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Planning Challenges and Opportunities in the Conservation of National Trails: The Case of the Israel National Trail

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Abstract: This study examines the planning challenges and opportunities in conserving national trails, focusing on the Israel National Trail. National trails offer crucial benefits, including health promotion, social connectivity, cultural education, ecological conservation, and economic growth. Despite their value, these trails face sustainability challenges from environmental impacts, resource constraints, and competing interests, often exacerbated by weak statutory protections. Using a case study approach, this study analyzes three decades of case law and planning committee decisions, uncovering real-life conflicts and challenges in trail conservation. This study uncovers issues like difficulties in preserving the trail's national identity, risks of route diversions, failure to realize ecological and economic potential, and inefficiencies in planning due to a lack of statutory footing. This study contributes to the emerging field of national trail research by proposing a retrospective methodology for identifying sustainability challenges based on practical realities and by emphasizing the need for comprehensive and transparent planning to ensure the sustainable future of national trails. Legal case studies prove to be a valuable tool for identifying conservation challenges and a significant database for developing a sustainable planning strategy. This methodology serves as a useful and globally relevant tool.

Keywords: land use; sustainability; national trails; spatial planning; regularization; open space; culture and leisure; conservation and development; ecological corridors

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1. Introduction

Trails have long been essential for people's mobility, serving as crucial pathways for economic, commercial, and transportation purposes. However, with the development of modern transportation networks, the importance of trails for these practical needs diminished. By the mid-20th century, trails began to be increasingly valued for recreational purposes instead [1,2]. This trend gained momentum after World War II, as the demand for free leisure activities grew [3,4]. Hiking emerged as a favored leisure activity, driving the creation of hiking trails [5]. "Today, it would be hard to identify a region of the world which does not boast of a trail or route that is sold as part of a wider tourism or recreation experience" [1] (p. 1). This led to efforts to protect and preserve valuable landscapes and sites through legislation, such as the National Trails Act 1968 in the United States [6] (p. 1).

Hiking trails were soon recognized for their multifaceted benefits beyond recreation: health-wise, walking and hiking contribute to both physical and mental well-being; socially, trails serve as communal spaces, fostering community bonds and social networks [7,8]; culturally and educationally, they provide a medium to imparting knowledge about the land, heritage values, historical landmarks, local traditions, and customs [6]; environmentally, trails create ecological corridors, aiding in the preservation of natural habitats [9] (p. 10); and economically, trails stimulate national and local economic growth [10], supporting diverse industries such as transportation, tourism, food, equipment, and information [2].

The successful American National Trail model, especially the Appalachian Trail, has inspired the development of similar hiking trails around the world. Today, most countries

boast hiking trails that are significant parts of their tourism experiences [1,11]. "With their rising popularity, the trails have become a priority for regulators, planners, politicians, scholars, and the general public" who have prompted their regulation and integration into national spatial planning systems [12] (p. 1). These legal mechanisms have enhanced the likelihood of the trails' long-term sustainability and protection; however, maintaining this sustainability remains an ongoing challenge due to the constant interaction of conflicting rights and competing interests over limited land resources.

Hiking trails often create tensions between land ownership rights, either private or public, and the public's right to access natural resources, requiring careful balancing of landowners' interests and the public's need for open spaces and safe access for recreation [13]. Given the complex nature of these challenges, sustaining national trails—described as "an experiment in democratic principles" [6] (p. xvii)—demands periodic reassessment to ensure their continued viability and protection.

A variety of studies have examined the sustainability challenges of trails from different perspectives. Giles [14], Marion and Leung [15], and Marion [16] have addressed the environmental aspects, focusing on managing soil erosion, vegetation damage, and wildlife disturbance along recreational trails. Social sustainability concerns, such as user preferences, access, and recreational experiences, have been explored by Giles [14] and Beeton [17]. Miller et al. [18] combined social and environmental aspects together and introduced the concept of a "recreation ecosystem" that encompasses both positive and negative interactions between recreation and the environment. Economic sustainability, relating to the financial viability and costs of trail construction and maintenance, has been discussed by Giles [14] and Stender et al. [10]. Additionally, Stender et al. [10] emphasized the importance of sustainable long-distance trail management, while Cerveny et al. [19] explored effective governance practices. Integrating these studies reveals the multifaceted complexity of these challenges and underscores the importance of developing a comprehensive strategy to conserve and ensure their sustainability. At the onset of the current study, we sought a method that would reveal a wide spectrum of challenges rather than focusing on different aspects at a time. To achieve this, we concentrated on spatial planning, which combines environmental, social, and economic considerations.

Despite growing awareness and ongoing attempts to align conservation and development goals, these objectives are still at odds, and even today, debates and tensions persist, making it a significant challenge to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes [20] (p. 409). This ongoing tension has garnered scholarly attention, especially in the context of Biosphere Reserves, such as Mount Everest, in pursuit of ways to integrate conservation and sustainable development [21]. However, national trails in this context have often been overlooked.

To narrow this gap, we chose to focus on a previously unexplored methodology in the context of trails: the collection and analysis of proceedings before spatial planning committees and courts related to trail sustainability. Examining planning procedures allows for the identification of various challenges and the development of an overall approach to sustain the trails. This legal research method involves reviewing laws, and court protocols and decisions on a particular issue. These data serve as primary information sources, reflecting real, rather than theoretical, conflicts on the trail [22,23]. Sustainability in this context means safeguarding the trail's existence and continuity, preserving its unique characteristics, and utilizing its potential to serve both present and future generations. Collecting data this way helps identify points of failure and opportunities, indicating the range of practical challenges regarding the trail.

In this study, we focused on a unique type of trail—national trails—and examined the insights gained from planning processes about the challenges affecting their sustainability. Specifically, we used the Israel National Trail as a case study. In Israel, national regulatory planning is absent; the trail was planned by environmental activists and promenades and has since faced various challenges. This research aims to understand the challenges in preserving a national trail and identify what needs to be addressed to ensure its future

sustainability. The findings reveal the disadvantages of non-comprehensive planning and offer a holistic platform for proper trail planning.

While existing studies suggest planning strategies and present models for preliminary planning of trails [24], our study contributes in two key ways. First, for countries like Israel, where no formal preliminary planning process exists, this study provides a method to retroactively identify challenges and formulate a personalized strategy that ensures the trail's sustainability, tailored to the country's and society's uniqueness. Second, it offers all countries, including those with preliminary planning, a way to assess whether their chosen strategy meets practical reality.

The research question is, therefore, what insights can be gained from the proceedings conducted before the planning committees and the courts on the challenges impacting the sustainability of national trails and the opportunities that arise from conserving them? Our primary goal was to identify the challenges that emerged during these proceedings and to understand how they impact the sustainability of the trail. Additionally, we sought to uncover the pitfalls in trail conservation revealed through the analysis of these proceedings. By revealing the opportunities that form from conserving the trail, we aim to highlight positive aspects and strategies that can enhance trail management and sustainability. We also examined whether decision-makers addressed these issues effectively to ensure the sustainability of the trail.

The importance of this study lies in its provision of a useful tool for identifying challenges and opportunities [25], and in conserving and maintaining national trails, adapted to the relevant society in which they exist.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development of Trails

Given that land resources are limited, there exists competition between important and conflicting needs: on the one hand, there are the development needs of an expanding population. On the other hand, there is the imperative to protect natural spaces for the benefit of both humanity and the preservation of flora and fauna. As Baird et al. stated, integrating the conflicting aims of conservation and sustainable development is a difficult challenge that must be reconciled [20]. Meticulous planning of land allocations is crucial to achieving an optimal response to this competition. Every decision made today can have an irreversible impact. Therefore, it is essential to proactively identify areas with high conservation value and to provide them with protection to ensure their preservation.

Spatial planning is "the deliberate social or organizational activity of developing an optimal strategy of future action to achieve a desired set of goals, for solving novel problems in complex contexts" [26] (p. 73); its purpose is to allocate resources effectively, ensuring the optimal utilization of the land resource while meeting the maximum needs of society both in the present and future [27].

An example of this is the work of scholars Mel Wilson and Travis Belote, who explored the potential of long-distance trails in conserving biodiversity across the United States against the backdrop of the growing global call for strategies to connect wilderness areas as climate change continues to reshape plant and animal habitats. In this context, long-distance hiking trails are emerging as valuable ecological corridors. Trail corridors link protected areas, forming linear chains of conservation. Wilson and Belote argue that leveraging existing trails is a pragmatic starting point in efforts to combat extinction and preserve biodiversity, given their already established infrastructure [9].

Spatial planning aims, therefore, to enhance the quality of life of all users of a given space by balancing various interests, equitably distributing resources, and addressing market failures. However, the planning process is not straightforward. It is influenced by a diverse array of considerations, some complementary and others contradictory. These include the tension between conservation and development interests, the balance between decentralization and concentration—namely the existing tension between federal/national

and state/local council planning agendas and/or regulations—and the interplay between equality and economic factors [28] (p. 26).

Sustainable development in the context of trails also requires careful planning to provide economic and social opportunities while addressing planning and environmental concerns. Trails can function as sustainable development when incorporating all three pillars of sustainability: the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural pillars [29]. Effective trail management requires careful planning, clear guidelines, construction, and maintenance to balance resource protection with development and recreation objectives, and it includes funding, governance, partnerships, conservation, infrastructure, and tourism [10,11,15,30,31]. While sustainable trail development shows promise, challenges remain in addressing all aspects of sustainability [29].

Given that international studies indicate that effectively balancing diverse interests in planning largely relies on strong legislative frameworks and enforcement measures [32], this study's significance stems from its ability to pinpoint the challenges that need to be addressed in order to safeguard national trails, which are open spaces of considerable conservation value. Sustainability in this context means safeguarding the trail's existence and continuity, preserving its unique characteristics, and utilizing its potential to serve both present and future generations.

This enables the development of a planning framework that not only achieves the sustainability objectives of the area in question but also exerts an increasing influence on the overall spatial planning.

2.2. National Hiking Trails

Hiking trails are defined and classified in various ways, often based on their purpose. Accepted definitions consider them as corridors of protected areas, natural or cultural, intended for walking, or riding (bicycle or horse), excluding motor vehicles [1] (p. 4) [33].

Among the diverse array of trails, there are unique hiking trails, known as national trails. An in-depth examination of the research literature reveals no single generalized definition of these paths. Instead, different definitions relate to various aspects. Synthesizing these various definitions yields three essential criteria for a trail to be considered a national trail. First, length: national trails are primarily long hiking trails, often stretching for hundreds of kilometers [1,2,6,12]. Second, narrative: these trails tell the story of the nation. They link and connect to sites of special importance—whether historical, cultural, or related to heritage and characteristic landscapes. By doing so, they contribute significantly to the development of feelings of identity and belonging to the place [6,34,35]. And third, recognition: for a trail to be considered a national trail, it must receive public recognition and acknowledgment as a cultural symbol of the nation. This recognition can take various forms. Formal recognition may involve legislation, as seen in the enactment of the National Trails Act in the United States. Informal recognition occurs through public perception, both locally and internationally, acknowledging the trail's significance as a national trail [6,12,34].

These three criteria can provide guidance to the planning of national trails, ensuring their existence as national symbols, maintaining continuity to prevent interruptions in historical and ecological corridors, and preserving their quality to convey the national narrative. However, this combined purpose does not stand in isolation and competes with conflicting planning interests. Development pressures—such as infrastructure, construction, and agriculture—pose challenges. The trail's vulnerability varies, influenced by factors like proximity to populated areas or potential for economic and tourism development [19]. Regulatory decisions should strike a balance between competing interests and rights, safeguarding the trail's sustainability.

2.3. Israel National Trail

The Israel National Trail traces its origins to an initiative by journalist and naturalist Avraham Tamir, who drew inspiration from another national trail—the Appalachian Trail

in the United States [36]. The realization of this idea stemmed from a project initiated by the Israel Trails Committee at the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), led by Uri Dvir, a multifaceted individual with interests in education and geography and a mentor to dozens of tour guides and students. In April 1995, after a decade of discussions, meticulous planning, and route marking, the Israel National Trail was officially inaugurated in a festive ceremony [34].

The Israel National Trail, like other national trails, encompasses a multitude of benefits, from preserving and protecting Israel's natural and heritage resources, through positively impacting the physical and mental health of users, to creating livelihood and employment opportunities for the economic well-being of citizens. These intertwined benefits elevate the trail to an open space of immense importance and conservation value [34].

The trail meets all three essential criteria for its definition as an Israeli national trail. It is a long trail, winding the length and breadth of Israel and currently stretching for 1073 km. The trail is intended to tell the story of Israel. It passes through a variety of heritage sites such as Masada, Lachish, Caesarea, and Zippori and traverses diverse landscapes, including the towering Galilee Mountains, the Sea of Galilee, the Jezreel Valleys, the Tavor, the Mediterranean Sea, the Dead Sea, the Negev Mountains, and the southern Red Sea [7]. See the route of the trail in Figure 1.

Furthermore, the trail is widely regarded by the general public as the national trail of Israel [12,34]. It is esteemed as a valuable national asset; the country's trek; an Israeli icon; the highlight of the country's trails [37–41].

The inception of the trail was far from straightforward. The members of the Trail Marking Committee, who spearheaded the process, wrestled with intricate planning questions that carried significant political, economic, and social consequences while charting its course [34] (p. 134). In addition, the Israeli land regime, which is based on layers of rights, is highly complicated, with a mixture of public and private owners, not always well identified [42]. Among the challenges encountered by the trail's founders were issues related to "undefined borders, outline plans that have not yet been distinct, and military firing zones. These complexities, coupled with concerns about potential harm to protected natural values made the laying out of the trail a difficult task" [36] (p. 7). The founders did not actively pursue statutory recognition of the trail's route with the planning authorities. While no explicit explanation exists in the documents, it is assumed that this decision aimed to avoid delays in route advancement and maintain flexibility [34] (p. 137). Although not specifically declared, this decision helped the trail's founders in maintaining their exclusivity on trail's planning for a long period.

Instead, the founders established a set of working definitions and principles and defined the mission of creating an internationally recognized long-distance trail. The trail winds in a way that extends the route significantly beyond the country's 430 km length from north to south. Most of it follows pre-existing trails, interspersed with new connection fragments that deliberately link heritage and historical sites resonate in the collective national memory, while showcasing the country's diverse landscapes. Its meticulous design ensures that hikers experience a rich tapestry of localities, people, religions, and historical narratives, with attention given to safety and security [34]. Uri Dvir, who chaired the committee for marking trails, later explained that "the original thought was that we would never change the trail" [43]. This initial vision let to a route that gained broad recognition and significant status from both the general public as well as local and national decision-makers [34,39,41]. The Israel National Trail evolved into a remarkable success story attracting thousands of hikers every year [39], and in 2012, it was also included in National Geographic's list of the 20 best hiking trails in the world [41]. However, the past three decades, it has faced planning challenges that have frequently led to transformation [12,39]. While some of the challenges pose a threat to its existence and character, others present opportunities for improvement and enhancement.



Figure 1. Israel National Trail route, 15 August 2024. Source of the base map: Survey of Israel.

As will be demonstrated below, the challenges are not theoretical. Since its inauguration ceremony in 1995, the trail's route has undergone numerous changes. In some parts, it was shortened, and in others, it was extended. Instances of blocked or diverted paths, along with documented objections to hiking along the prescribed route, further highlight the challenges. Ensuring the trail's conservation and long-term sustainability is a critical endeavor.

In various states, concerns regarding safeguarding the sustainability of national trails have prompted planners, politicians, and legislators to prioritize them on the state agenda. National trails have been anchored within national planning systems and managed through tailored mechanisms for maintenance and development. However, Israel did not follow suit, and despite trails' unprecedented success, it lacks a firm foundation within the statutory planning layer. Perplexingly, as the trail grows in popularity, a desire for regularization, in the form of adding it to the national GIS layers, appears to wane among trail planners (personal interviews with Dr. R. Katoshevski, Deputy Southern District Planner, Planning Administration, 9 August 2023; I. Ben Dov, trail marking coordinator, Israel Trails Committee, 13 August 2023; Adv. I. Hahn, environmental planner and CEO of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel from 2016 to 2023, 9 August 2023; and S. Yagel, planner and marker of trails and member of the Israel Trails Committee, 8 August 2023).

The question of trails' regularization was first addressed in a joint study conducted by Havatzelet Yahel, Rachel Katoshevski-Cavari, and Emir Galilee. The researchers reviewed existing regulatory policies related to national trails worldwide and explored planning and legal measures for preserving those trails. Their findings highlighted that the trail's absence from planning layers and its lack of binding legal status leave its continued existence dependent on the goodwill of landowners along its route. Consequently, the trail faces repeated threats from development plans and other pressures. The researchers concluded that this reality underscores the need for further examination and research [12].

3. Research Methods

In our research, we adopted Yin's [44] case study methodology, which allows for a detailed, unsequenced analysis of various data sources, including courts and planning committees protocols and decisions, as well as interviews. Case study research is a valuable and highly effective method in legal scholarship that allows researchers to achieve both practical and theoretical objectives by offering in-depth exploration of complex issues.

Often identified as a "stand-alone qualitative approach", it differs from other qualitative methods by offering a degree of flexibility and wide diversity in study design, tailored to specific research questions [45,46]. Legal case studies can provide rich, contextual insight into real-world scenarios and through qualitative analysis of court rulings and filings [22]. This content analysis approach seeks to examine the effectiveness of law as an instrument to achieve a set of policy goals and allows researchers to understand stakeholder's perceptions and behaviors in a particular legal reality [23]. It treats each legal case as a "true life story".

The documentation of the protocols and decisions of the planning committees and courts serves as a crucial reflection of real conflicts and competing interests, derived from actual disputes. This documentation encapsulates the genuine issues and challenges faced by parties involved in trail sustainability, free from the mediation of planners and policymakers. By examining this data, researchers can access authentic narratives and conflicts, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved. Applying this method in our study is innovative, as the use of such documentation is common in legal research, and it is less developed in the context of geography and planning.

Our approach involves the collection of decisions, pleadings, and protocols of case law and quasi-judicial planning committees, as well as legislation, that discussed specifically the Israel National Trail. The material includes also accompanying documentation submitted in these processes such as plans and maps.

To comprehensively gather relevant cases, we conducted a thorough search of every publicly accessible legal database available in Israel by using relevant Hebrew keywords.

By focusing on these keywords, we ensured that the cases identified are directly pertinent to our research, providing a broad and unbiased representation of the legal issues concerning the national trail. The search yielded 30 proceedings in which matters related to the national trail were raised.

However, while these data offer a broad perspective on the investigated aspects, they are inherently limited. They primarily include cases that resulted in formal decisions or judgments due to constraints of accessibility and disclosure. Proceedings that concluded without published rulings or were not filed at all—often due to legal costs—are not publicly available. To address this limitation, we drew on studies that have found the combination of legal analysis and qualitative analysis of the consequences of the regulations (or lack of them) as a productive method to identify challenges and supplemented our data collection with information from newspaper articles and online sources [32,47]. Additionally, we collected documents and conducted complementary open-ended interviews with hikers, planners, and officials from planning authorities and non-governmental organizations involved in the trail. These organizations include the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, the Israel Trails Committee, the Nature and Parks Authority, the Survey of Israel, and the Jewish National Fund.

We structured our analysis around two primary themes: threats to the trail and opportunities that can emerge from it. In doing so, we relied on the strategic management literature, particularly Dutton's work on categorizing strategic issues. Dutton's framework underscores how the categorization of issues as either threats or opportunities is pivotal in shaping effective decision-making and policy formulation [25]. By dividing our analysis into these two categories, we offer a clear and structured approach to national-level policy and decision-making. This framework enables policymakers to address the immediate risks to trail sustainability while also identifying and harnessing opportunities to enhance the trail's long-term value.

4. Results

The conservation and sustainable existence of the Israel National Trail face challenges from various aspects, necessitating a multifaceted response. The current study will present the findings related to the planning aspect. The issues of management, land rights, and legal responsibilities deserve a separate discussion.

Within this framework, we identified several challenges and opportunities in the sustainability and conservation of the national trail, which are discussed in the subsequent sections, each accompanied by relevant examples. The threats section is further divided into three subsections, corresponding to the national trail's three essential criteria—narrative, length, and public recognition—and the opportunities section is further divided into three subsections, corresponding to the three pillars of sustainability: the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural pillars.

4.1. Threats to the National Trail System

4.1.1. Diverting the Path from Its Narrative

A fundamental component of a national trail is that it serves as a means of imparting the national narrative [34] (p. 28). Therefore, its route should pass through significant landmarks of heritage and national landscape. Without keeping the story conveyed by the route, the trail loses its essence, uniqueness, and purpose. The proceedings before planning committees and courts highlight the difficulty in addressing this requirement. Below are some examples to illustrate this issue.

The first example pertains to the construction plans for residential quarters in the city of Beit Shemesh. These plans underwent an extensive planning process spanning over fifteen years, involving local, district, and national planning committees, as well as the court. The planned area included heritage sites intersecting with the route of the Israel National Trail. However, the trail was not marked on the map approved by the local committee, and once approved, it obstructed the passage.

During the objections filed against the plans' approval, arguments were raised against diverting the trail. Mr. Asael Levy, a tour guide, emphasized the significance of preserving the Israel National Trail in its original location due to the historical and heritage importance of the region, spanning from Biblical times through the Mishna and Talmud periods to the establishment of Israel. Mr. Shmuel Sivan, a resident of the area, underscored the route's importance in terms of landscape, archaeology, and botany. Both individuals urged the local committee to preserve the area and maintain the trail's existing route, recognizing its uniqueness, significance, and value as a cultural and ecological corridor [48]. Hence, diverting the path in favor of the development interest risks disrupting the continuity of the national story or omitting a crucial chapter from the nation's narrative.

Despite these concerns, the planning committees and appellate courts did not heed the request and prioritized addressing the existing housing shortage. Consequently, they ordered the diversion of the Israel National Trail. Notably, their decision discussions lack any consideration of the significance of diverting the trail from heritage sites to an unknown alternate route. This omission raises doubts about whether the altered route can adequately convey the nation's story [49–51].

This case exemplifies the challenge of maintaining the trail path as entailing national values. A similar challenge arose in another instance—a hearing held before the Appeals Subcommittee of the National Planning and Building Council regarding the construction of a tourist site in the Timna-Sasagon Valley [52].

This time, the plan intersected with the trail and involved constructing a 300-room hotel in one of Israel's most beautiful landscapes and an ecological corridor. Hence, if approved, the hotel would pose a potential threat on the values of the Israel National Trail. Unlike the case of Beit Shemesh, the subcommittee prioritized the trail, emphasized the need to explore less harmful alternatives, and ordered a significant reduction in the plan's area to protect and preserve the trail's path. Their decision underscored the importance of preserving areas designated as a showcase of the character of the land (ibid., at § 250).

The question of development needs vis-à-vis preserving the route as a means of showcasing the country's character arose in eleven additional proceedings [53–58]. All the above highlights the trail's constant vulnerability to having its route diverted to less prominent paths, thus compromising its identity as a national trail.

The absence of regulatory planning mechanisms to safeguard the trail is manifested in its omission from the planning layers within the national Geographic Information System (GIS). This absence complicates planners' ability to consider it, necessitating reliance on environmental organizations to issue warnings for each specific case (personal interview with Dr. R. Katoshevski, Deputy Southern District Planner, Planning Administration, 9 August 2023).

4.1.2. Shortening the Length of the Trail and Impairing Its Continuity

Another component of a national trail is that it extends over a significant distance. The long route serves a dual purpose: facilitating the comprehensive portrayal of "the full story of the land" and establishing and conserving an ecological corridor. Thus, its shortening or the disruption of its continuity undermine its suitability to serve as a national trail.

In this section, we will present two examples; in both cases, the trail was at risk of impairing its continuity.

Over the years, the trail has endured setbacks. One of the most significant was the cancellation of its first segment, stretching from Kibbutz Dan to Kfar Giladi, in August 2021 [59]. The trail's first section until the change is illustrated in the enlarged map on the right side of Figure 1 (dashed line in red between points A-3). This segment traversed a lush area boasting breathtaking vistas, archaeological treasures, and historic landmarks, notably the Tel Hai Courtyard (point 3), site of a heroic battle. Moreover, this segment held strategic importance as it linked the northern and southern borders of the state. Officially, safety concerns were cited as the reason for its cancellation. However, there were arguments regarding other reasons that involved conflicting interests in land use rights, pressure from

local farmers aiming to restrict access to agricultural zones, and reluctance of the municipal authorities to manage visitor influx. While the cancellation of this northernmost segment did not sever trail's continuity, it did diminish its intrinsic value. Moreover, the cancellation of the segment was made without prior public discourse or formal planning proceedings. These are not mandatory, due to the nonregulatory status of the trail. Consequently, the section's markings were swiftly erased from the landscape, disappearing from all new maps with a stroke of brush and paint.

Two years after the cancellation of the original section, a decision was reached to introduce two new segments to the trail, initiating from Mount Hermon connecting to Tel Hai Courtyard [60,61].The new sections added to the trail are depicted in pink in the enlarged map on the right side of Figure 1 (section one is illustrated as route 1–2, and section two is 2–3). While this expansion does address some of the deficits posed by the earlier cancellation, it underscores the transient nature and vulnerability of the trail. Without established regulations and mechanisms for modifications, there exists no safeguard against the potential shortening of the trail or to ensure that additions to its path meet the necessary criteria for preserving its essence as a national trail.

Another section came under risk, this time as part of road expansion in the Ta'anakhim, Jazreel Valley, northern Israel. The litigations were held by the Northern District Planning and Building Committee. After considering the arguments laid before it, the committee underscored the importance of preserving uninterrupted passage for hikers along the trail and, therefore, set guidelines for an environmental impact assessment to be carried out as a prerequisite for project advancement. Additionally, the committee ordered the planners to submit a report and stipulated that the Israel National Trail must be referenced within the report as part of the open spaces, emphasizing the preservation of continuous passage for hikers as a key criterion [62].

4.1.3. Maintaining the Quality of the User Experience

The Israel National Trail has achieved considerable popularity and established itself as a distinguished brand, both within Israel and internationally [12,34,41]. In the case of Israel, this popularity served as the foundation for meeting the third criterion: public recognition of the trail as a national trail.

A high-quality trail is one that is engaging, secure, well-maintained, and accessible, providing a cohesive experience tailored to hikers' needs. Researchers have found that the sustainability of trails relies not only on design but also on the conditions that influence the hikers' quality experience [5].

Preserving this esteemed reputation presents a planning challenge, which was explored within proceedings across four key contexts outlined below: accommodating travelers' needs, ensuring a seamless and unified experience, raising interest levels, and assessing accessibility.

Accommodating Travelers' Needs

The challenge of providing accommodation services for hikers along the trail surfaced during discussions regarding plans for the Carmel Alonim Forestry Center. The plan was initiated by the Jewish National Fund and aimed, among other things, to authorize land use for travelers' accommodation on a limited scale of six field beds for hikers of the Israel National Trail that pass through the site. In the proceedings before the local planning and building committee in Haifa and, subsequently, during an appeal, the Jewish National Fund argued that the accommodation would harmonize with the natural environment while respecting its intrinsic values. Moreover, owners of nearby bed and breakfasts expressed support for the proposed plan, perceiving it as complementary rather than competitive. However, the subcommittee rejected the Jewish National Fund's plan on the basis that there is a necessity for a comprehensive examination of accommodation needs before approval of such accommodations. The decision emphasized the importance of addressing the broader issue of services required for hikers along the Israel National Trail in a holistic approach

rather than piecemeal solutions. The subcommittee called upon the Ministry of Tourism to provide a formal position paper on the matter [63].

This example demonstrates that absence of a comprehensive planning that offers a broad perspective hindered the ability to devise an optimal solution for trail hikers. This raises concerns of decline in hikers' satisfaction over time, which could adversely impact its popularity and ultimately lead to the erosion of its reputation.

Providing a Seamless Trail Experience

Ensuring a seamless experience along a trail that traverses contiguous areas with consistent geographical features is paramount. However, challenges arise when different sections are handled by different ownership and municipal jurisdictions. This issue was highlighted in a study conducted in the United States focusing on the sustainable governance of national trails, which examined the impact of multiple ownerships and jurisdictions on long trails. The study revealed that the involvement of numerous local authorities complicates the establishment of a seamless and enduring trail experience, presenting significant hurdles in coordinating maintenance, access, and overall trail preservation efforts. In response, the study advocated for the implementation of compliance regulations to address the presence of multiple legal entities [19].

In Israel, the issue of uniformity of trail's experience surfaced during deliberations on the requests of the Elad Municipality to expand its jurisdiction over open areas, including forests of the neighboring regional councils for development reasons [64]. The Boundaries Committee that discussed the matter approved it. The discussions within the committee brought to light the fact that while regional councils have internalized the importance of preserving open spaces, this awareness is not uniformly shared among municipal authorities (ibid., pp. 13–14). The absence of a clear national policy regarding open space preservation allows each authority to dictate independently on the appearance and management of its open spaces. Consequently, there are no mechanisms to ensure an experience of unified continuity throughout the entire length.

The Level of Interest Provided by the Trail

Ensuring a high level of interest along the entire length of a national trail is imperative. However, this task becomes particularly challenging in Israel's southern regions. The presence of military activities and extensive firing zones prevents trail's alignment based on scenic landscapes and sites. These often necessary detours may lack interest and be less engaging [34] (p. 143) (Figure 1 illustrates the layout of military zones in Israel and their overlap with the trail).

Degree of Accessibility

In some of the military areas, there are no detours, and the trail passes through them, which obviously impacts its accessibility (see Figure 2). Entry into these military zones is possible but requires prior coordination with military authorities throughout the year, including weekends and holidays [65] (p. 149). This entails arranging coordination approximately ten days in advance, separately with relevant areal military officials in the Northern, Central, and Southern Commands. However, information regarding communication methods and coordination procedures is not clearly provided and is solely available in Hebrew. This poses a significant burden on hikers, especially tourists, who seek continuous completion. Furthermore, the fact that the Israel National Trail is not marked on military maps complicates the matter even more (conversation with the Northern Command Coordinator on 22 March 2023). The military does not actively inform the public about the necessity of prior coordination, and hikers are unaware or choose to disregard this requirement (personal interviews with L.R.; A.T.; H.T.; and G.N., dated 28 March 2023). Consequently, the trail is not freely and regularly accessible throughout the year, a fact that significantly detracts from its quality.



Figure 2. A warning sign for entering a fire area prohibits entry to the area, including on Saturdays and holidays. The sign prominently displays the Israel National Trail symbol in its three colors, orange, blue and white, guiding travelers to the trail's path. Source: Supergan, L. Israel National Trail Youtube 2016. Available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LMJKCVGnXM&t=10s, accessed on 3 September 2024 [66].

The four challenges cited above highlight the difficulties stemming from the absence of guiding principles, national regulations, and mechanisms aimed at ensuring a comfortable, engaging, high-quality, consistent, and safe experience for users.

4.2. Opportunities

Along with the threats confronting the trail, there are also opportunities to be seized. A well-crafted planning strategy, attuned to societal needs, can harness these opportunities to enhance various aspects of the country's economy, welfare, and overall quality of life. The Israel National Trail presents several such opportunities, and the key lies in recognizing, seizing, and effectively realizing them.

4.2.1. Creating an Ecological Corridor

The significance of establishing ecological continuity, as discussed in the research literature [9], was a central consideration in decisions made by various planning committees. For instance, when deliberating the proposal to upgrade and expand the coastal railway between Hof Carmel Station and Shfayim, the planning committee emphasized the necessity of planning wide crossings to ensure the uninterrupted passage of both animals and hikers, including those using the Israel National Trail [67].

In another case regarding a zoning plan for a nature reserve area in Givat Alonim, the planning committee not only highlighted the importance of nature reserves but also mandated the updating of the Israel National Trail's route within the plan's appendix and stipulated that it should be clearly marked to ensure its preservation. It further noted that the plan serves to regulate and enhance the array of open spaces designated for utilization and protection at both national and district levels. Moreover, it fosters continuity and linkage between natural and open areas while incorporating agricultural zones into the overall landscape [58].

The significance of preserving an ecological corridor was also emphasized during the above-mentioned deliberation on the Elad municipality's request to expand its jurisdiction. Representatives from the Jewish National Fund argued that any narrowing of the corridor could render it irrelevant [64] (p. 3).

4.2.2. Economic Development

Environmental planning has both positive and negative impacts on property values and residents' well-being [13]. Planning that offers the public options for utilizing open spaces enhances welfare and fosters shared public benefits, among which increase property value [68]. An illustration of this principle is evident in the approval of a plan to establish Israel Defense Forces colleges in the Jerusalem Hills. The decision highlighted the plan's substantial contribution to surrounding neighborhoods by creating a high-quality public scenic promenade designed to connect with the Israel National Trail nearby. The combina-

tion of the trail and promenade aims to provide accessibility to neighboring communities and offer picturesque views of open areas, Ein Kerem, and archaeological sites [69].

Enhancing residents' quality of life is also influenced by planning that addresses the economic needs of current and future local inhabitants. This is exemplified by the case of the Ein Mahal local council, an Arab minority population, located in the periphery, with a low socio-economic ranking, situated next to the Israel National Trail.

Recognizing the trail's role in attracting travelers and tourists, the planning committee viewed the trail as a catalyst for creating favorable planning conditions to bolster community development and economic prosperity. Consequently, it designated an area within the community to be developed as a camping site linked to the trail, positioning the community on the tourist map [70]. This decision resonates with the emerging strong trend of "sensitive tourism" which is "conscious tourism that considers the needs and expectations of local communities and does not have a negative impact on the surrounding natural environment" [30] (p. 32).

4.2.3. Social and Community Enhancement

In addition to ecological and economic opportunities, sustainability includes significant social and cultural aspects. The aforementioned case of Ein Mahal provides a clear example of how the Israel National Trail can foster communal enterprise and enhance social interactions.

The local council, recognizing the trail's potential to attract visitors and stimulate economic growth, also created an avenue for communal enterprise that benefits the local community. The inclusion of the trail is a platform for increasing public recognition of the council's residents, facilitating encounters between different populations, and strengthening the community's sense of pride and empowerment.

Strengthening social connections was also a key consideration in the case of Bedouin settlements Darijat and Makhul in the northern Arad Valley. The plan's explanatory notes underscored the Israel National Trail's potential to facilitate mutual exposure between trail hikers and neighborhood residents and, therefore, recommended planning an alternative route that will pass through the settlements and attract visitors [71]. Those cases illustrate the potential for national trails to foster interactions between different segments of the population, promoting social cohesion and cultural exchange. They can create opportunities for meaningful engagement that includes even sleepovers and extended exposure to different cultures and ways of life of peripheral communities, including minorities, showcasing the trail's role in fostering social sustainability.

5. Findings

Our study examined the challenges and opportunities impacting the sustainability of national trails, with a specific focus on the Israel National Trail, through a comprehensive analysis of legal and planning proceedings before courts and planning committees. Legal case studies proved to be a valuable tool for identifying conservation challenges and a significant knowledge base. The findings reveal a series of interconnected issues that are critical to the trail's long-term sustainability.

Conveying National Story and Identity: One of the primary challenges identified was the difficulty in preserving the trail's national significance and unique identity. This issue emerged prominently in 13 proceedings, underscoring the delicate balance between development and the trail's role in conveying the national narrative (see Section 4.1.1). The data reflect a persistent struggle to maintain the trail's identity as a symbol of national heritage while accommodating necessary developmental pressures. This difficulty is often exacerbated by decisions to divert the trail away from sites of special importance and significance to the nation, which can dilute the connection between the trail and the historical and cultural landmarks it was originally designed to highlight.

Trail Vulnerability: The lack of robust regulatory planning mechanisms, coupled with its omission from the national Geographic Information System (GIS), increases the trail's

vulnerability. Without proper regulatory safeguards, planners often rely on warnings from environmental organizations, making the trail susceptible to arbitrary changes that could diminish its significance.

Ecological Integrity and Continuity Concerns: The trail's function as an ecological corridor and its ability to tell the comprehensive story of the land are jeopardized by disruptions or potential route shortening. The materials reveal instances where the continuity of the trail was threatened, often without prior public discourse or formal planning proceedings. Such disruptions not only compromise the trail's ecological value but also detract from its role in the national narrative (see Sections 4.1.1 and 4.2.1).

Lack of Comprehensive Planning: The absence of established regulations and mechanisms for route modifications leaves the trail open to arbitrary changes, impacting both its essence and its continuity. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive planning guidelines that preserve the trail's uninterrupted passage for hikers, while maintaining its integrity and reputation (see Section 4.1.1. and Section Accommodating Travelers' Needs).

Challenges to Hiker Experience: The sustainability of the trail is also contingent upon the quality of the hiker experience. The proceedings highlighted several challenges in accommodating traveler needs, ensuring a seamless experience, and addressing accessibility issues. The involvement of multiple local authorities in trail management complicates these efforts, pointing to the need for a unified national policy on open space preservation to ensure a consistent and high-quality trail experience (see Section 4.1.3).

Ecological, Social, and Economic Potential: Despite some recognition by planning committees of the trail's potential as an ecological corridor, a means of strengthening social connections, and a catalyst for economic growth, the absence of a national systemic vision often results in missed opportunities. The lack of a cohesive strategy hinders the trail's ability to contribute to ecological conservation, economic utilization, and social engagement, limiting its broader impact (see Section 4.2.2).

Inefficiencies in Planning and Resource Waste: The exclusion of the trail from national GIS layers leads to frequent objections and obstacles during planning initiatives, often surfacing only at advanced stages of development. This inefficiency results in delays, as exemplified by the Beit Shemesh case, and causes significant resource waste. The Timna-Sasagon Valley case further illustrates how these inefficiencies can lead to substantial financial and non-pecuniary damages, including costs incurred by entrepreneurs who must alter or abandon their plans (see Section 4.1.1).

These findings collectively highlight the multifaceted challenges in sustaining national trails. The real conflicts and competing interests reflected in court decisions offer authentic insights into the practical issues that planners, managers, policymakers, and trail advocates must address.

6. Discussion and Implications

This study offers critical insights into the planning processes and challenges affecting the sustainability of national trails, with a specific focus on the Israel National Trail. The methodology employed—drawing on legal rulings, planning documents, and stakeholder interviews—demonstrates a robust case study approach that can be adapted and applied globally. This approach, as a research tool, provides a nuanced understanding of trail sustainability that transcends national boundaries, offering valuable lessons for other countries.

This study underscores the importance of meticulous spatial planning that integrates environmental, social, and economic considerations while balancing conflicting needs to ensure the trail's long-term viability. It also highlights the necessity for regulatory mechanisms to safeguard the trail's national significance, ecological integrity, and user experience. The trail's omission from national GIS layers and the lack of a unified policy on open space preservation pose significant threats to its sustainability.

This study contributes to the literature on national trails, which is still in its early stages, by introducing a methodology traditionally used in legal studies. This approach allows

for a broad spectrum of challenges to be revealed, rather than focusing on a single aspect at a time. Its strength lies in its ability to uncover real-life challenges and opportunities that can inform trail planning and management in diverse contexts, offering policymakers insights that theoretical models may not capture. Moreover, this methodology is adaptable and can be applied in different countries to reveal their specific needs and address them effectively. Additionally, this study highlights and clarifies the criteria for national trails, which had not been clearly defined until now. This allows the findings to be examined in accordance with these criteria, ensuring that the essence of national trails is safeguarded and preserved.

Based on the findings, we suggest the following recommendations.

- Strengthening Regulatory Frameworks: Establish comprehensive planning guidelines aligned with the national trail's essential criteria, and integrate the trail into national GIS layers to enhance protection and prevent arbitrary modifications. Implementing these guidelines will improve planning efficiency, prevent delays, and reduce both monetary and non-pecuniary damages, ultimately ensuring the efficient use of resources.
- Adopting a Comprehensive Planning Approach: Balance development needs with the trail's ecological, economic, and social roles through a comprehensive planning approach.
- Enhancing Public Engagement: Ensure transparent and inclusive public discourse in planning decisions to preserve the trail's continuity and national significance.
- Encouraging Future Research: Conduct further research on national trail, including regulations, and allocation of rights and responsibilities, drawing on global experiences to develop effective planning strategies.

These recommendations, while derived from the Israel National Trail, resonate with global best practices for integrating trails into national infrastructure planning [19] and echo the pressing call for clear guidelines at trail destinations [11]. Although there may be concerns regarding the potential loss of planning flexibility, the benefits of comprehensive regulation are evident.

The case study approach used in this research highlights how the identified challenges and opportunities can inform trail management and conservation efforts of national trails. This methodology provides a template for other countries to adopt based on their unique planning environments and trail appreciation contexts. If implemented globally, it would be invaluable to expand upon this knowledge and learn from the experiences of other countries and to proactively avoid potential pitfalls.

The need for ongoing research and adaptation to local conditions remains crucial, yet the foundational principles identified in this study offer a valuable starting point for ensuring the sustainable future of national trails worldwide.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive examination of the challenges and opportunities impacting the sustainability of the Israel National Trail, offering insights that are applicable on a global scale. By utilizing a methodology rooted in legal studies, this research reveals a broad spectrum of real-life issues, contributing significantly to the literature on national trails, which is still in its infancy. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive planning and regulatory frameworks, as well as the importance of public engagement and further research. Ultimately, this study offers a valuable template for future trail management and planning efforts, emphasizing the importance of adapting strategies to local conditions while maintaining a focus on sustainability.

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