

What's happening on the Green Mountain Trails? By Matt Baatz-Trail Master

In a week or two spring peepers will emerge from the thawed vernal pools and start peeping.

The male ruffed grouse will hop up onto his drumming log and start drumming defining his territory and calling out to any hens who happen to be in the area for a rendezvous.

The bear will migrate from their winter dens and starting from around Tweed River at the valley floor, browse for the newly sprouted tender greens in the wetlands.

Ferns will unfurl, the ramps will cluster on the side hills of ravines, and a dense covering of trout lilies will carpet almost the entire trail system.

By that time the trails are usually dry enough to ride.

Riders will once again pedal up Noodles Revenge and Luvin It to Shrek's Cabin and from there they will get a nearly unfathomable view of the Green Mountains.

And the reaction they will have, one of ineffable awe, is an accurate one. Even the view to Camel's Hump and beyond is a mere suggestion of the full extent of this forest which cannot be discerned with the human eye from this vantage. By some measures it stretches from the Tug Hill Plateau near Lake Ontario to the coast of Nova Scotia, including tens upon tens of millions of acres of trees.

And in a time when forests around the world are disappearing and being destroyed at a shocking rate just as we need them most, we cannot underestimate the importance and magnitude of preserving such a forest.

Part of what you're feeling when you breathe in the view at Shrek's Cabin is that though you're only in a miniscule stand of the forest, you are part of something much bigger. Something that you feel connected to but cannot fully comprehend or even express in words.

This northern forest promotes all those things that make the earth resilient and life giving: biodiversity, interdependence of species, recycling, partnership and flexibility in natural systems. This is the formula for sustainability.

An intact, healthy forest is also by far the best means of capturing and sequestering carbon on earth. All the trees in the world sequester 25% of carbon emissions. Similarly the sum total of forests in the United States sequester 25% of our emissions. The forests in Vermont sequester

70% of the emissions from all activities in this state. We could always do better, but it's a good start.

As a 700 acre trail system on private land, we steward a very small part of even Vermont's forest, but nevertheless have a big responsibility.

You see, eighty percent of the northern forest in the US is *also* privately owned and subsequently difficult to protect. Therefore it's important for us to set an example of how privately owned forest can be stewarded for the benefit of all while boosting the economy creating a win/ win situation among the landowners, the local business owners, the town, the community and the ecosystem. We need to be a viable and visible example of success *while* protecting the land.

Sir David Attenborough, the famous naturalist said: no one will protect what they don't care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced.

In ecological design the crucial organisms are those which are multifunctional, those that perform several ecological services in one package helping to create a well-balanced and productive system. Though a trail system is not an organism as such it often mimics one, so the metaphor still fits quite well. A trail system is also multifunctional. Just through its nature it fulfills many ecological and societal services at the same time harmoniously, symbiotically.

I had a little discussion with the red squirrels in the forest one day. I went down a list of acknowledged crises in our society and tried to determine as honestly as I could how many of these could be mitigated via a vibrant trail system:

Item 1: Social isolation...Trails can help..Trails have built in communities of riders and volunteers that are integral to the system. These communities as they are connected by a sense of shared purpose with equals create strong bonds, and the kinds of friends you'll never find on social media.

Item 2: Meaningless work...Trails can help...when you work on trails the benefits you see from that work are palpable and visible. You see the enjoyment on people's faces as they ride your work. You yourself can enjoy the trails in perpetuity right behind them. The work demands creativity, physicality, intellect and camaraderie and produces beauty. There are few things in life that are more gratifying.

Item 3: Sedentary society....Trails can help self-evidently.

Item 4: Children are spending next to no time outdoors....Trails can help. The forests that surround trails *are* schools in their incredible variety of experiential learning opportunities and

they effectively mitigate ADD without the use of substances. As everybody in this room probably knows, the innate creativity of children positively thrives in nature. Children always have and always will love nature if we let them.

Item 5: Adventure and taking managed risks are real human needs, especially in young adulthood, and they are lacking in our domesticated and litigious societyTrails can help....If these essential needs are repressed they inevitably come back to society in a much more destructive form. On most cross country trail systems much of the risk is perceived rather than actual. Bumps and bruises and occasionally breaks are a fact of the sport, but they are rarely life threatening, and can be mitigated through learning proper technique.

Item 6: We are suffering a health crisis...Trails can help...The truth is you can't separate environmental health from mental health from physical health from community health. They're interrelated and all can be sourced from a trail system.

Item 7: We are suffering a crisis of addiction...Trails can help....People who feel whole and connected, to the environment, to each other, to a way of life, to something bigger than themselves are a lot less prone to addiction. Addiction attempts to fill a void in our spirit and if we instead feed it genuinely with all the wonderful things that I just mentioned that can be found on a trail system then we're working towards a positive solution.

The best thing of all is that the trails are already performing these services without us having to lift a finger. The only thing we need to do is recognize it, encourage it, and allow it to happen.

Trail Statistics are great, pictures on social media of massive berms are just fine, along with video clips of big air and shredding the gnar...If it gets people on the trails, wonderful. But, for us, those things are all beside the point.

The important thing is to get more people on the trails to drive the giant feedback loop to a greater effect. More people means a greater portion who is going to fall in love with the trails. And those people in turn are going to care for the trails with everything they got. And caring for the trails creates what's called an umbrella effect protecting everything that the trails surround as well: the wildlife, the watershed, the forest and all the many services it provides free of charge. And the more cared for it becomes, the more additional people are going to in turn fall in love with it, and the beat goes on....

This year as every year, we are going to look to the South north east and west, to other trail systems for inspiration and support, as they are doing to us, knowing that they are serving the same function as we are, in slightly different ways but with similar results. Trail systems are not in competition with each other. This is not a zero sum game. Vermont is known for its amazing

diversity of trail systems and it's rarely a question of riding strictly this one or that but riding as much as you can and then coming back for more.

It's not mentioned often enough, but this diversity, and the increasing connectivity of trail systems has major benefits for ecology. Trail system connectivity mitigates the forest fragmentation which diminishes crucial biodiversity, the very thing that supports the health of our beautiful forests. It is a rarity in Vermont that trail systems think of themselves as competitors with one another, and I think this is the big reason why. We go out every day on the trails and see with our own eyes the importance of interdependence and diversity.

Trail systems, be thankful, are springing up everywhere in Vermont. As I recall almost a decade ago just along the route 100 corridor there was a major trail system every 20 miles or so. It's now getting closer to 10. Things are changing fast.

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that there is a major initiative in progress to try to connect them with single track in the form of the Velomont Trail. Once this does happen. It will be a win win situation for both the riders and the forest itself. In these times of rapidly changing climate and just as rapid forest fragmentation, both plants and animals need plenty of continuity in the form of wildlife corridors through which to migrate and thus survive. Connecting trail systems is a really good way to help create and sustain these corridors while supporting tourism and the Vermont economy simultaneously and sustainably.

Just as importantly it posits another example of the truism that the interests of the so called natural world and the interests of humans are not opposed to each other, in fact, if we look deeply enough, we realize they are exactly the same.

We already know this, but how does the portion of humanity living out a major part of their lives in cubicles, driving in metal boxes, staring at screens and getting a perspective of reality that is anything but real, find this out? They need to experience it. They need to be exposed to the kinds of experiences, as we already have, that show them that a life spent outdoors connected to the rest of the natural world and each other is the best kind of life. Getting them out there is the tricky part.

So this year, Green Mountain trails will continue to build berms, maintain the heck out of the trails, and build new ones knowing that having vibrant trails will protect the forest while the forest will protect us. And we'll ride up to the Shrek's cabin vista every once in a while and squint out towards Camel's Hump and attempt to fathom what exactly is at stake, and once again, utterly fail.

