



18 July 2022

Re: 2021 Trail user surveys, McIntosh Run Singletrack Trails

More information about the trails: <https://mcintoshrun.ca/singletrack-trail/>

2021 Trail User Survey.

In Fall 2021, the McIntosh Run Watershed Association (MRWA) conducted online and in-person user surveys for the McIntosh Run Trails, a system of recreational singletrack trails that MRWA builds and manages on HRM and Crown lands in the McIntosh Run watershed.

Background:

MRWA is an environmental conservation and community association formed in 1994 with a mission of stewarding the ecological integrity of and enabling sustainable public access to the McIntosh Run river and surrounding watershed. This mission has inspired activities ranging from monitoring sewage outflow events and water quality, to fish-friendly programs and river clean-ups with local schools, to our guided Hikes for New Canadians series and She/Her+ mountain bike rides, and many others.

As part of our conservation+community mission, MRWA builds and maintains the singletrack trail system which connects Spryfield, Herring Cove Village, and neighbourhoods in between. The trails are designed to accommodate mountain bikes, but are for all non-motorized users. The trails have become very popular; MRWA trail counts indicate that usage has increased dramatically over the last few years (>2000% since 2016), the trails are now the most used system for mountain bikes east of Quebec, and the trail use is estimated to exceed 100,000 visits per year (bike+pedestrians).

With Phase 1 of the trail system complete (23 km in total), MRWA completed a trail user survey to reflect on the trail system and plan for Phase 2, which would add 16 km mostly on Crown lands. The 2021 trail user survey was designed to determine who is using the trails, success and problems, and to assess if there is justification for Phase 2. If there is justification, we also wanted to know what Phase 2 should look like to meet the needs of the community.

The online survey was designed by MRWA in consultation with the Kirk lab at Dalhousie's School of Health and Human Performance to ensure validity and avoid ethical concerns. The survey was advertised at all neighbourhood trailheads, on MRWA and neighbourhood social media sites, during in-person trailhead counts, and by supporting organizations such as Nova Scotia Trails Federation.

Summary:

Below is a digested version of what we found in the online trail surveys. Results for all 53 questions including demographic response data and response rate is attached. 430 people replied to the online surveys.

- 32% of respondents live within 2km; 56% in other HRM; 12% outside HRM (some respondents were from outside the Maritimes).
- Biking, hiking, running, dog walking were all identified as main uses of the trails by respondents, with biking most common. Most respondents (bikers in particular) use the trails in multiple modes.
- People use the trails for exercise, mental health, fun and recreation, and to connect with nature (all of these were chosen by >80% of respondents)
- 94% of respondents say the trails are very important or extremely important to them; 82% say pandemic has made the trails more important to them.
- 95% say the trail conditions are good or excellent, and 95% say they recommend the trails to others. 81% say the signage and trail markings are good to excellent. 87% say the safety and security along the trails is good or excellent.

Trails as neighbourhood and tourism amenity

- 49% of local residents say the trails were a factor in their decision to live in the area, or would have been a factor (for those who lived in the area before the trails were built).
- Most respondents who identified as visitors to Halifax said the trails are the major or only reason for visiting (70%). Visitors stay 1 to 3 days and on average spend \$500 during their visit, mostly on restaurants and accommodations. Nearly everyone says they'll be back.

Problems and Management Goals

- Most respondents do not perceive any significant problems on the trails. The survey listed 13 potential problems, and all of these were rated “not a problem” by 64% or more respondents. No respondents selected “other problems”.
- Although the overall frequency of problems was low, some issues were highlighted: i) erosion, and poor drainage on some trails (~33% of respondents); trail widening and braiding (31%); dog poop; problem dogs; bikers who don't yield when they should. MRWA has flagged these for consideration and proactive strategies, which will likely require cooperation with HRM and the Crown.
- Proactive management goals: Preventing vegetation trampling, spread of exotic species, and negative impacts on wetlands were seen as a high priority by at least half of respondents. MRWA is incorporating this into trail management in cooperation with HRM and the Crown.

Demand for Phase 2

- There is overwhelming demand for more trails. “More trails” is the #1 improvement requested by respondents (75%).
- Respondents want singletrack trails of all difficulty levels but especially blue-square (intermediate), then black (expert) and green (easy). Double black (expert extreme) are identified as ‘very important’ by 17% of respondents. Phase 2 will likely include all four levels, roughly corresponding to the demand but within the limitations set by natural terrain.

- 81% want more long backcountry-style options (4+ hour rides, all-day or longer hikes). About 50% are moderately or very interested in even longer options, i.e. overnight bikepacking or backpacking. Very long options are not feasible in the footprint of Phase 2, but may be considered in a Phase 3.
- Other improvements identified by respondents are more parking (46%), public restrooms (45%), bike lanes leading to trailheads (29%) and more trail navigation markings (29%).

MRWA was happy to learn how important the trails are to local residents, residents of broader HRM, and to people who visit Halifax to use the trails. We found the information gathered through the survey helpful and important in planning for phase 2 which is now scheduled to begin this fall. The success of the trails is a result of amazing community support, from volunteers to funders to trailhead neighbours, to supportive councillors and provincial MLAs and staff at HRM Parks. Thank you for helping us make it happen. We appreciate your continued support as we start on the next phase of this exciting project.

Sincerely

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Alice Morgan (President)

McIntosh Run Watershed Association

mcintoshrun.ca

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