

AN ARGUMENT FOR REFRAINING FROM TURNING SOME ROUTES INTO TRAILS

Ray Chipeniuk

Every so often we hikers, skiers, and snowshoers discover an easy way to link a parking spot along a logging road with a beautiful place in the high country. In my experience, our immediate wish is then to make our route a trail. Over the years I myself have acted on that wish, and more than once. However, I think an argument can be made that the recreational values of **routes** are different from those of **trails** and that outdoor clubs such as the BV Backpackers should sometimes do what they can to keep certain routes from being turned into trails.

Definitions and theory from cognitive science

Before I make my case, let me give a few definitions and some background information from cognitive science. By “**trail**,” I mean a line cut through montane and subalpine forest for use by hikers, skiers, snowshoers, or the like. When I say “cut,” what I mean is that the makers and maintainers of the trail clip or saw through enough vegetation to make it easy for people to walk (or ski, etc.) single file, or maybe two abreast, along a visible pathway. In other words, even if it involves only natural materials on site, such as wood and stone, a “trail” in this sense is an artifact, something made by human beings for their own purposes. This point is a central one, to which I’ll return in a minute.

In contrast, a mountain “**route**” is simply a line in someone’s head, more or less invisible on the land. Even when repeated use results in the line taking on some of the appearance of a trail through trampling, it remains just a route because it is not the product of utilitarian human intention.

Cognitive psychologists have found that human beings think about artifacts very differently from how they think about natural things (or social entities, which are yet another matter). Artifactual thinking always involves consideration of intentions: What was the original purpose of this trail? Why did the makers of the trail choose to follow the creek rather than the drier ridge above it? What accounts for the abandonment of maintenance in the 1930s? When people think about natural kinds of things, on the other hand, they treat those things as having their own purposes (if any purposes at all), their own internal organization, their own intrinsic ways of behaving. As a result of much experimental research, we now know that natural kind and artifactual kind cognitive modules are well developed in children, cross-culturally and all but universally, by the time they are about six years old.

During the past 25 or 30 years, social scientists and medical researchers have also established many ways in which experience of nature is conducive to good mental and physical health. For example, exposure to natural scenes or exercise in natural settings reduces stress, refreshes attention, and speeds recovery from illness. There is now so much research on the beneficial effects of nature on

human health that a recent article in the journal *BioScience* synthesized close to 100 peer-reviewed publications concerned with dose-response phenomena in the relationship between nature and health.

Differences in the recreational experience of trails versus routes

Does the distinction between trails as artifacts and routes as a configuration of natural kinds help us understand major differences in our experience of outdoor excursions? I think it does. For one thing, notice that when we hike a mountain trail, the trail takes us to a destination someone else has chosen for us. It may just be the alpine meadows above tree line, or it may be a peak, but we are bound to someone else's idea of where we should go, and even how far in that direction. To that extent we are passive passengers in the outdoors, not active drivers who have defined their own goals and how they reach them. And there are innumerable ways in which personal autonomy is known to be of huge significance in a good human life. (In my youth, Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization would have framed any serious discussion of personal autonomy. Nowadays the giant in research on personal autonomy and happiness is a scholar with the unlikely name of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi.)

When we set our own goals in a route we also, at least ideally, have to do our own planning. More than when we simply opt to hike a trail, we need to assemble maps and aerial photographs. We need to identify objectives, obstacles, and hazards in the landscape we hope to traverse. We need to carry out mixed scanning between objectives and our ultimate goal. We need to estimate times and distances not on the basis of a description provided by a text or even a friend who has been over the same route but according to our own experience and judgment. Psychologists regard planning as one of the highest of human cognitive abilities; not to use it in our back-country recreation, from time to time, is to neglect another dimension of self-actualization.

Do our intuitions support these further claims from research? Mine do. Trails often bore me. My mind tends to dwell on the destination rather than the here and now. Small wonder, I suppose, when what is before my eyes is frequently the monotonously repeated features of a kind of road, deliberately simplified to impose engineering specifications on a chaotic land surface. Nor am I unusual in often being bored by trails. When he was a boy, my nephew strongly disliked hiking with his parents in Jasper and Banff, some of the most beautiful and exhilarating landscapes in the world. Then they tried taking him off the built paths....

In a group on a trail, I, like most other hikers, may become so involved in conversation that I barely notice the reality I am passing through. We are enclosed in a social bubble. That may be all right if what we are heading for is an end point, an overwhelming vision of mountain glory over the final ridge. But most mountain trails do not climax in views of outstanding beauty and interest.

I have no real evidence for it, but I am unable to shake the feeling that exclusive reliance on trails can undermine self-reliance in the most shocking way. Over the years I have encountered a surprising number of trail hikers and skiers with no maps, no compass, no extra clothing, no sense of the lay of the land. The American cultural concept of "wilderness" makes a virtue of self-

reliance. In Canada many of us are inclined to depend on SARS or the RCMP to rescue us when we step off the trail and become lost in the bush. Exclusive attachment to trails has made many of us good at reading signs and poor at telling north from south by the position of the sun in the sky or the pattern of surrounding peaks.

Practical reasons for restraining the proliferation of new trails

Worth mentioning are a couple of practical reasons for not upgrading routes to trails. First, trails need maintenance, and maintaining trails is hard for groups to arrange and irksome work for the people who do it; whereas routes maintain themselves. Second, in the Bulkley Valley we who are non-motorized recreationists have a long history of watching snowmobile and quad riders take over trails we have made and from the perspective of most of us, wreck them. (Cognitive research on naturalness indicates that nothing in a landscape, not even houses, is as unnatural as vehicles.)

Circumstances in which a route should be preferred over making a new trail

In what kinds of circumstances should a route be preferred over a trail? Obviously, we should frown on a trail whose potential ecological impacts might be great whereas a route over the same line would seldom have anyone on it. In my opinion we should think long and hard before countenancing a trail to a place whose aesthetic impact depends on the difficulty of reaching it. We should probably opt for a route rather than a trail when a well-loved destination already has good access. We should probably avoid making new trails for mainly utilitarian reasons, such as linking together existing trails into long circuits.

Conclusion

I don't want to give the impression that in my view trails are a bad thing and we should have only routes in the mountains. On the contrary, I believe there are powerful reasons for promoting construction, maintenance, and non-motorized recreational use of trails in our home mountains. Most of the time I personally move on trails, not cross-country. I must even admit to having pioneered a few trails myself. All I am suggesting here is that we hesitate before automatically commending construction of new trails to nice places above timberline. When one of us in the Backpackers works out an appealing new line from parking spot to alpine, maybe we should consider recognizing it as a "route" instead of a trail waiting to be developed. Or perhaps we could flag it, or parts of it, while most of it unmarked. On the other hand, sometimes, after due deliberation, we might agree that a new trail is in fact justified. But let us think twice....