

National Trails Roundtable - Summary Report

Introduction

Throughout Canada, there are many organizations that develop, fund, maintain, and promote a variety of trails at the local, provincial and national level. Generally, these organizations are staffed by dedicated volunteers and channel whatever monies they have directly towards improving the trail system. There's no neat diagram to explain the work or relationship of these organizations, and their difference in size, longevity, purpose and capacity is vast. Some trail groups are new, while others have extensive experience in trail building and know more about funding mechanisms and working with different levels of government.

In the eyes of many trail stakeholders, including users, builders, operators, and government funding partners, there is too little focus on collaboration, understanding, or reaching out and too much time spent looking inwards.

Trail leaders recognize that the trails sector is comprised of a large number of stakeholders with different needs and goals. The National Trails Leadership Roundtable was designed to determine if there was support for improving collaboration across the sector, so that leaders of a variety of organizations can clarify their roles and responsibilities as positive contributors to the trails movement at the national level. This initiative was funded by the Trans Canada Trail and Parks Canada. The Roundtable provided a forum for trail leaders to meet and talk candidly about their shared interests and concerns. A consulting firm, MASS LBP, was engaged to facilitate the process. They prepared two research papers in advance of the Roundtable meeting in Banff that was held from November 23 to 25, 2010.

The goals of the Roundtable were twofold - to promote a more cohesive trails community in Canada and to find opportunities for greater collaboration. The results of the meeting are summarized in this document. It is hoped that they will become guidelines for developing a cooperative framework. Delegates identified shared values, created visions for trail collaboration, identified issues for action under ten themes, and brainstormed opportunities for solving challenges together. The final session presented delegates with an opportunity for compromise and union. This session allowed each delegate to propose to the rest of the group an issue or topic for agreement. On issues that did not garner agreement, delegates elected to park them as needing more time to resolve. These topics will require focus from the entire trails community over the coming months and years.

All of the delegates agreed on the urgency of the need for collaboration. At the end of the two day Roundtable, a cross section of seventeen trail leaders volunteered to serve on a Working Group to review the final report from MASS LBP and develop priorities for collaborative initiatives. One of their tasks will be to investigate options for the form or mechanism of collaboration. The Working Group has also drafted an online survey to accompany this document in order to encourage other trails enthusiasts to become involved in the work of the Roundtable and to assist the Working Group to consider the views of as many people as possible.

Values

The delegates at the Roundtable were asked to identify the values that guide their organizations and share instances where these values were either a source of pride or conflict. The delegates

found that they had a large number of common values that could act as a uniting force in the trails sector. The consultants took the values that were generated by the delegates and clustered similar values together to come up with the following “values map”:

Diagram 1. Values Map



The above map shows the values loosely grouped according to theme. The size of the circle indicates the frequency with which the value was cited by the delegates. The values most common to trail organizations were: working in a collaborative manner, showing respect for the many stakeholders involved in trails, committing to making trails accessible, maximizing the passion of the trails community, raising the profile or stature of trails in the eyes of the public and policy-makers, and working with communities that are close to trails to ensure that trails are socially, environmentally, culturally, and economically sustainable.

Some values related to how delegates felt about the trails themselves – that they are integral to our heritage, health, and natural environment - and some values related to how delegates hoped to ensure that trails stay this way, through education, safety promotion, sharing, good planning, and stewardship. Delegates felt confident that these shared values were a strong basis for moving forward with collaboration.

Shared Challenges

Ten challenges were identified through the preliminary research by the consultants as well as discussions that were held at the Roundtable. These challenges are as follows:

- Government Involvement;
- Funding;
- Fragmentation of the Trails Sector;
- User Group Conflict and User Experience;
- Land Use, Access and Management;
- Marketing and Promotion;
- Trail Building and Maintenance;
- Education and Engagement;
- Risk Management;
- Environmental Stewardship and Wildlife Protection.

A Vision for Trails and Trail Collaboration

The next activity at the Roundtable gave delegates the opportunity to sketch out their vision for trail collaboration. The delegates worked in six different groups. Subsequent to the Banff meeting, members of the Working Group took the six different vision statements and merged them into one vision as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Vision for Trails Across Canada

Our vision is one where...

- Canadian trails will be there for the enjoyment and well-being of all people by providing a lasting legacy;
- Trails are celebrated and highly valued by all Canadians;
- Trails are sustainable and environmentally friendly.

As trail leaders we will work to...

- Present a more unified national voice on trails and trail issues;
- Honour diversity within the trails community;
- Develop an inclusive national level framework with a transparent process that will seek to broadly engage all trail stakeholders;
- Ensure that Canada's trails are funded and sustainable.

By...

- Obtaining resources and support at the federal government level and from other funding sources;
- Identifying a dedicated federal government partner or a portfolio of partners;
- Ensuring there is a viable organizational structure to take the next steps;
- Supporting positive relationships at the provincial and local level within the trails community;
- Sharing best practices.

Areas of Agreement

Delegates arranged for a final plenary session where they could map areas of agreement and disagreement as a means of solidifying the issues, opportunities, and progress from the previous two days. They wanted to ensure that they didn't leave the Roundtable with an empty promise of future collaboration.

The delegates asked each other to clarify compromises, agreements, and commitments, ensuring that each issue garnered the support of the room. Issues where solutions had not yet been found were listed as unresolved, on the understanding that trail leaders would revisit them over the course of collaborative initiatives.

The results are listed below. It is important to note that neither list represents a priority sequence of issues to address. Instead, the results of this conversation can be used as guidelines for mapping out a structure or mechanism for national collaboration.

Collaboration:

We agree to collaborate, but we also agree that:

- There is no existing ideal mechanism or organization through which the trails community can collaborate;
- We need a mechanism / forum;
- We need a representative Working Group to investigate the options for finding a mechanism for collaboration.

Profile of Trails:

- We agree that there is a problem that trails are taken for granted by government and the public
- We need to raise the profile and public awareness of trails
- We agree that we need to reach out to the broader trails community

Funding and Resources:

- We need sustainable funding;
- We agree that we need a realistic assessment and location of the resources required to advance our agenda and resolve outstanding issues.

Conduct:

- We agree to respect our differences in trail use & mandates;
- We agree to respect the priorities of the communities we work in;
- We agree that the process we use to engage with each other, the government, and the public must be transparent;
- We agree that we need appropriate and feasible timeframes & a sense of momentum.

Information and Knowledge-sharing:

- We need to do more to share best practices and information;
- We agree that we need to better understand the trail organizational landscape (mapping stakeholders, needs and priorities);
- We agree that we need to do further research about the collective benefits of trails with a focus on health, well-being and prosperity (economic, social, environmental);
- We need to “make the case for trails”;
- We agree that we need a ‘collection point’ for informational resources (e.g. a website);
- We need to communicate the knowledge we already have.

Interacting with Government:

- We would like to achieve a unified voice to government and the public on those issues on which we agree;
- We need to engage governments at all levels in finding solutions;
- We need provincial and federal governments to develop closer working relationships on trails issues;
- We agree that we need to identify the specifics of and make a recommendation to the federal government regarding a lead trails agency;
- We agree that we need both financial and non-financial incentives from government for trails.

Issues for Further Consideration

We have not resolved the following issues:

Structure of Collaboration:

- The form of the organization / forum / coalition that would best represent our interests / We have struck a Working Group to investigate this further;
- What constitutes equitable representation of trail organizations in a collaborative approach;
- The relationship between local, provincial and national membership;
- Whether we need a comprehensive architecture for trails organizations in Canada.

Determining Priorities and Allocating Resources:

- What priorities and needs are / We know that this needs to be part of our research agenda;
- How to allocate funding according to priority or need. We know that this needs to be part of our research agenda;
- What sustainable funding would look like and how much we need.

Other:

- Issues of terminology. We agree that we need to develop a clear terminology regarding trails;

- Whether we need a user pay system or what it would look like;
- Whether we need a national classification system.

Conclusion

By the end of the two days in Banff, delegates had stated strong support for future collaboration. This foundation included a map of shared values, a thorough exploration of common challenges, an identification of issues or obstacles to tackle, and an agreement that a collaborative approach is the best way forward. Delegates agreed to:

- Share information and learn from one another;
- Speak with a clear voice;
- Work towards common goals;
- Champion an inclusive and positive trail culture;
- Raise the profile so more Canadians will value and appreciate trails;
- Be more strategic about resources: volunteers, funding and land assets.

The delegates concluded by agreeing to widen the conversation from the Roundtable to as many trails advocates as possible by distributing this summary report and encouraging participation in an online survey.