections of the trail or wait until trail surfaces dry out and firm up. Being intentional about walking on only the dry, compacted trails will go a long way toward protecting trails and nearby vegetation.

Walking on trails that are still muddy and unstable can cause long-term damage to trails, making them more susceptible to erosion, with sediment washed into nearby streams.

Trails that are very wet, with puddles perhaps covering the entire trail, are much more likely to have soil compaction and erosion problems. Soil compaction creates problems for vegetation trying to grow in the spring and makes it much more difficult for the ground to absorb water. This can cause a higher flood risk, which can lead to more erosion of rocks and roots.

When hikers and bikers encounter muddy spots in trails, it can seem natural to try to avoid the mud and go around it. But this actually can create even more erosion and can damage the vegetation surrounding the trail.

While it might not seem like that big of a problem at the moment, there are larger consequences from many people taking these small detours or chewing up mud. It can take volunteer crews hours to restore one area of a trail in the spring, fixing ruts and other damage to the trail caused during the wet season.

If you still want to go hiking in the spring, here are some tips to help reduce your impact on the wet trails:

1. Wear boots that are designed to get muddy! If you see mud covering the trail, try to stay on the trail, walking through the mud if you must. The closer you stick to the center of the trail and step on rocks, the less impact you will have on the trail.
2. Choose hikes that are on boardwalks or in sunny areas. These will tend to dry out faster. Walking on paved trails or roads is another good alternative at this time of the year.
3. If you notice you start to make deep tracks in the mud, turn and go back the way you came.
4. If you notice a muddy spot, do not walk off trail around the muddy part. This makes a new trail that encourages other people to follow the side path you made and can cause serious damage to the trail and surrounding vegetation.

■ *Maya Klanderman is the sustainability specialist at the ODC Network.*