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GOING DOWNHILL

Conflict over rogue mountain bike trails coming to a head

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Metro Vancouver is shutting down popular but unsanctioned mountain bike trails. The North Shore Mountain Bike Association is condemning rogue trail builders. Someone booby trapped Corkscrew, a longstanding sanctioned downhill run.

Nobody, it seems, is happy on the trails.

NSMBA executive director Deanne Cote published an open letter last week acknowledging that in the woods of the North Shore, things are coming to a head.

To a very large degree, the sport of downhill mountain biking was born on the North Shore, and it remains a world-class destination and home to the head offices of some of the biggest brands in the industry.

Since the pandemic, the popularity of mountain biking has ballooned, but there hasn't been enough new trail infrastructure to meet the growing demand, Cote said. Increasingly, mountain bikers are packing tools into the forest to forge new routes for themselves.

"We see it no matter what mountain, whether it's Cypress, Fromme, Seymour. It's happening everywhere, not just within Metro Vancouver, but we're talking across the province," she said. "There's such a pressure on the

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RESCUE GAME CHANGER



EYES IN THE SKY North Shore Rescue's Grant Baldwin gets some flight hours in with a drone capable of thermal imaging to assist in spotting subjects outdoors. See page B1 for our annual special section recognizing the volunteers of North Shore Rescue for all they do to keep us safe. PAUL MCGRATH / NSN

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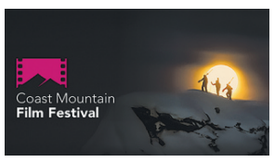
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Rogue trails can do damage

Continued from A1

trail systems."

But, Cote said, when people take matters into their own hands, it jeopardizes the environment, people's safety and the future of their sport in Metro Vancouver's jurisdiction.

At one time, all of the mountain bike trails on the North Shore were unsanctioned, Cote acknowledges, and she frequently is asked why things should be any different now.

"Our response is because it's 2025, and the way that things were done in the past is not working any longer," she said.

Rogue mountain bike trails damage sensitive environment

Heidi Walsh, director of watershed and environmental management for Metro, said rogue trail building is nothing new. In recent years, they've worked with NSMBA to try to direct people back onto the sanctioned trails, but the latest wave of trail building has crossed a line.

"We're probably into 10, 15, 20 kilometres of unsanctioned trails," she said. "[They're] paralleling existing sanctioned trails that we've recently spent lots of money upgrading. They kind of spaghetti their way down the mountainside in multiple different directions.… We get to the point where it's starting to get a little out of hand. The environmental damage starts to get quite dramatic and then we have to take some action and go in and shut down some of these unsanctioned trails."

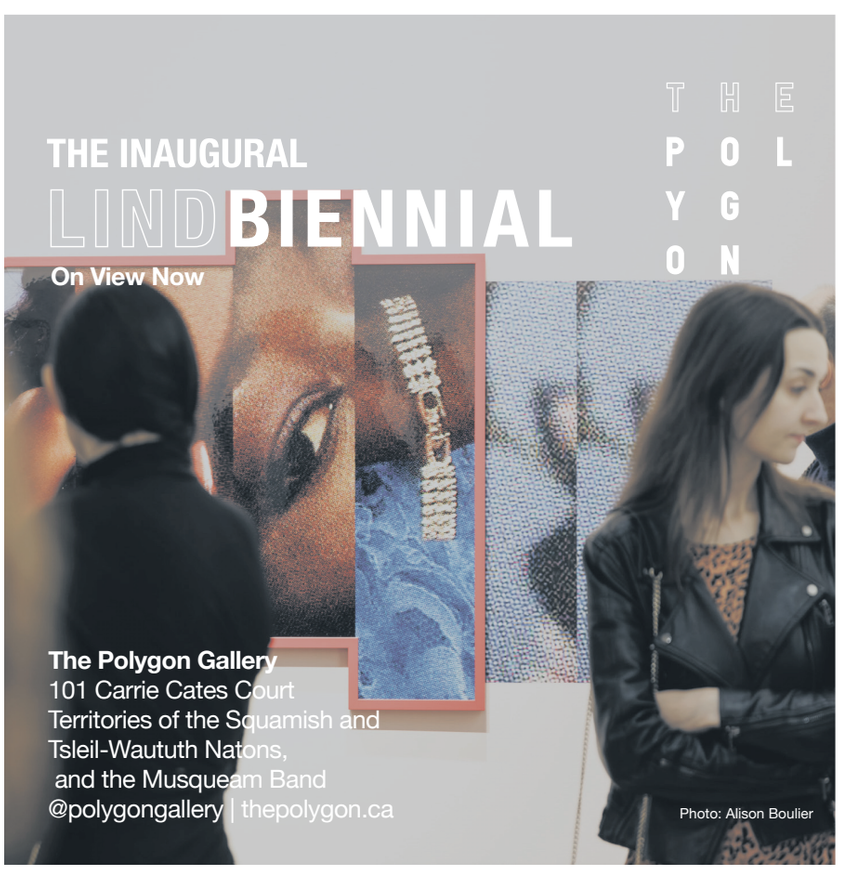
Among those already closed or being prioritized for closure: New Normal, Iceland, Suicide Jimmy, Jankritaville, Orleans, and the CBC loamers. Crews are installing signs warning that the routes are closed, ripping out any unauthorized ramps or berms, and spreading forest duff over the lines carved out by bike tires.

The environmental damages aren't just hypothetical, Walsh said. The biggest problem has been what follows after a new trail is blazed and ridden heavily.

"It's eroding away all the soil. That's all going into the creeks and river systems. And then we get trees that become unstable because the roots get exposed. Then the next season, the bikers come in again and they're doing more damage to the tree roots. Then we start to have tree failure. And then, eventually, the trail just turns into a whole bunch of loose, cobbly rocks," she said. "And then it gets abandoned, and then they move on to a new line."

The sanctioned trails, by contrast, have

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North Shore trail sabotaged

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been carefully designed with drainage and root systems in mind and they get regular maintenance from the NSMBA's army of volunteers to ensure their sustainability.

Enforcement in the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve is virtually non-existent, largely because it would require Metro Vancouver staff to catch trail builders in the act, and they tend to be "fairly crafty," doing their work out of eyeshot in the early mornings and late evenings, Walsh said. And, even if they were caught red-handed, Metro does not have a bylaw in place specifically to deal with them.

"It's something we're working towards," Walsh said.

Rogue trails ignore Indigenous rights

Metro Vancouver has a responsibility to consult with First Nations, including the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation) and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh Nation), before approving changes to the landscape. When people bypass that, they likely don't know what the value is to Indigenous people who have a different relationship with the land.

In her open letter, Cote references an Indigenous mountain biker who recently returned to a spot where she and her late mother used to go pick mushrooms together, only to find that an unsanctioned trail had been cut through.

"You have to think about the broader picture, and not just about what it is you want in this moment," Cote said. "These lands are sacred to our local First Nations, and we need to respect that first and foremost."

Trail sabotaged

More than damaging the environment and stepping on the toes of land managers like Metro, Cote said the reputation of the mountain bike community as a whole is suffering as the "one per cent" continue to blaze new trails without permission. There are still plenty of people, she cautioned, who are openly hostile to all mountain bikers and think the sport should be banned outright on wilderness trails. New, unsanctioned trails cropping up only emboldens the people who are opposed to all mountain biking, said Cote.

In November, after New Normal was closed down, someone deliberately spread woody debris with rusty nails jutting out from it across a sanctioned trail – not the first time someone has set a booby trap for mountain bikers on the North Shore.

"They actually went out and sabotaged

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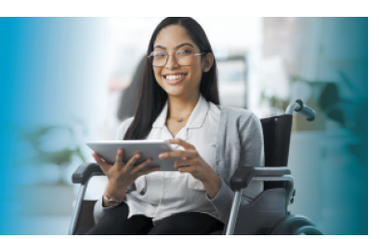
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Bike association pushing for new trails

Continued from A15

one of the authorized trails within the network in retaliation, which put not only other riders and trail users at risk, but also created additional work for our volunteers," she said, adding that it was like a "kick in the gut" for NSMBA's volunteers to be tasked with cleaning up a mess they had no part in creating.

"It's exhausting," she said.

North Shore mountain bikers react

Word of the trail closures and the NSMBA's letter spread quickly in the mountain bike community and, online at least, there was a consensus: Both rogue trail building and riding would likely continue. Matthew Nieken-Spence, who rides the trails in the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve, said the sanctioned ones managed by the NSMBA are "overbuilt" and sanitized to the point that they aren't fun to ride, especially for those seeking a double-black diamond challenge.

Like the allure of fresh powder on a ski hill, many mountain bikers seek loam – the loose and forgiving soil that gives the best tactile experience when bombing down a hill.

"They have a more natural feel. They're not all carved out and paved over," Nieken-Spence said. "You almost feel like you're more connected to the trail."

And that's exactly what New Normal offered, Nieken-Spence said, adding that it was as well designed and maintained as any of the ones in the sanctioned network.

"It's actually one of my go-tos," he said. "There's nothing on it that's screams 'This trail should not be here.' Everything about it's been pretty well done by the trail builders who did create it."

Metro Vancouver, though, has pre-emptively declared that, because it was built without permission, New Normal will be fully decommissioned and never added to the authorized trail network. Nieken-Spence said that decision underscores why some mountain bikers have so little faith in Metro Vancouver and NSMBA to provide the kind of trails his fellow riders really want to see.

"I think that's pretty short-sighted. They should be looking at it on a case-by-case basis," he said. "All they're going to do is just have people go back and reopen them, or create something new, somewhere else. These trails don't get created because there's no need for them, and they need to realize that."

Because "loamers" aren't on official maps and not publicized, they don't draw in a lot of traffic, Nieken-Spence said, and the people who build them are highly secretive, sometimes not even sharing their secret spots with close friends.

"You go ride your spot and you just keep it on the down-low, because otherwise it won't be a good spot anymore because everything gets blown out, and that's when things go wrong," he said. "If you have 15 people going down a trail in the entire weekend, what is that really going to do?"

New trails possible, but when?

Since she published the open letter, Cote said she's heard those sentiments from a lot of people in the mountain bike community.

More than having a role in maintaining the trails, the NSMBA also advises Metro Vancouver on the development and sanctioning of new ones. Metro adopted a trail strategy to that effect in 2022.

Cote agreed that New Normal was well-designed and constructed. Its only grievous sin was that it was built without permission. NSMBA had lobbied Metro – unsuccessfully – for it to become a sanctioned trail, like Cambodia, the most recent one formally added to the network.



NSMBA executive director Deanne Cote has called on rogue trail builders to stop their work in Metro Vancouver's Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve. PAUL MCGRATH / NSN

"Metro has made it very clear that it is not a trail that is going to come within the sanctioned network at any given point. We recognize that that style of trail is absolutely required within our network," Cote said.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the people who enjoy the speed of downhill mountain biking aren't keen on the speed of regional bureaucracy, especially when other jurisdictions – Squamish and Whistler in particular – have seen their downhill options grow while the North Shore's have stayed relatively static.

"People don't feel like we've been advocating hard enough for new trails to be constructed across the shore and I completely understand that," Cote said. "It's been a really long time, and it's hard to see when our neighbouring trail communities, they get new trails all the time and there's excitement.… But that tide is turning, and our land managers are recognizing this and are working at implementing a new trails process."

It puts the NSMBA in an awkward position, having to lobby long and hard for new trails while insisting that no one take matters into their own hands when they've lost patience. Still, Cote said she wants the rogue builders and riders to know that the NSMBA is there to serve them too.

"If they have ideas of how to make a trail a little bit more fun, or add a little bit more spice to a trail, then they can absolutely approach us with these ideas, and we can bring it forward to our builders," she said. "If they're getting bored, then there's lots of other riding destinations where they can maybe go and find those experiences that they're looking for. That doesn't necessarily mean they have to go out and build it themselves. There's plenty out there."

Walsh, meanwhile, acknowledged the desire for newer and better downhill mountain bike trails, but she said Metro Vancouver has many competing priorities and demands from user groups to satisfy with limited taxpayer dollars.

"I don't disagree with that. It's just not our mandate to be the best mountain bike trail network around," she said. "And any time we're spending decommissioning trails is time we're taking away from building and maintaining trails."

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