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[West Vancouver](#)

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[Lions Gate Bridge](#)

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[Grouse Mountain](#)

[Mount Seymour](#)

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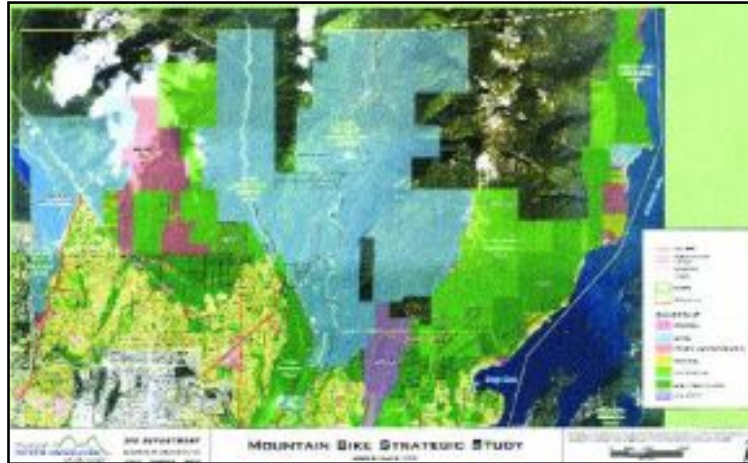
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War of the Woods - Alpine Study

By



A patchwork quilt represents the numerous landowners in the Seymour area of the North Shore.

Jennifer Maloney

May 12 2005

On the bottom floor of North Vancouver District Hall, Susan Rogers pulls out a foam board that bears an aerial view of the area from the Capilano Watershed to Indian Arm.

The map is overshadowed by transparent colours, which squarely mark ownership of the rugged mountains that have become the birthplace to a backyard sport that is blind to boundaries.

"Essentially, right now it's not a managed area, but it's being used for recreational use," explains Rogers, District of North Vancouver's section manager for parks and planning. "Part of the problem is finding money. It's a large area."

Mountain biking has been popular on the North Shore since the early '90s, when riders started creating trails in the area that has become known, simply, as the Alpine.

By the end of the decade the District started hearing rumblings from residents in neighbouring areas who suddenly had a huge increase of parked cars on their streets.

Aldergrove Star

"In 2000 we really woke up to what was going on and said, 'what are we going to do about this?'" Rogers said. "Originally we didn't have any idea of where the trails were. They were deliberately keeping it secret."

A year later, District staff started a mountain bike strategic study to survey who was using the trails in the backcountry. They found hikers, dog walkers, trail runners and naturalists were occupying many of the trails, but on Mt. Fromme the prime users were mountain bikers.

In 2003, the Alpine Recreational Plan was authorized as an attempt to create a policy that would balance recreational riding with environmental stewardship in the Alpine, which has become internationally recognized by bikers for having "sick" trails. As part of the study, an environmental assessment was conducted to identify sensitive habitat areas, which would severely suffer from the erosion and sediment the sport creates.

As a result, a preservation zone now buffers Mosquito Creek, limiting its recreation use to maintain its pristine quality.

"We're looking at a framework of what should be permitted and what should not be permitted," Rogers explained. "These areas have never been managed, per say."

On Jan. 31 of this year, District council passed a motion for its staff to hold a workshop to communicate their findings publicly, however the date has been postponed as senior managers continue to meet with the private owners of Grouse Mountain and Mount Seymour to answer all of council's inquiries. The workshop won't act as a public hearing, but concerned residents will be invited to listen and observe.

"No voting will go on," Rogers said. "It's an opportunity to explore [our findings] in a more informal setting. This isn't the final study. We're not even at that stage yet."

In addition to its ground trails, the North Shore is globally known for building riding structures, which take riders up a ramp and along a piece of four-by-four wood. The dangerous nature of these structures poses a liability risk to landowners.

"They're not signed to identify the level of risk," Rogers said. "What an experienced rider can handle, a beginner can't. Because it's our property, the District has to assume responsibility if we are sued." To date, no major accidents have been reported in the Alpine area owned by the District, but Rogers said that doesn't mean they haven't taken place.

"We know there are accidents," she said. "But people don't necessarily report them.

While the land ownership is neatly outlined on the District's colourful chart, mountain bikers aren't necessarily following the District's road map. A few years ago North Shore landowners recognized they were all dealing with the issue of mountain biking, but were responding to it in different ways.

The District has since began working with fellow stakeholders such as the GVRD, BC Parks, Grouse, and Seymour, in hopes of creating a collective riding policy for the entire North Shore.

Whistler, another mountain bike mecca, already has its own mountain biking standards, but the terrain on the North Shore is different from the ski community's and therefore requires unique regulations.

"The mountain biking community doesn't see where BC Parks ends and the District begins," said Larry Fyroishko, BC Parks area supervisor for Vancouver. "It's all one place in the wilderness."

Since the sport became a phenomena, BC Parks has designated a number of its trails in the Alpine area for mountain biking, but its not allowing new structures to be built for the time being.

"Through our master plan there may be a protocol put in place for additional trails, but we're not at that point yet," Fyroishko noted.

The Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve is currently working with the North Shore Mountain Biking Association - a non-profit organization that serves as a voice for mountain bikers on the North Shore - on developing mountain biking standards that would grade the trails for difficulty. The standards, expected to be completed by the end of this year, could potentially be adopted by other North Shore landowners.

"They would include looking at rating the mountain bike trails for difficulty, kind of like skiing, except most of them are probably going to be black diamond," said Laurie Fretz, supervisor of the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve.

Fretz explained the Seymour Conservation has fostered its relationship with the mountain biking community over the years and has learned to embrace the sport.

"It used to be you'd go into patrol and come back and find a new trail or structure," Fretz said. "It's happening less and less because the mountain biking community is aware we want to work with them."

Fretz said mountain bikers as a whole have become more organized in the last few years, adding a lot of educated savvy riders are active in negotiations

about the future management of the Alpine area.
"Essentially, we said it would be a very productive thing if all landowners sat down to participate in joint projects and studies. Our hope and our intent is to look at mountain biking as a whole on the North Shore," she said. "Hopefully, our standards will work in other jurisdictions as well so we can manage it in a consistent way."

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