

Council Member Motion

Notice given on: Wednesday, May 3, 2023

Meeting Date Wednesday, May 17, 2023
From Councillor Justice
Subject Ecological Impacts of Trails

Background

CONTEXT

Trails in our forest landscapes, whether used for mountain biking, hiking, or horseback riding, can have both positive and negative impacts on natural ecosystems. North Cowichan's forest trails are a critical component of our quality of life, economic development, and may also lead to enhanced natural resource management and promote environmental preservation through raising awareness of nature and natural systems. However, the development and use of these trails may also negatively impact natural systems in several ways such as:

- fragmenting habitats and isolating wildlife populations
- site degradation causing changes in drainage patterns and compacting of soils
- increasing the presence of humans and dogs which can alter the behaviour patterns of wild animals

Ensuring sound trail planning, development and management policies requires a better understanding of the environmental/ecological impacts of trails, the affects of different types of recreational use, and where trails and specific forms of recreation use are or are not appropriate given ecological or cultural sensitivities. At present we have little understanding of the extent or magnitude of the impacts of trails on North Cowichan's forest ecosystems.

Developing better knowledge in this area will allow the Municipality to locate and sanction trails where - and in such a way - that they provide full community benefit and enhanced recreation experience while having minimized negative impact on ecosystem integrity, wildlife and other ecological services provided by healthy forests.

RATIONALE

In the recently completed forest engagement process, the community voiced a strong desire to emphasise conservation, biodiversity and ecological services in the future management of our forests.

At the same time, our forests are becoming increasingly popular; with growing numbers of people using the trails recreationally in a number of ways. Mountain biking in particular is drawing greater numbers to the trails and its evolving technology may expand the season of use, intensity of use, and ability to cover greater distances per use.

Planning for increased use is consistent with policy objectives in the Parks and Trails Master Plan for expanding outdoor recreation and tourism. The master plan stipulates this should be done in balance with environmental conservation but is silent on how an appropriate balance is achieved. Without some clarity in this regard, we are placing largely unknown pressures on the natural features and systems of the forest.

In addition to having ecological impacts, trails may impact places of cultural and heritage significance and are of great concern to First Nations. This is a critical consideration in trail policy and decision making, to be considered distinctly. It is Council's understanding and expectation that First Nations will be and are already being engaged on all uses in the forest reserve, including any potential new trail development.

Recommendation

THAT Council directs staff to supplement the biodiversity protection policy project to:

1. Assess, through literature review and consultation with experts in other jurisdictions, the potential risks and impact of various types of trails and trail use - including but not limited to hiking, downhill and cross-country mountain biking, equestrian, and off-leash dog walking - on wildlife, soils, ecology, vegetation and water;
2. Develop general criteria and guidance for recreation and trail planning and management in our forest areas;
3. Identify where trails and specific recreational uses either are or are not appropriate given ecological sensitivities, and;
4. Identify needed mitigations to existing trails, if and where necessary.

Attachment: None.