

The Social, Health and Heritage Benefits of Trails

TRAIL
MONITOR

2

Background

Go for Green, the Active Living and Environment Program, is proud to present the second in a series of Fact Sheets about trail development in Canada.

Three priorities of Go for Green's Rails to Greenways initiative are:

- Researching and promoting the social, heritage, economic, health and environmental benefits of trails, especially preserving Canada's discontinued rail corridors for trails.
- Distributing useful and up-to-date resource material to local groups involved in trail development in Canada.
- Promoting Canadian trails to Canadians and international visitors.

Trail Monitor #2 provides a compilation of research facts about the social, health and heritage benefits of trails.

Social Benefits

- Because of their linear design, trails act as a meeting place for the community. Trails foster community involvement, and corresponding pride, in addition to providing an opportunity to interact with people of varying backgrounds, and experiences.

- Greenways located close to one's home are accessible to all income groups, particularly those who cannot afford the cost of a weekend cottage. Trails that can be used easily as a route to the corner store, or to commute to work or school, will rapidly become part of community life. (Royal Commission on the Future of Toronto's Waterfront 1992)



"A web of trails ties the community together. If you build trails the people will come, and through their trail use, safety in neighbourhoods is increased because of "eyes on the street". Walking or cycling is a healthy, inexpensive activity, available to everyone and environmentally, trail ways create green ways."

Mayor Joan McKinnon,
City of Waterloo, Ontario

- Common trail activities such as walking, bicycling, and cross-country skiing are all relatively inexpensive, unorganized activities, providing accessible recreation opportunities.
- Rail trails are proving to be safe from crime. Trail users displace abusers. (RANS1992)
- An important by-product of trails is improved self-image and social relationships, reduced crime, a livelier community atmosphere and a lifestyle which encourages young people to find their entertainment in healthier and more wholesome ways. (Active Living – Go for Green, 1996)

- Trails help build partnerships among private companies, landowners, neighbouring municipalities, local government, and advocacy groups. When residents are encouraged to be involved in a community project, like a trail project, they feel more connected to the community. (Warren 1998)

- The experience of walking and bicycling helps us connect people and places. Walkers move at slower speeds and have more time to perceive and comprehend the details of the environment and the community. (Active Living – Go for Green 1995)
- Tourists have an increased interest in the outdoors and nature-based activities and they travel to pursue special interests and fulfilling experiences. Trails offer an ideal means of satisfying these interests. (Warren 1998)

"20 years ago Kitchener Parks and Recreation initiated The Happy Hoofers, a seniors walking tour group with a goal of staying healthy socially. Yesterday (May, 1999) 60 seniors went on their scheduled walking tour of Crawford Lake. The group functions all year round and each year the membership keeps growing as individuals are retiring younger".

The Happy Hoofers

Health Benefits

- The majority of Canadians view environmental quality and fitness as the most important factors influencing their personal health. (Enviroics 1998)
- Walking has consistently been the most popular physical activity of Canadians over the last decade. 85% of Canadians walk for leisure and recreational reasons. 82% of Canadians confirmed that they would ideally like to walk more often than they currently do. Trails can provide Canadians of all ages with this opportunity. (CFLRI 1995/Enviroics 1998)
- Canada's 1995 Physical Activity Monitor found that Cycling was one of the 10 most popular physical activities of Canadians with a participation rate of 44%. Amongst teenagers, biking was *the most popular* physical activity. 66% of Canadians reported that they would like to cycle more often. (CFLRI 1995/Enviroics 1998)
- There is evidence that improved cycling and walking facilities mean greater participation. The percentage of commuters who cycle is three times greater in cities with substantial bicycle lanes. (Active Living – Go for Green 1995)

- Just over one-third of Canadian children and youth meet the guidelines for optimal growth and healthy development. (CFLRI 1997)

- In 1994, the World Health Organization, in a landmark position statement, announced physical inactivity as one of the four major risk factors of coronary heart disease. Physical inactivity is also a contributing factor for type II diabetes, colon cancer, back pain, hypertension, obesity, osteoporosis, anxiety and stress. (WHO, 1994/U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1996)

- The relative risk of the four main Coronary Heart Disease risk factors (physical inactivity, elevated cholesterol, high blood pressure and cigarette smoking) were very similar. However, the prevalence of those at risk for the three latter risk factors was small (10–18%) compared with that of failing to perform regular physical activity (59%). Physical activity is therefore a more important concern than the other risk factors, from an overall population perspective. (Caspersen, 1989)

- In addition to the health benefits associated with physical activity, a more active population can yield potential economic benefits by reducing the cost of: medical care and sick leave, absenteeism in the workplace; health insurance claims and maintaining the independence of older adults, thereby reducing the cost of institutional care. (Ministry of Health, Ontario, 1995)

Circa 1940, Ottawa Train Station

Photo: C



- The linear nature and grade of rail-trails offer excellent opportunities for people of almost any age to pursue physical activity in a natural setting.

Courtesy of C. Robert Craig – Memorial Library



- Active leisure pastimes, that are and will continue to be popular, are those that are unstructured and can be enjoyed close to home, work or a secondary residence. Trails are affordable, accessible and unscheduled opportunities. (Vélo Québec 1998)

Heritage Benefits

- When Lord Strathcona drove the final spike into the CP Rail line at Craigellachie, British Columbia, in the Eagle Pass near Kamloops, on Nov. 7, 1885, Canada was finally welded together with a single ribbon of steel. But a century later, the national dream is being recast in the form of trails across the country. These are important cultural landscapes that must be preserved. (Fennell 1994)
- By bringing abandoned rail corridors back to life, corridors which were at one time the backbone of our country, trail proponents are helping us find our roots and discover our past. (Vélo Québec 1995)
- Artifacts and archives provide a wealth of tangible heritage that lends itself to display and presentation. Several examples of heritage interpretation in railway corridors include the typical prairie town settlement, the Canadian Shield, and an urban railway tunnel. (Marsh 1994)

- Trails provide the visitor with first hand opportunities to understand, appreciate, and enjoy key park/site heritage themes and values. (Parks Canada 1996)
- Travelers are increasingly attracted to educational oriented experiences provided by cultural and historic sites. One of the fastest growing areas of tourism includes cultural and historic community festivals, events, and competitions. Greenways and trails can provide a link between historic and cultural sites. (National Parks Service 1990)
- The history of human habitation along trails in Newfoundland stretches back thousands of years. It includes Dorset Eskimo sites, Beothuck occupations on the Exploits River and along the coast, Norse settlement in Trinity Bay, and European settlement. Many communities have established excellent local museums and interpretative facilities that trailway users can visit. (Northland Associates Ltd. 1992)
- In the first year alone of the Klondike Gold Rush, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 gold seekers packed their outfits over the pass to Lake Bennett. Today, an estimated 3,000 hikers a year brave the trail. Our interest in trying to recreate history dictates the route. The Chilkoot Trail is laden with memories of the past and relics from the 1897 gold rush.

“Abandoned railway rights-of-ways can be a unique seed source for valuable species of woody and herbaceous plant material. In many cases the construction of railways pre-dated local land development and preserved stretches of indigenous plant material within rights-of-way. As the demand for hardy native species increases, the protection and accessibility of seed source reserves will become more critical... The emerging field of landscape restoration depends on a gene pool for vegetation adapted to Ontario. Abandoned railways are seen by some as an irreplaceable genetic resource.”
(Ecologistics Limited, 1990)





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(for a complete bibliography, visit our website at www.goforgreen.ca)

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