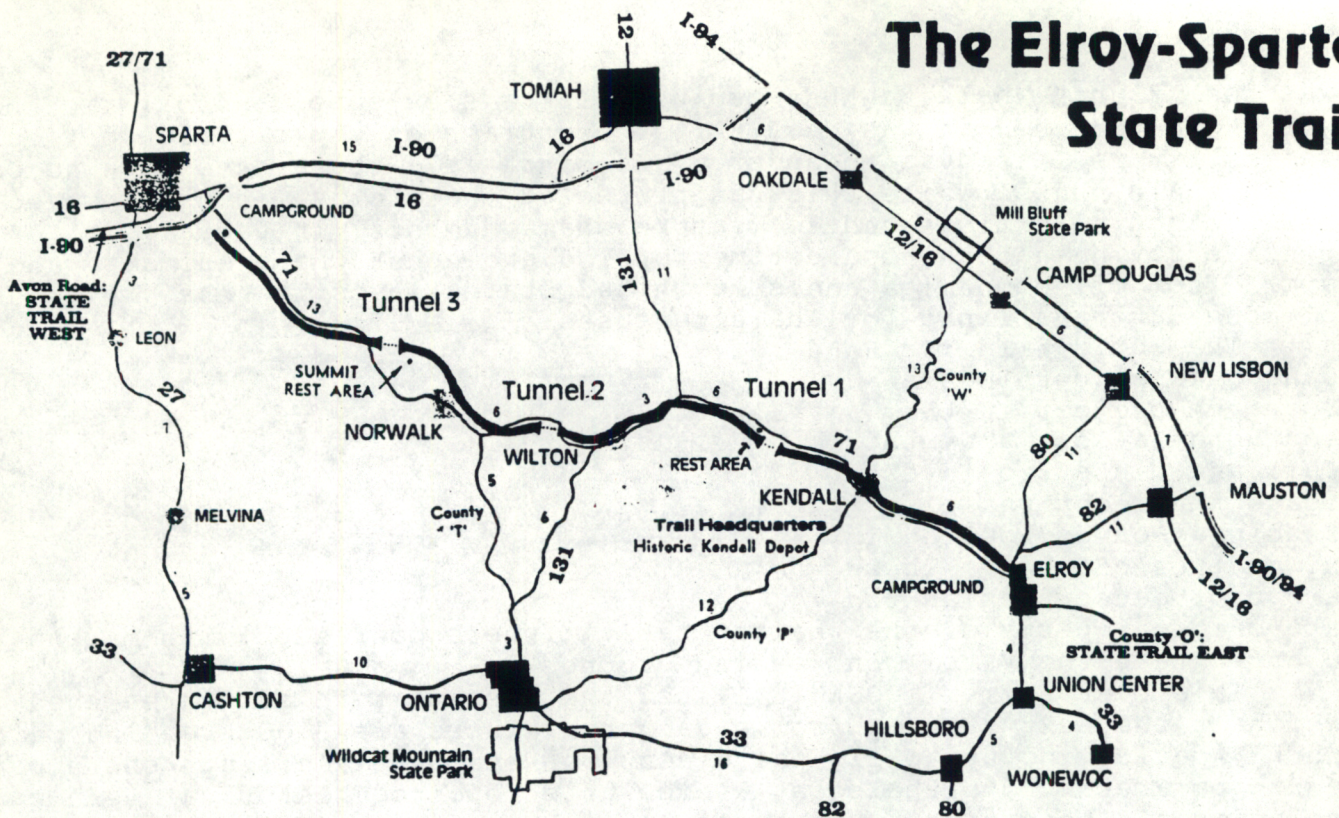


The Elroy-Sparta State Trail



Why not try it here?

BY GARY SCHNEIDER

Lots of applause is due for the Island Nature Trust's recent work to draw more attention to the tourist potential of some of our natural areas. The combination of preservation and attracting tourists can go hand in hand, although they sometimes seem to be two different sides of a story.

On March 2, the Nature Trust made a presentation to the Conservative Task Force on Transportation and continued their case for protecting scenic roads. The use of abandoned railroad tracks for hiking, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling trails. As I heard the report on CBC radio, I remembered how other places have combined preservation and tourism.

Stuck in the southwest part of Wisconsin, in a rural area, the Sparta-Elroy Trail is a success story that deserves more attention. The railroad was built in 1873 and in the early 1900's traffic consisted of six daily passenger trains and 40-50 freight trains along the 32 miles of track. The next part of the story is common to many areas - traffic declined until 1964, when the last train ran on the line. Many of the small towns along the line faced a similar decline, both in population and economic health. But the Department of Natural Resources acquired the land after the railroad removed the tracks and in 1972 the Elroy-Kendall-Wilton-Norwalk-Sparta Hike and Bike Trail was added to the National Bike trail route. The roadbed was surfaced with crushed limestone and the bridges were planked and protected by railings. There are three wonderful tunnels on the route, the longest being .75 miles long - it's quite exciting to be walking your bicycle through these, the only light coming from either end, water constantly dripping and the rocks playing tricks with your voice. While the tunnels are a definite drawing card, they also provided a lot of problems and expense because they needed a lot of restoration.