

Chilcotin Mountain Trail System

INTRODUCTION:

Along the dry, inland slopes of the Coast Mountains, stretching from Tweedsmuir Park south to the Lillooet River Valley and east to Fraser River and the Cariboo, there is an extensive network of trails and routes which provides access to a spectacular, mountain wilderness. These trails are mainly within the Chilcotin Mountains, the Coast Mountains 'front range' on the southwestern rim of the Chilcotin Plateau. These mountains have exceptional and diverse recreational, biological, and cultural values. To maintain wilderness conditions along the range and to protect local and long-distance trail corridors, the Chilcotin Wilderness Society is proposing that the major trails and routes be identified and planned as an integrated system.

This trail system would link a network of Parks, Protected Areas, and Special Management Zones - including Tweedsmuir Park, Charlotte Alplands Community Preservation Area, Klinaklini River Goal 2 Protected Area, Homathko River/Tatlayoko Protected Area, Tsylos Park, Big Creek Park, Churn Creek Park, Spruce Lake Park, and Upper Lillooet River Park.- all designated to protect their biological diversity and exceptional backcountry recreation opportunities.

Two roughly-parallel trail corridors have been mapped with interconnections to form a 'stacked loop' system. Such a system would provide for alternative travel routes along the range as well as for local circuits. These trails make up some of the most important trails in the individual areas and should all be protected. Nevertheless, the routing will be refined as comments are provided by trail users. At this stage, our hope is to generate discussion and interest in the broad trail system concept. In local planning forums - such as the ongoing Chilcotin Sustainable Resource Management Plan - we'll then get to the task of detailed trail system planning.

LANDSCAPE:

In the Chilcotin the proposed trail system follows the less rugged ranges on the inland flank of the Coast Mountains, including the Rainbow, northern Pantheon, northern Niut, and Chilcotin Ranges. These are ranges of moderate relief between the steepest mountains of the Pacific Ranges and the rolling terrain of the Chilcotin Plateau. The landscapes along the trail corridors are remarkable for their diversity, featuring grasslands and wetlands, old-growth forest, large lake and river valleys, high peaks and rolling highlands, extensive alpine meadows, myriad tarns, and glaciers.

Eastward from the Coast Mountains and the South Chilcotin Mountains, a trail crosses the Camelsfoot Range to the grasslands of Churn Creek Park and the Fraser River benchlands. Terrain here is moderate, with flat valley bottoms, relatively gentle sidehills, rounded summits, and low divides between drainages. Forests tend to be open, with many meadow openings and wetlands; alpine areas are easily-travelled with extensive meadowland.

The route southward from the upper Taseko Valley would cross the Bridge River basin at the foot of Bridge Glacier, climb to a broad pass, and descend Salal Creek Trail to Upper Lillooet River

Park. This transect connects trails along the dry side of the Coast Range with trails on the coast side (in particular the Elaho-Meager Hiking Trail connecting the Lillooet and Elaho River Valleys).

TRAIL USE, MAINTENANCE, AND DEVELOPMENT:

There is a long history of backcountry travel along this range, both by horseback and foot. Some of the key trails in the proposed system have long been used by First Nations people for hunting, gathering, and trade. Through the past century many additional trails have been developed by prospectors, trappers, guide-outfitters, ranchers, tourism operators, and local residents.

Public recreationists now travel throughout the range, but use remains low, partly because the area is not well known, but also because its inaccessibility requires a capability for multi-day wilderness travel. Public recreation use is concentrated in the better known trails in the South Chilcotin and, to a lesser degree, in Tweedsmuir and Tsylos Parks, and in the Potato and Niut Ranges in the West Chilcotin.

The existing trail system has been developed and maintained almost entirely by trail users with little participation by government. This will continue to be the case, there currently being no government resources allocated to trail development. Government support for an integrated trail system would be sought first at the planning tables, where careful management strategies must be devised, and later, in development of management agreements with users which adhere to trail system goals.

TRAIL AND ROUTE DESCRIPTIONS:

On the trail system map 'trails' and 'routes' are differentiated. Trails all have had some degree of development, although conditions vary widely. Routes have had no development but are shown as the most feasible line of travel. By comparison with the coast side of the mountains, the open forests of these 'rainshadow' ranges provide for much easier route finding where there are no trails. Listings of communities, access, land use, trail uses and conditions, ecological values, and tourism operators are provided for the individual valley and mountain areas along the corridor are appended.

TOURISM OPERATIONS ALONG THE TRAIL CORRIDOR:

Being situated in a spectacular mountain wilderness, backcountry recreation is the focus of most tourism operations in the Chilcotin. Present commercial recreation use of trails includes horse trips, guide-outfitting, hiking, mountaineering, and backcountry skiing. Facilities vary from tent camps and rustic cabins to well-established lodges. A Chilcotin Mountains Trail System would encourage additional activities such as lodge-to-lodge travel, longer-distance guided hiking and riding, and provision of services to trail system users.

In order to develop their businesses, lodges, eco-tourism operators, and guide-outfitters require a secure land base. Establishment of a trail system would provide broad-based protection for the wilderness character of the trails and for the backcountry to which they provide access. An

integrated trail system would also make the Chilcotin and Coast Mountains more recognizable internationally as a wilderness tourism destination.

While advocating low-impact use of the backcountry, the Chilcotin Wilderness Society sees the expansion of wilderness tourism as vital to sustaining community economies. Other resource industries operate here on the margins of profitability; however wilderness tourism in the Chilcotin has truly world-class potential.

In a *Chilcotin Wilderness Tourism Study* (for the BC Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture) the West Chilcotin Tourism Association (2001) endorsed establishment of a trail system along the Chilcotin Mountains to provide for expanded wilderness tourism opportunities. Based on their research the WCTA conservatively estimated primary revenues of Chilcotin wilderness tourism operations to be in the range \$35-40 million annually (excluding spin-offs and multiplier effects). This revenue represents a substantial and long-term component of the economy of Chilcotin communities.

MAINTAINING WILDERNESS CONDITIONS:

As the primary infrastructure for backcountry recreation it's critical that the important trails along the Chilcotin Mountains remain intact. If this system is fragmented by unplanned resource development the wilderness to which it provides access will be diminished or lost.

While advocating an integrated trail system, the Chilcotin Wilderness Society is committed to preserving the wild and undisturbed conditions now found in the backcountry. To this end, some guiding principles in trail system planning will be:

- no motorized vehicles during the summer and fall in wetlands, grasslands, and sub-alpine and alpine areas (except on established roads);
- adherence to leave-no-trace wilderness practices; and
- low-impact trail construction and maintenance practices.

ACCESS TO THE TRAILS:

Points of road access to the trail system are shown on the map. In many cases these access points are close to communities or tourism operations where supplies and lodging are provided.

Good road access to the trail system is available near Anahim Lake, Nimpo Lake, Kleena Kleene, Westbranch (near Tatla Lake), Tatlayoko Lake, Chilko Lake (north), Tsuniah Lake, Nemiah Valley, Taseko Lake (north), Big Creek, Churn Creek Park, Goldbridge, and Pemberton.

As a first indication of road access conditions we have attempted to differentiate 2WD gravel roads and bush roads (often requiring 4WD); however, conditions vary widely and change constantly. Local information should be sought before driving roads that are not part of the Provincial road system.

FIRST NATIONS INTERESTS

First Nations people based in the Chilcotin and on the mid-Coast have asserted land claims which extend across all of the project area. It's recognized that trail planning or development would be carried out without prejudice to any aboriginal rights or title that may exist.

Natives have long used and continue to travel trails throughout the area. Within the proposed trail system there are some very important native heritage trails, for which special protection is required. Trail system planning goals should include maintenance of traditional uses, protection of heritage values, and provision for First Nations tourism ventures.

CONNECTING TRAILS AND ROUTES

In the long-term the proposed trail system could form a part of both regional and Provincial-scale trail systems. Trails and routes with which the system would connect include:

- extensions northward through Tweedsmuir Park along the Coast Range;
- the Alexander Mackenzie Heritage Trail/Nuxalk-Carrier Grease Trail which is to be followed by the National Hiking Trail.
- trails across the Dean River Valley to Itcha-Ilgachuz Provincial Park;
- the native trail travelled by Lt. H. S. Palmer in his 1862 reconnaissance across the Chilcotin;
- heritage trails and routes crossing the Coast Range (down Southgate, Homathko, Klinaklini, and Bella Coola Valleys);
- the proposed recreation trail following the Fraser River benchlands;
- the regional trail system being developed in the Cariboo; and
- the Elaho-Meager Trail linking upper Lillooet River and upper Elaho River valleys.

TRAIL SYSTEM PLANNING:

Several government agencies share responsibility for regulation of the backcountry land base, and diverse communities, resource stakeholders, interest groups, and individuals are concerned about trail management in the region. A trails strategy is required which will unite trail system users around the goal of maintaining wilderness values and traditional uses of Chilcotin Mountains trails, while allowing for expanding opportunities for eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and public recreation.

The *Cariboo Chilcotin Land Use Plan* (Province of British Columbia, 1995) provides for protection of such long-distance travel corridors:

'Many of the regionally significant rivers and trails cross a number of polygons; in order to provide clear direction to subsequent sub-regional planning processes it will be necessary to compile these targets into overall statements of management direction for the entire length of each of these recreation corridors' (p. 144).

As well, maintenance of backcountry recreation values is recognized in the Land Use Plan as a principal management requirement for the six Special Resource Development Zones that the trail system crosses. With resource development encroaching on these trails, and with land use planning forums underway, there is a unique opportunity now to accommodate this valuable wilderness resource.

PUBLIC INPUT:

This information has been prepared first to solicit comments from Chilcotin residents and resource stakeholders concerning details of the proposal; and second, to foster public interest and support.

Planning for this trail system is ongoing; public input is welcome concerning which additional trails and routes should be included in the system, and how trails in the system should be managed.

Beyond this planning process, broad-based public support is critical to establishment of a regional trail system. This website is a first step towards acquainting public recreationists with the trail system and with the wilderness values along the Chilcotin Mountains.

ABOUT THE CHILCOTIN WILDERNESS SOCIETY:

The Chilcotin Wilderness Society is a conservation group composed mainly of Chilcotin residents based in the Tatla Lake and Tatlayoko Lake areas. In 1989, then as the Niut Wilderness Society, the group submitted a *'Proposal for a Wilderness Area in the Niut Range'* to the Chilcotin Forest District. The Niut Society Chair was later a full participant in the CORE land use planning process which culminated in the *Cariboo-Chilcotin Land-Use Plan* (and included establishment of the Homathko River-Tatlayoko Protected area in the Niut Range). Society members have since been actively involved in the Chilcotin Sustainable Resource Management Plan process as well as community-based planning initiatives focusing on management of wilderness conditions along the Chilcotin Mountains.

As a community-based organization the Chilcotin Wilderness Society is strongly committed to finding a balance between wilderness conservation and resource development which supports a diverse community economy. Our members regard planning for a *Chilcotin Mountains Trail System* as an integral element of this community development objective.

WILDERNESS SAFETY:

The foregoing information is being circulated to promote the Chilcotin Mountains Trail System. It is not intended as a guide for backcountry recreation. Much of the area described is inaccessible wilderness and the trails are mostly unsigned and can be difficult to follow. Recreationists should be well equipped and capable of unassisted wilderness travel. The Chilcotin Wilderness Society accepts no responsibility for uses of the information contained herein.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

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