

Giant's Head Mountain redevelopment balances recreational use with environmental protection

by Doug Holmes

Giant's Head Mountain is Summerland's most prominent landmark, known as much for its cultural, ecological and recreational importance as its imposing presence in the heart of the community.

The 87-hectare Giant's Head Mountain Park was established in 1967 with two apex paths and quickly became a popular destination for locals and tourists. Over the years, an unplanned 12-km network of dozens of criss-crossing trails emerged, resulting in soil erosion, loss of grasslands, introduction of invasive plants, and threatened wildlife habitat.

A common question in environmental management is whether nature ought to be protected *from* people or *for* people. Obviously restricting entry to Giant's Head Mountain Park would protect its natural state however, if done properly, enabling access can serve to deepen public appreciation for nature and foster stewardship to ensure conservation continues for generations to come.

Through effective park management, it is possible to encourage responsible recreational use while protecting sensitive ecosystems.

With no previous management plan for Giant's Head, the District of Summerland completed a Trails Redevelopment Plan in 2018. It recommended phasing redevelopment as resources became available.

Phases 1 and 2 were completed in 2020 with 5.4 kms of upgraded existing trail, 2.3 kms of new trail, and other trails decommissioned for environmental protection and erosion control. The work also included new guard rails, park entrance improvements, road pull outs, refurbished viewing tubes and wayfinding signage.

Work on phases 3 and 4 is currently underway and includes upgrades to the upper circulation road and pedestrian trails, upper parking lot washroom, upper section of the Grind trail, and a new park entrance washroom.

It also includes remedial planting and invasive weed management, brush removal and fire hazard remediation work, further trail decommissioning, and additional fencing to keep hikers on dedicated trails.

There are various ways to decommission and restore a trail to its natural pre-existing state, including turning up soil, reseeded and transplanting, redistributing downed trees, and strategically closing off trail heads. Usually heavily compacted ground needs to be broken up and loosened to allow plants to recolonize the trail corridor.

A registered professional biologist (RPBio) ensures contractors working on Giant's Head follow conservation best practices and project environmental plans, and the trails contractor also has its own environmental staff.

Giant's Head Mountain has cultural significance for the syilx Okanagan people, who call it *ackłt'pus* (meaning 'a large lump on the edge of the bluff'), and the project therefore includes First Nations consultation for Indigenous interpretive signage, the first of which was unveiled last year in partnership with the Okanagan Nation Alliance and Penticton Indian Band.

The combined Phases 3/4 is a \$1.68 million project with \$673,113 coming from the federal government, \$560,871 from the provincial government, and the remaining \$448,798 from District of Summerland reserves.

Phases 1/2 cost \$800,000, with \$445,000 from the provincial government, \$200,000 from the federal government, and \$100,000 from the Rotary Club of Summerland through proceeds from the annual Giants Head Grind - Christopher Walker Memorial event. Rotary further supported the project with \$26,500 for signage.

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland