



SUCCESSFUL TRAIL DESIGN

According to a joint-committee comprising Parks Canada and the International Mountain Biking Association, a trail should meet two objectives: satisfy the needs of its users and minimize the impact to natural resources. In other words, a successful trail is both socially and environmentally sustainable.

In this context, environmental sustainability implies that a trail must be constructed using eco-friendly materials and, just as importantly, constructed in a manner as non-obstructive as possible to its natural surroundings. Trails should align with the natural shape of the land and stay out of the way of natural water flows. This will not only lighten the trail's impact on its environment but also make it much less susceptible to erosion, thus much more durable.

Ensuring that a trail is socially sustainable, on the other hand, implies that it must meet its user's needs. Building trails that people won't use is quite simply a waste of energy and resources, and to avoid this, parks across North America regularly survey their users. A well-known survey conducted in Minnesota found that trail users ascribe the following values to trails: safety, convenience, recreation, fitness and transportation. Safety and convenience are base-line values that must be present to satisfy the needs of any users. The importance of the other values depended on the site, the trail community and the diversity of the regional trail system.

Respected Trail Designer Troy Scott Parker concludes that on top of safety and convenience, successful trails incorporate the following concepts:

- Natural shape; nature never follows a straight line and, by mimicking its shape, trails gain a "rough", "rustic" or "naturalistic" character.
- Anchors; these are distinct vertical features such as large trees or stones, or even the edge of a lake, around which the trail wraps itself and ties itself to the earth. Our eyes are drawn to these points of contrast and constantly seek them out.
- Efficiency; visitors want to feel that the trail isn't wasting their time and effort and will naturally bypass sections of trail that give them this feeling.
- Playfulness; this implies having variety on the trail and not revealing everything at once. There's nothing more memorable than turning a bend in the path and discovering something you didn't expect to see!
- Harmony; this is our feeling of overall appropriateness and it increases our sense of appreciation, respect and stewardship for the trail. To give a stark example of disharmony, think of a wide highway crossing a sensitive wetland. All the pollution it creates contradicts and uncomfortably clashes with its surroundings.

A recent survey conducted in the townsite of Wasagaming, in Riding Mountain National Park (RMNP), found that most visitors there are looking for a relaxing, leisurely experience. They are generally on vacation and, if they decide to go on a trail, they would like it to be safe, convenient (our base-line values) and recreational. If any changes were to be made to the RMNP trail system, they wanted more, short, easy trails with easy-access from the town. Such a request reflects their desire for trails to achieve greater harmony with the townsite streetscape, essentially recreational in nature.

