

Making Tracks: the History of the Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club

The Ski Trails

While the WCCSC has 85 kilometres of ski trails today, the trail system started out as a humble three kilometre loop – a loop that no longer exists, but has since been replaced by a series of baseball diamonds, a correctional facility, and a college. As Father Mouchet and Dave and Irene Brekke were establishing the TEST Program at the Takhini School during the winter of 1968-1969, a track was required for the students to train on. In describing the course following its inaugural competition, a report on the newly established program stated:

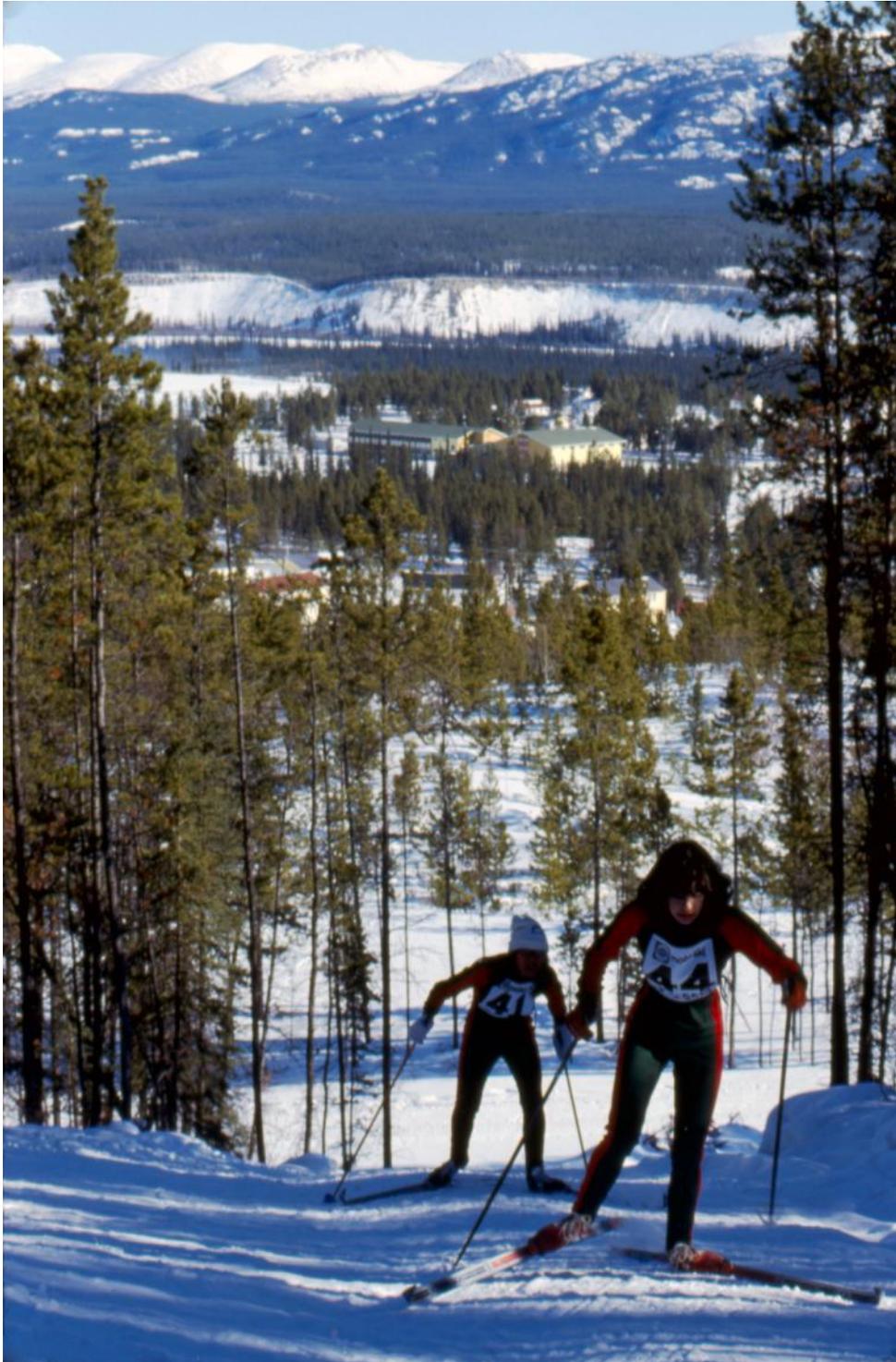
It followed a flat land then moved up the hill in switchbacks. In two places we had to cross the highway but no problems resulted from there. The course went up to the pumping station and then plunged down toward a small valley and up again into wooded areas where many uphill sections were built and in one place a fast downhill with two very sharp turns (the skiers [sic] called this section ‘Suicide Hill[’]). In the woods the course offered some very scenic views. Ribbons were placed along the course and it could be followed easily. The weather turned cold and during that time much work was done to improve the course. After a while it became necessary to build it with a shovel so the track would last longer as it would be harder underneath. The grooves also would appear deeper.

By the early 1970s, this trail system had acquired lighting which was paid for by the Yukon Government. However, the new trails had poor snow melt conditions and TEST was looking at the land across the Alaska Highway and at higher elevations.

Water Resources and Mount McIntyre Trails

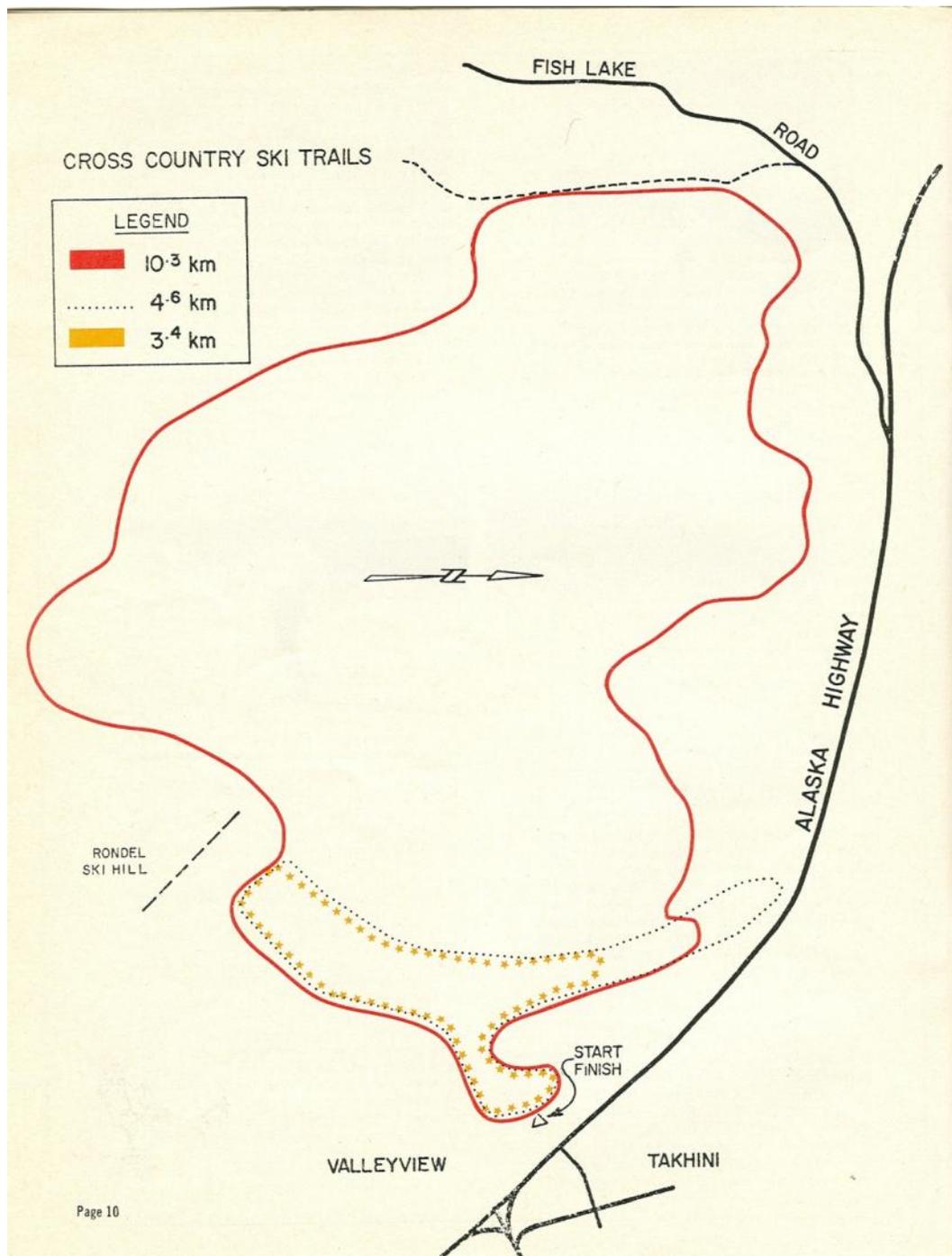
In 1970, TEST – under the direction of Father Mouchet – began constructing a series of trails. The first trail developed in the Water Resources area was 3.4 kilometre loop. This was followed two years later by the development of a 4 kilometre loop and a 5 kilometre loop. Part of the motivation for the increased trail development was the fact that Whitehorse would be hosting the Arctic Winter Games in 1972. Over the ensuing decade, the trail system expanded to include many trails that now more-or-less comprise many of the shorter loops of the trail system today. When the 1974 Junior Canadian Championships arrived in Whitehorse, the TEST trail map showed a 10.3 kilometre loop, a 4.6 kilometre loop, and a 3.4 kilometre loop. The trail map for 1977, when the Shell Canadian Senior Cross Country Skiing Championships were held in Whitehorse showed three loops roughly 10 kilometres long, a 6.9 kilometre loop, and a 4.6 kilometre loop. At this point in the trail system development, Selwyn’s Loop was the outer limit. In 1975, this trail system also involved a small lit loop. The surveying of the trails was carried out by Steve Baker.

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Credit: Yukon Archives, Arctic Winter Games Host Society fonds, 80/83, #827.

Meanwhile, another trail was constructed higher up on Mount McIntyre (now the Fraser Loop) for early season skiing. In 1976, a hut was built by Jack Fraser along the loop. It was not only a place where skiers could warm up on a cold day as skiers sometimes spent the night in the cabin.

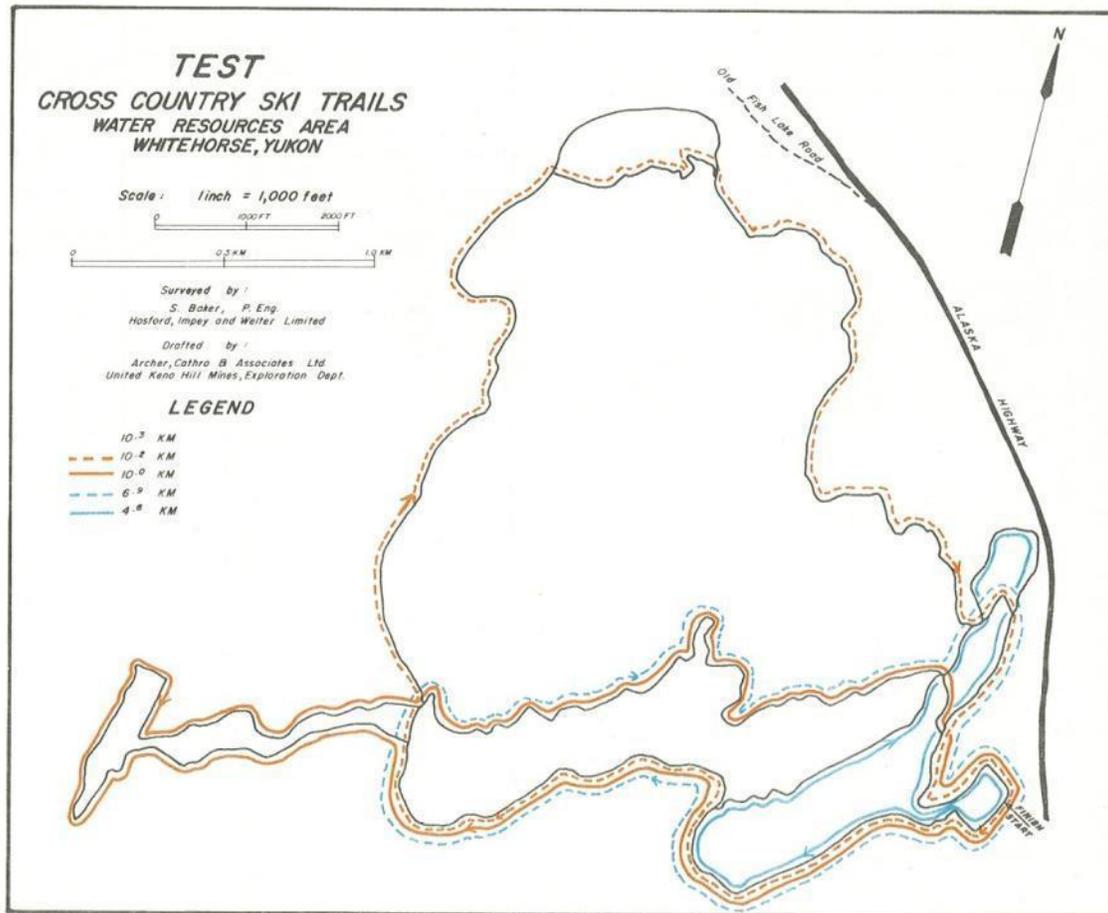


Credit: *Program for the 1974 Canadian Junior Cross Country Ski Championships.*

The trails were constructed and maintained by a number of incredibly dedicated volunteers. Naturally, Father Mouchet was heavily involved in the development of the trail system. However, many others made significant contributions to trail construction, such as Peter Steele and Olympic biathlete Jim Boyd. Meanwhile, the Coyne's of Klune Drilling provided financial

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support as well as gravel and equipment. Don Sumanik worked early in the morning to ensure that the track was set for the day. As he worked early in the mornings, he would awake around 2 AM and cut the trails before going to work! Meanwhile, Selwyn Hughes took time off of work in order to cut Selwyn's Loop.



Credit: Shell Canada Ltd., *Shell Canadian Senior Cross-Country Championships: Whitehorse, Yukon March 24-29, 1977.*

Given the great amount of time and effort put into the development and maintenance of the trails by the numerous volunteers, naturally TEST wished to protect the trails. This was a challenge faced by TEST and later the WCCSC for years. In December 1974, TEST president Bill Vandermale wrote a letter to Ken Steele, the Land Administrator for the Yukon Territorial Government, lamenting the difficulties he faced maintaining the ski trails due to snowmobiles, people walking on the trails, vandalism to trail signs, and littering. Additionally, Vandermale expressed his concern of real estate development in the area that would see the expulsion of the skiers. Consequently, he sought greater control over the land that the trails were on. This involved trying to obtain a lease of the trails as well as a rezoning of the land that the trail system

sat on as “Educational” so as to prevent development. While the Yukon Government agreed that TEST required a certain degree of control over the trails, Steele stated that the responsibility for zoning lay with the City of Whitehorse. However, TEST did receive temporary land use permits from the Yukon Government.

An additional challenge faced by TEST was the \$800 per year that they were paying to light the Takhini trails. By 1982, this burden had been taken on by the City of Whitehorse.

The WCCSC Trail System

The formation of the WCCSC saw a number of changes to the trail system. One was the shift in ownership of the trails and the other was the expansion of the system resulting in the link between the Water Resources trails and the Mount McIntyre trail. Additionally, in 1980 what has come to be known as the Pierre Harvey Loop was added for the upcoming World Cup.

In an April 1981 Memorandum of Agreement between TEST and the ski club, the rights of occupation of the ski trails and the chalet were transferred to the WCCSC. However, according to the agreement TEST “skiers and coaches would continue to have liberal access to both the Mt. McIntyre and Water Resources trail systems for the purpose of training and racing.” Meanwhile, TEST retained the track by the Takhini School – at that point a one kilometre loop.

While racing trails were well developed by the time the ski club was formed, touring trails remained sparse. For instance, when Mike Gladish initially became involved with the ski club in 1981, there was not much beyond Selwyn’s Loop, with the exception of the Copper Trail (which was then called the Touring Trail). Soon afterwards however, the touring division of the club began to develop trails that would connect the Water Resources trail system with the Mount McIntyre loop. These became known as the Upper and Lower Valley trails.

Over the ensuing years, the trail system saw the development of a number of small connectors. By 1986, a number of shorter connector trails existed such as Whiskey Jack and Coyote trails, to name just a few of the connectors that were constructed over the years. Additionally, the Blizzard Trail (which became the Olympic Trail in 1996) had been built as well as the Dog Trail. One of the more notable connectors was built in 1998, linking the 7.5 kilometre trail with the Monique Waterreus Loop. This provided a bypass to the dreaded Wall and breathed new life into the trail, which had been abandoned.

In 1995, Peter Steele commenced the creation of a new series of ski trails at the highest point of the 7.5 kilometre trail. A 2.5 kilometre trail was constructed by a number of club members. This trail was named Sarah Steele Trail in honour of Peter Steele’s late wife and former president of the WCCSC. During the following summers, Steele was able to acquire funding to hire youth to

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work on the trails and build other loops through the rolling terrain off of the 7.5K. Steele now looks on this trail system as the most worthwhile thing he had done in Whitehorse!

In addition to the trail system, a number of huts were erected along the trails. These were Bruce Harvey Hut (named in honour of an dedicated helper on the ski trails), Fireweed Hut, and Sarah Steele Hut.

Trail grooming at night could lead to some rather unique experiences. Sandy Johnston remembers grooming trails at two in the morning at forty below when the twin tracks died. As he walked back to the chalet he got the sense that he was being followed. This was when he noticed coyotes on the trail which, at that particular time looked like large wolves!

In addition to Johnston, some of the major contributors to the construction and maintenance of the trails were Dave Horner, Chris Bookless, Merv Miller, and Tom Fairman. In the mid-1990s, Harris Cox became the facilities director for the ski club. In this role he logged 20-30 volunteer hours weekly grooming the trails. For the great contribution he has made to the club, he has been awarded a lifetime membership.



Credit: Whitehorse Cross Country Ski Club.

As the trail system expanded along the edge of the city, the club continued to struggle with vandalism. This had devastating consequences in 1994, when the Jack Fraser Hut burned. As the *Whitehorse Star* reported on January 4: “a series of snowmobile tracks found around the site,

along with blood and liquor bottles, seems to indicate the fire was only the latest in the series of acts of vandalism that has plagued the hut since it was built in 1976.” In 1998, a human-caused forest fire was ignited on the Lower Valley Trail. However, with a great amount of volunteer effort the trail was ready to be skied by the fall. During the following summer, gates were installed “at key points” to prevent people from accessing the trail to acquire firewood.

The Ski Trails in the New Millennium

The year 2000 saw the beginning of significant changes to the racing trail system as the entire city sprang into action preparing for the upcoming Canada Winter Games (CWG), which Whitehorse was to host in 2007. Perhaps the most dramatic change to the trails was the relocation of the stadium in order to accommodate the construction of the Canada Games Centre. The once large stadium shrank in size and moved a few hundred metres onto the location that once held the speed skating oval. Making it distinct from its older counterpart, the new stadium underwent landscaping work resulting in a large berm on the first corner as races entered the stadium. Additional measures taken to accommodate the Canada Games Centre were the rerouting of the Water Resources Hill and the dismantling of the stairs leading down to the old stadium, known as Lover’s Leap. Meanwhile, in 2002 an underpass was constructed allowing skiers to pass from the stadium, under Sumanik Drive, and onto the Dog Trail. This underpass has come to be known as the Tube.

In the lead up to the CWG, a number of new connectors were developed and ski trails widened, changing “the feel of the trails.” As a departure from many of the previous volunteer efforts, the new trail developments were undertaken by commercial enterprises such as Ketz Construction and Skookum Construction. These included a ramp to the parking lot and a sprint course. Meanwhile, trails such as Raven were widened to accommodate skate skiing races.

Racing trails were not the only trails to undergo developments. Along some of the further flung touring trails, connectors were built and even an old, overgrown racing trail was re-cut. In the winter of 2002-2003, the Pierre Harvey Loop – which had formed part of the 15 kilometre race at the 1981 World Cup – was reopened for skiing. This was largely due to the efforts of Stephen and Marcus Waterreus and Scott Fraser. Meanwhile, a connector was built between the Upper Valley and Copper trails. This trail was named Jeff Link in honour of Harris Cox’s son, who had made a significant contribution to maintaining the trails.

The trail system has also seen the development of a number of mountain bike trails over the years, resulting in an increase of summertime use of the area. Most recently, a mountain bike skills park has been established.

Urban Development, Mining, and the Ski Trails

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While the ski trails were once on the edge of Whitehorse, the city expanded and enveloped the trail system. Early in the ski club's history there had been concerns related to the security of the trails. This was not so much related to encroaching development, but the trails being used for less complementary purposes. In 1983, Peter Steele wrote the Yukon Government's Minister of Tourism, Heritage, and Culture, Bea Firth, suggesting that the ski trails be made into a heritage park "so that they can never be touched for purposes other than skiing and kindred summer activities." However, this park was never established.

Beginning in 1998 and intensifying over the following decade, the ski club was forced to seriously consider encroaching urban development and how they would respond to these apparent threats. A developer had purchased land in the Kopper King subdivision bordering Herringbone Hill and KK Hill. This caused concern about the increased potential for vandalism and snowmobile access to the trails. Additionally, the developer had purchased another parcel of land off of the Fish Lake road which included a section of the 10 kilometre trail. This latter parcel of land was to be developed into a country residential subdivision – now Raven's Ridge.

The impact of development on the ski trails became a greater reality in 2006 as more concrete plans were made for the establishment of lots on Raven's Ridge. The ski club worked collaboratively with the develop, resulting in the rerouting of the 10 kilometre trail in order to accommodate the new subdivision

Another section of the 10 kilometre trail is located on a section of land owned by ATCO. This includes Moose Hill, the S-Bend, and a large part of the Pierre Harvey Loop. Consequently, the ski club has been working cooperatively with the company in order to secure a long term agreement to use the trails on ATCO land.

In October 2007, eighty-five mineral claims were staked on the WCCSC trail system. This news story broke in January 2008, causing additional concerns to club members about the security of the trail system. Similar to the situation with the residential developments on the ski trails, the club sought to cooperate with the mining companies responsible for the staking. Members of the club sat down with the mining companies in order to understand their interests while conveying the club's interests.

As developments have encroached onto the ski trails, the WCCSC has moved forward addressing each development individually as well as addressing the situation globally. This involved the formation of the Land Tenure Committee and cataloguing and mapping threatened areas. Additionally, the ski club has succeeded in getting the area recognized in the City of Whitehorse's Official Community Plan as the Mount McIntyre Recreation Area. This has resulted in the establishment of a "park preserve" around the ski trails. Many of the so-called

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threats to the trail system have resulted in the recognition of the trails' significance to the community.