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War of the Woods - Not so happy trails

By



Dangerous Dan stands by his now-demolished Watchumacalit trail.

Justin Beddall (Rob Newell photo)

May 12 2005

Earlier this year, the District of North Vancouver razed the landmark one-kilometre trail known as "Watchumacalit," an ambitious series of chicken-wire covered sky-bridges that snaked down the side of Mt. Fromme.

The "deconstruction" of a trail that was made famous in mountain biking videos such as *Kranked* and *NSX* came at a time when North Van District was in the process of completing a study aimed at determining the future use of the alpine area - land stretching from Capilano River to Deep Cove, and including 41 kilometres of trails used for mountain biking and hiking.

Although Vancouver's North Shore has become to mountain biking what Hawaii's North Shore is to surfing, the District has yet to officially sanction the trails on its land.

"The District of North Vancouver has no authorized mountain bike trails on its lands. Any so-called mountain bike trails, courses, etc., which are located

on District of North Vancouver lands are there illegally, and as such, the District, accepts no liability or responsibility for those illegally-created 'mountain bike' trails," states a posting on the District website. District parks planning section manager Susan Rogers said one of the reasons "Watchumacalit" was dismantled was due to liability concerns associated with the trail, which had sky-bridges that were 10 feet off the ground in several sections.

Richard Boase, the District's environmental protection officer, said other reasons also factored into the decision. For instance, the trail was completed after a council-endorsed moratorium on trail building earlier in the year. He also questioned if small cedars had been cut down to build the trail. (An accusation the trail's builder, Dangerous Dan Cowan, vehemently denies.)

District officials aren't the only ones concerned about the future of mountain biking on their lands.

Residents have complained about bikers parking on their streets and creating noise and litter, this despite the fact that the District has instituted resident's only parking signage in the area.

In addition, other trail users - mostly hikers and naturalists - are upset by the proliferation of mountain bike trails and the cavalcade of body armour-clad bikers who now inhabit the woods.

Monica Craver, a resident who lives near the top of Mountain Highway, believes the conflict between residents and bikers has reached a boiling point.

"It's a very polarized issue. There's really no buffer zone between residents and bikers," she said.

Craver says mountain biking has grown so quickly in recent years that the sport - like skiing and more recently snowboarding - needs a designated area.

Craver said she believes that mountain biking should be contained to ski resorts, like the new project scheduled for Cypress Mountain and the existing one in Whistler.

"It's where it works. They have a detrimental effect on wildlife. The solution is simple: it's getting too big, and like skiing or snowboarding, it needs specialized amenities," she said.

Veteran District councilor Ernie Crist has empathy for the homeowners. Crist say he has nothing against mountain biking, but does have a problem with "mountain biking on sensitive, rain-soaked, steep forested hills of Mt. Fromme."

"That's what I'm against. Other than that, be my guest. The mountain bikers park adjacent to residents. We have received complaints about parking, etc., but the real issue is that in order to

accommodate the mountain bikers you need to provide facilities. They need a large area. Do we have the resources to build a million-dollar parking lot? Do we want to spend the money on shower and change facilities and maybe on first aid? Who is going to enforce it? Who is going to police it? I believe that type of biking may be accommodated by the GVRD - they have more land, they have more money." Crist, vilified in the mountain bike community for his stance on mountain biking on Fromme, doesn't believe a resolution will be easily found.

"It will bring endless conflict. It's like pushing a square peg into a round hole. It will not work in the long run. It's a steep forested mountain. You are upsetting the ecology."

Dangerous Dan Cowan bristles when discussing the councillor's comments. He feels the solution lies in tolerance, and education.

"The residents have to realize their houses are bordering an epic piece of land that's perfect for mountain biking. The mountain bikers have to realize that they're part of the growth of the sport and they're now in the faces of the residents. I can understand their concerns because there's always a few bad apples; it's just the way of life. It's the vocal minority that's really opposed to mountain biking." Cowan says the destruction of "Watchumacalit" may be a harbinger of things to come for trails on the Shore.

"I don't want to sound pessimistic but the North Shore was known for challenging trails - that's how it got its name. If they start destroying the most challenging trails it will lose its world-wide reputation. It will always be a great place to ride but there are other places that are embracing mountain biking more - they're not going and ripping down trails."

Cowan notes that Squamish, Maple Ridge, Nelson, Chilliwack and Abbotsford are becoming popular places to ride.

"People don't need to come to the Shore. [The destruction of "Watchumacalit"] is setting the tone for what's to come. The trail was pretty gnarly but at what point do they draw the line. Who's going to make that decision?"

Richard Juryn is the event producer for the North Shore Mountain Bike Events Society, a not-for-profit organization established to guide dialogue and solutions for responsible and sustainable mountain biking on the North Shore, and the host of the 2005 North Shore Credit Union World Mountain Bike Festival & Conference, taking place later this month

in North Vancouver.

He figures there's a solution that will satisfy all stakeholders.

"I think the District of North Vancouver has done the right thing with the Alpine Study. You have to get everybody together. There have to be decisions made that involve everybody and that are OK with everybody. I think that's number one."

Juryn believes that capital infrastructure costs, for instance the creation of a parking lot at the top of Mountain Highway, would best be solved through public-private-partnerships.

"There are some things, like the parking lot, and things like that that are going to be required to get beyond the flashpoint at the top of Mountain Highway. That's still on the North Shore the biggest single problem."

The next step?

"Getting stakeholders in the same room to do some long-range planning, to answer questions like, 'Where do we want to go with this?' and 'What do we want it to look like?' Trail maintenance, getting trails marked, user code of conduct, a map of official trails, that sort of thing," Juryn said.

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