

Trail Builders Tale

We have composed this narrative to describe the practices we use to maintain and extend our trails. We acknowledge development of a trail system must have some negative impact on the ecosystem. We hope after reading the following you would agree our approach reduces any negative impacts.

If it had not been for the dedicated effort of a few individuals these trails would not be here. The whole area would have been a clear cut. These individuals fought to protect the Groves and within the last 2 years with the help of the local Community Forest the Groves were designated a BC Parks and Recreation site and given permanent protection.

Overall, the trails cover 15 kilometers of terrain. When you walk the trails, you see some very large stumps. These are remnants of a forest of trees nearly all of this size that once covered the Sunshine Coast. The trees consisted mostly of Douglas Fir and Western Red Cedar. Within the Groves one can find living examples of first growth Douglas Fir including the Lonely Giant, the Sentinel and the Twister. The purpose of protecting the Groves and building the original trails was not only to allow people to enjoy the natural solitude but also to see these magnificent specimens.

Initially the trail system was primarily used by local residents. As it became evident they were a “permanent” fixture, more non-residents sought them out as a local attraction. When the easy access trails were completed in 2012 usage started to increase exponentially. With increased usage, a number of problems presented themselves on the original trails. The roots of the very large trees the Groves are intended to protect were being exposed and trod upon. Trails going up steep slopes were beginning to erode in heavy rain. Rocks were poking through the trail surface. The exposed roots and rocks created tripping hazards. Given that trampled roots were potentially hurting the trees, slope erosion was undesirable and looking down to avoid tripping diverted attention from the beautiful surroundings, we started thinking about how we could minimize these problems.

We decided to implement practices that would not only reduce maintenance but also long term negative effects on the ecosystem. As many as 8 trail builders work on the trails. They are from 40 to 76 years old. Everything used by the trail builders comes from the immediate forest environment. No foreign material is brought in. Almost all work is done by hand without the use of power tools. We do have a chain saw on hand to remove trees that come down in a wind storm or to cut dead falls when trail building.

You may come upon a section of original trail where the trail builders are currently working. Follow us while we work on this trail. Two or three of the trail builders go ahead of the others to navigate the course of the trail. The remainder of the builders follow to fine tune the trail. Following the original trail, the builders try to keep at least 3 feet away from any Douglas Fir or large cedar. Shifting the trail to the left or right they make every effort to avoid the roots altogether. If it is impossible to avoid a large root they bring in fallen logs or set rocks at the location to build ramps to minimize damage to large roots or trees.

Other roots that have found way onto the original trails have been trampled or scraped under foot for years. When pulled on, dead or damaged roots come out with little or no resistance. At first it may seem counter intuitive but all organics are removed from the original trail surface to get to a solid base. Removal of the organics deters roots from penetrating the finished trail. If it is not possible to get to trail base, organics are removed to a depth of about six inches. The organics are set aside for the final stages of completing the trail. Rocks poking through the trails are removed and set aside for use in finishing.

Steep inclines on an original trail are usually partially or badly eroded. These inclines can be dangerous to navigate in either wet or dry conditions. The trail builders determine a route for switch backs up an incline to minimize erosion and make for safer hiking. As they go along the builders identify sources of native soil to cover the trail.

The builders do a rough levelling of the trail. Small rocks are used to fill in depressions to bring the trail up to grade. In cases where water crosses the trail they dig a swale and fill it with rocks. This allows water to cross the trail and continue on its natural course without pooling or running down the trail.

Ramps over large roots or between large trees are gently sloped to allow at least 4 inches of cover. Rocks are used to build steps where there is no other way get around or over an obstruction. Rocks are used to buttress a trail where it drops off steeply to one side and to buttress the low side of switch backs. On switch backs the builders direct any water course away from the trail and back into the aquifer. Since steps and buttress walls must be stable they are carefully placed and chinked in what amounts to the art of dry stacking.

Raised ridges on either side of the trail are levelled effectively widening the trail. This allows hikers to safely pass one another. The trail is finally covered with about 2 inches of material consisting of varying combinations of sand, fine gravel or clay. You hikers pack this cover further preventing the incursion of roots onto the trail. With the final cover added the trail is now raked and tamped.

The last thing the builders do is cover the sources where native material was taken to finish the trail, most visible being the 'borrow pits' along the side of the current trail. They also cover any remnants of the old trail. They use organics that have been set aside as well as decomposing root stumps and logs. If available, they cover with a carpet of moss. Within 2 years it will be very difficult to identify either the sources of material or the original trail as they will be covered by mosses and undergrowth.

Now let's look down the refurbished trail from the top of a switch back. The original trail has become a trail with many more bends and S curves. With this constant change in direction your eyes are treated to a more panoramic view of the forest around you. You know you are walking on a trail where you are not tramping on roots, where erosion has been minimized, and where water is treated as a necessity and not a nuisance.

We hope this gives you some comfort that we are very much interested in doing this for the benefit of the community but, just as importantly, not at the expense of the forest. There is always more to learn and those that follow us will no doubt improve further upon our ideas. We ask only that you stay on the trails and avoid the temptation to take short cuts or our efforts will have been for naught.

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