

Unauthorized Trail-building on Crown Lands

Gabriola Land & Trails Trust (GaLTT) was recently contacted by concerned Gabriolans about new trail construction in the Crown lands between Tait and the Wheelbarrel Nursery. GaLTT has not had any involvement with this work and, until recently, was unaware of these activities. Having now looked at the new trails and associated infrastructure, we have some serious concerns. These trails are being built for aggressive mountain-biking rather than casual cyclists, incorporate jumps and technical maneuvers, and significantly impact both the environment and the safety of other users. We don't know who is responsible for these new trails and infrastructure but have been assured that members of the Gabriola Off-Road Cycling Association (GORCA) are not involved.

Our most immediate concern is that there are at least two locations where these new trails incorporate jumps that require the cyclist to cross another trail at high speed. In both cases, the intersecting trail is regularly used by other cyclists, hikers, dog walkers, and horse riders which results in a major safety and liability concern. These jumps must be immediately removed for the safety of all trail users.

GaLTT is also concerned about the scale of the work and its negative impact on the environment. Some of the newly built trails have banked corners and ramps constructed with rocks, logs, and dirt. A significant amount of native vegetation has been removed to create the trails and large "borrow pits" have been created to collect the soil and rocks used in construction. In one case, a new trail crosses a mossy meadow containing petroglyphs. Moss has been removed down to bedrock to create this trail. These rare ecosystems are extremely fragile and, once damaged, will take decades to recover.

What the trail builders may not realize is that it is illegal to build a trail on Crown land without prior authorization from the appropriate government agency. Key stakeholders and provincial government staff have developed a policy that outlines a process for establishing mountain bike trails on provincial Crown land (<https://www.mbta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/mountain-bike-policy.pdf>). This process is necessary to minimize negative impacts on the natural landscape, to ensure the trail location is free of land-use conflicts, and to help build positive relationships with First Nations and user groups. Failure to comply with these rules could result in stiff fines, a remediation order to return the area to its original condition, and/or a jail term. In other words, non-compliance is a serious issue.

Another important consideration is that the Crown lands in question are being held in trust by the provincial and federal governments for treaty settlement with the Snuneymuxw First Nation. We feel strongly that it is the responsibility of the Gabriola community to respect this reality and to treat these Crown lands gently. It is for this reason that GaLTT's activities on these lands are confined to maintaining the existing trail network.

There will likely never be unity of opinion among Gabriolans as to the appropriate use of Crown lands on our island. GaLTT takes the position that we must all show respect: for the land holders, for other users, and for the land itself.

An enormous amount of effort has obviously gone into building these new mountain-biking trails and we acknowledge the dedication and ingenuity shown in their creation. However, we urge those responsible to think about the actual and potential consequences of their actions and to cease further trail building activities on these lands.

Rob Brockley

President, Gabriola Land & Trails Trust

Letter to the Editor (Sounder July 22, 2020)

Mountain Biking and Multi-use Trails

I'd like to make a couple of clarifications to my recent letter to the Sounder (June 24, 2020) regarding recent trail-building activities on federally- and provincially-managed lands.

Almost the entire 80+ km trail network on Gabriola Island is available for all types of active transportation (i.e., human-powered travel). With few exceptions (e.g., Elder Cedar Nature Reserve), mountain bikers have the same rights as others to use island trails. GaLTT strongly supports multi-use trails, and actively promotes "share the trails" initiatives, advocating respect for all user groups and their safety. The GaLTT membership includes a wide range of trail users including walkers, joggers, horse riders – and yes, many keen mountain bikers.

All people deserve a safe place in the woods to explore and to expend their energy and enthusiasm. GaLTT is sympathetic to those wishing to build mountain biking trails and infrastructure and can understand why they wish to do so. Sadly, creating and encouraging these opportunities in today's world is not a simple matter. To reduce user conflicts and to protect the environment, unmanaged free-range trail building is actively discouraged on federal and provincial lands. To complicate matters, the government-managed lands on Gabriola are mostly set aside for treaty settlement. GaLTT does not support more trail-building on these lands because we believe their de facto ownership by the Snuneymuxw First Nation must be respected if reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is to be truly meaningful.

Unfortunately, GaLTT does not have any ready solutions to offer. Working within a bureaucratic system has its own set of problems and can trigger rules, regulations, and liability issues that may stifle much of the spontaneity and creativity that is desired. Despite these drawbacks, GaLTT would support a request to the Regional District of Nanaimo by interested Gabriolans (through the Parks & Open Spaces Advisory Committee) for permission to build dedicated mountain biking trails and jumps in one of the local RDN parks.

Rob Brockley
President, Gabriola Land & Trails Trust