Innovative Leisure Practices

CASES AS CONDUITS BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE
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Chapter 4

Private land, public interest: Securing private land access to encourage amenity based migration for community development

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Chapter Summary:

In order to support diversified forms of economic and community development, rural communities are increasingly investing in recreational opportunities on neighbouring lands, including agri-tourism and mountain resort development. However, in communities where significant proportions of peripheral land holdings are privately owned, opportunities for recreational land access and development are restricted or threatened. The Village of Cumberland, located on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, is home to a premier network of mountain biking trails developed by local users on a mix of both public recreational and privately owned industrial land. Without the existence of a formalized land use agreement between local public, private and not-for-profit land interests, the value of Cumberland’s mountain biking trail network cannot be wholly realized. This case study details the collaborative land-use management partnership that has been developed in Cumberland in order to support economic and community development through amenity migration and the promotion of recreational mountain biking. Through sharing the costs and benefits of managing private land use, Cumberland’s multi-sector stakeholders have ensured that their individual strengths are utilized and unique interests are addressed.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this case study, the reader will:

1. Understand recreational land use issues on privately owned land on Vancouver Island, British Columbia;
2. Learn how competing local land-use interests can collaborate to ensure the best use of natural resources;
3. Recognize the contribution of recreation and tourism to rural community development
The Issue, Opportunity or Trend

In Canada, many rural areas, including the mountainous forest communities of British Columbia, once subsisted on the strength of local natural resource industries; as natural resource extraction economies have matured and declined, these same communities have struggled to identify and create new strategies for both community and economic development. A common response to this issue has been increased community investment in leisure-based development alternatives, including agri-tourism and major resort development (Nepal and Jamal, 2011; Ooi, Laing, & Mair, 2015). However, not all rural communities benefit from the proximity of suitable agricultural lands, functional mountain landscapes, or even adequate access to suitable recreational spaces. While publicly accessible Crown land is prevalent across much of Canada’s rural mainland, on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, private industrial interests own a substantial amount of the land that surrounds communities, diminishing the opportunities for recreational development. The TimberWest Forest Corporation is the largest private landowner on Vancouver Island, holding title to 804, 200 acres of forestland (TimberWest, 2010b). Though TimberWest authorizes the limited use of their land for responsible recreational endeavours through an application and permit process, a great deal of access to their private land holdings is restricted in order to protect the interests of public safety, owner liability, wildfire risk reduction, and natural resource protection (TimberWest, 2010a). The scarcity of land for leisure-based development is uniquely challenging for rural communities on Vancouver Island, where further leisure-based development requires integrated multi-sector partnerships to secure access to privately owned land (Benson, 2001). This case study provides a description of the innovative process by which the rural Village of Cumberland, a not-for-profit mountain biking association, and private logging interests have collaborated to create an alternative land use strategy that is strengthening the community and local economy by sharing the abundant surrounding forestland.

Privately owned rural land represents a new frontier to recreational users, providing ideal and unspoiled locations for leisure activity (Benson, 2001). Private land access is an important component of many popular, rurally based leisure activities including hunting, wildlife viewing (Benson, 2001), hiking, camping, motorized vehicle use (Daigle, Utley, Chase, Kuentzel & Brown, 2012), and mountain biking (Mason & Leberman, 2000). The desire of recreational users to access privately owned land is related to the absence of suitable public space; when little appropriate public land is available, users will seek additional spaces to recreate (Daigle et al., 2012). Securing proper access for recreational use on private land is a significant managerial issue that requires innovative and collaborative responses from the different stakeholders involved (Weiss et al., 2007). Extant literature on the public demand for private rural land use highlights three dominant managerial responses: open land access, paid recreational use, and collaborative management. The most liberal managerial view of private land access, open-access, allows entry for all leisure-users, providing they are undertaking non-invasive leisure activities; trusting that users will responsibly use the spaces they visit (Benson, 2001). Open land access to private forestland is commonly practiced in the northeastern and western United States, where low-impact recreational access is a long-accepted regional tradition (Daigle et al., 2012). Open access is also practiced in several Western European countries where open recreational access is a right of citizens (Weiss et al., 2007). In contrast to the progressive approach of open land access, paid access involves landowners levying usage and permit fees for recreational use (Daigle et al., 2012). Paid recreational use often emerges as a managerial response in locations where issues of private property damage, recreational user safety, and land-use conflicts may emerge (Daigle et al., 2012). Between the two polarized responses of open access and paid use, private land access has also been managed through innovative, collaborative partnerships between differing stakeholders and land interests (Benson, 2001; Weiss et al., 2007).
The sustainable use of private land for leisure use requires collaborative partnerships where the interests of public governing bodies, recreational users, and private landowners are all considered (Benson, 2001; Weiss et al. 2007). In a collaborative private land access partnership, the stakeholders involved can ensure their individual concerns are addressed and that their unique strengths can be contributed towards land management (Weiss et al., 2007). The collaborative management of recreation on private land requires meticulous planning between stakeholders and an amalgamation of natural resources including land, trees and trails; social capital including knowledge, strategic planning and trust; as well as financial resources including funding and infrastructure (Mason and Leberman, 2000; Weiss et al., 2007). Collaborative land management also allows for stakeholders to share the costs and benefits of managing recreation on private land communally. While the predominant share of power in this relationship resides with private landowners who ultimately dictate land access and are primarily focused on resource cultivation; each land interest benefits through collective land management; recreational access provides social benefits to users, generates economic impacts for the local economy, and fosters positive public relations for the landowner (Daigle et al., 2012). Collaborative partnerships also help alleviate the cost of mitigating the negative impacts that are associated with private land access, including soil erosion, existing trail widening, vegetation-growth changes, and littering, by dispersing the responsibilities amongst the stakeholders (Goeft & Alder, 2001). The shared burdens and benefits of a collaborative land use partnership make the damage and risks of recreational land use much more tolerable for private landowners (Benson, 2001). Additionally, recreational user-groups possess an extensive knowledge on their leisure activities and it is important that users play a participative role in local leisure planning and land access decision-making (Mason & Leberman, 2000). Collaborative partnerships allow for leisure organizations representing user-groups to act as intermediaries between landowners and users, educating recreational users to ensure the responsible use of natural resources (Daigle et al., 2012). For example, in Wales, UK, a local mountain biking organization contributes to collaborative management by communicating land access issues with the cycling community at large and promoting the local trail system to encourage new visitors (Weiss et al., 2007).

Mountain biking is a leisure activity that is increasingly being promoted as an economic alternative in forested rural communities. Increased access to private lands for recreational use contributes to community and economic development by encouraging active residents, attracting visitors seeking leisure opportunities, and promoting the development of leisure-related shops and ancillary services to compliment recreational opportunities (Weiss et al., 2007). The development of mountain biking trails through a mixture of both public land and private forestland in Wales, UK through an integrated partnership led to an influx of £ 1 million into the local economy, while attracting major corporate sponsorships to defer the costs associated with trail management, promotion and upkeep (Weiss et al., 2007). In a Canadian context, British Columbia’s Sea to Sky Corridor in the Whistler region generated an estimated $10.3 million in spending from cyclists living outside the area during just 3.5 summer months in 2006 (MBTA, no year).

The Innovation

Case Context

The small community of Cumberland, located in the Comox Valley region of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, is home to a renowned series of mountain biking trails that have branded the Village as a legitimate cycling destination (Mountain Biking BC, 2015). In addition to informal recreational mountain biking, Cumberland’s trails also play host to a series of annual races, group rides and cycle-centric events organized by the United Riders of Cumberland Mountain Bike Club (UROC). The Village of
Cumberland is a community that has long been tied to the natural resources that surround it. Originally founded as a mining community in 1888, the historic Village grew and regressed with the development and eventual decline of the local coal extraction industry (Village of Cumberland, 2015b). The preceding industrial use of the surrounding forestland left a vast footprint of logging trails and access roads surrounding Cumberland, which have been used by local mountain bikers to connect an expansive system of narrow biking trails. The current mountain biking trail system is accessible directly from the Village itself and includes over 70 distinct trails and connectors running through both public and privately owned land (Comox Valley Mountain Biking, 2015). The trails contained within public lands reside within the Cumberland Community Forest and Coal Creek Historic Park. The Cumberland Community Forest is a community owned recreational area comprised of 71 hectares of forestland purchased from timber interests by members of the Cumberland Forest Society in 2005 and donated to the Village (Village of Cumberland, 2015a). The recreational area within the Cumberland Community Forest and the mountain biking trails it contains are protected by a development covenant that permits certain low-impact recreational usage such as cycling on existing trails, while prohibiting invasive developments, such as new recreational trails (Village of Cumberland, 2015a). The Cumberland Community Forest demonstrates one strategy towards local forest conservation. However, timber interests have been found to be more likely to allow public access for active recreational use rather than passive natural conservation (Daigle et al., 2012). By partnering with UROC, the Village of Cumberland can better ensure the conservation of local forest resources through their active use.

However, issues of land ownership and recreational access have complicated the use of Cumberland’s mountain biking trail network. Developed by a committed group of local riders over a decade of work, the Cumberland mountain biking trail system now intersects both public and privately owned land that has been designated for forest preservation and timber cultivation respectively. Recreational trail use in Cumberland is largely informal; the community of cyclists police themselves, knowing their access to private lands is a privilege rather than a right. While the community is home to a premier trail system, without a formalized land access agreement the existing mountain biking trails cannot be completely utilized by recreational riders, or promoted through marketing strategies. Specifically, without a collaborative partnership between stakeholders to define trail-user responsibility, regulate use, and mitigate the legal liability of private landowners in the event of accidents, Cumberland’s trails cannot be promoted and utilized as a tool for community and economic development.

Stakeholders Involved

As Cumberland shifted from a community focused on natural resource extraction to one championing outdoor leisure opportunities, it has been important for different stakeholders to work together to ensure a viable future for recreational cycling access for all interests. The three major stakeholders involved in developing a formal trail access agreement in Cumberland are the Village of Cumberland, the United Riders of Cumberland Mountain Bike Club, and private landowners represented by the significant timber holdings of TimberWest Forest Corporation and Hancock Forest Management Incorporated.

The United Riders of Cumberland Mountain Bike Club (UROC) represents the interests of cyclists in securing trail use agreements with the timber companies and the village. UROC formed in 2008 as a registered not-for-profit association that is now comprised of approximately 180 dedicated members (UROC, 2014). UROC represents the greater regional cycling community in securing private land access, advocating for riders, organizing annual races, fundraising events, promoting the Village as a mountain biking destination, promoting active living within the community, and performing necessary trail
maintenance (UROC, 2015a). UROC is conscious of their environmental dependency on forest resources and the club acknowledges the impact of mountain biking on the surrounding forest and the trail system it contains. The group’s loyal cadre of members volunteer their time to participate in organized trail maintenance days on local trails in order to mitigate erosion and other rider-caused trail impacts, and dismantling illegally constructed trails (UROC, 2015d). UROC also acts as the voice for cyclists in the greater Comox Valley region. The association actively pursues trail access agreements with various private interests, communicates messages from land owners to the cycling public, and hosts community events such as trail use forums in order to better understand the perspectives of different trail users and stakeholders (UROC, 2015c). UROC is an association that strategically aligns itself with similarly focused community organizations such as the Cumberland Community Forest Society, to whom UROC has raised and donated funds in order to further protect the local forest periphery from encroaching logging operations (UROC, 2015b). Without such a visible, unified organization to act on the behalf of cyclists, it would be much more difficult to advance recreational cycling opportunities in Cumberland.

The second major stakeholder involved in securing trail access for recreational cyclists is the Village of Cumberland Council, who represent the interests of local government. Cumberland is a community that is currently branding itself around its abundant outdoor recreational opportunities and amenities, as evidenced by the purchase and donation of the Cumberland Community Forest, as well as reinvestment in community parks, camping, and recreational amenities (Village of Cumberland, 2015b). The Village has also committed to expanding local cycling opportunities including a new bicycle jump park and an informational kiosk to be constructed in 2015 (Village of Cumberland, 2015d). The Village manages and regulates the portion of the mountain biking trail network that is currently contained within the public areas of the 71-hectare Cumberland Community Forest and the 40-hectare Coal Creek Heritage Park, and also assists UROC in the pursuit of formalized land access agreements with private landowners (Village of Cumberland, 2015c). In 2012, Cumberland Council created the position of Parks and Outdoor Recreation Coordinator to ensure the efficient management of local recreational resources and to officially facilitate private land access negotiations that had been initiated by UROC (UROC, 2013a). The working partnership between the Village and UROC represents the type of community level vertical integration that is vital to integrated land use planning (Weiss et al., 2007).

The private forest landowners of the TimberWest Forest Corporation and Hancock Forest Management Incorporated represent two of the most visible and significant private landholdings that are traversed by the Cumberland mountain bike trail network. TimberWest currently owns 804 200 acres of forestland located throughout Vancouver Island (TimberWest, 2010b), while Hancock owns nearly 50 000 additional island acres. TimberWest is self-described as, “a leader in sustainable forest management and is committed to Vancouver Island communities” (TimberWest, 2010). Correspondingly, the major logging firm balances their own economic interests with the social responsibility that is associated with the consideration of recreational interests, including those of the Village of Cumberland and UROC, who are directly impacted by logging operations. Both major timber companies have granted informal trail access to recreational riders and have adjusted active logging operations to better-accommodate riders and mitigate industrial impacts on existing trails (United Riders of Cumberland, 2015e). This demonstrates the willingness that the private landowners have to work with their fellow forest stakeholders on the issue of trail access. Acknowledging and understanding the interests of public governing entities and not-for-profit associations, whose interests may run counter to those of the forest industry, is important to ensure the best use of forest resources on private land. However, the timber companies must also carefully manage how the land they own is accessed and used; unregulated or unpermitted trail access can raise recreational user safety concerns, increase backcountry fire risks, lead to vandalism, and negatively effect forest natural resources (TimberWest, 2010).
Approach Used and the Impact

In order to secure mountain biking trail access for riders beyond the modest public areas managed and protected by the Village of Cumberland, a collaborative partnership between the major stakeholders was required. In April 2013 Cumberland Council unanimously approved a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Village and the United Riders of Cumberland on the issue of securing trail use agreements with private landowners (UROC, 2013a). The MOU, originally a two-year agreement, allowed the United Riders of Cumberland to take the lead in the pursuit of local land access agreements for cyclists with assistance provided directly by Cumberland’s Parks and Outdoor Recreation Coordinator (UROC, 2013a). The Village and UROC each contribute to sustaining the existing trail network; while the Village develops and manages trail use regulations, UROC performs trail maintenance (UROC, 2013a). UROC has also contributed to the conservation of community forest resources by dismantled illegal trails that violate the conservation mandates of the Cumberland Community Forest (UROC, 2013b). UROC also acts as an intermediary between the greater regional mountain biking community and logging interests, UROC continually informs riders of upcoming trail closures and the reasons behind such decisions. The transparency that UROC provides in land use decision-making has fostered a culture of mutual respect between the mountain bikers and the timber company. Since the formalization of this partnership, between the Village and UROC, UROC has actively been working with private landowners to secure formalized trail use agreements. However, while progress has been made no permanent agreement has been concluded between the parties.

Though a final land access agreement has not been finalized between the private landowners, UROC, and the Village, significant progress has been made and a high level of mutual understanding and collaboration persists. This is evidenced by the ongoing recreational use of the mountain biking trails that has been authorized by the timber companies, as well as by the consideration that is given for existing trails during timber harvest planning (UROC, 2015e). Negotiations towards formal land access agreements in Cumberland are ongoing and a resolution is expected, in March 2015 the MOU between UROC and the Village of Cumberland was renewed, paving the way for subsequent land use negotiations (Village of Cumberland, 2015d). Integrated partnerships across different levels of power, influence and understanding can link the resources necessary to ensure the most agreeable use of recreational resources for all stakeholders (Ooi et al., 2015). By continuing to pursue formalized land use and access agreements with major private landowners including TimberWest and Hancock Forestry, UROC can ensure a viable future for mountain biking that is well regulated and beneficial to all of the Cumberland forest stakeholders, promoting and protecting the coveted forest resources.

The innovative partnership at work in Cumberland to improve recreational access has already led to promising evidence of community development. From 2006-2011 the overall population in Cumberland grew 23% with the number of families increasing by 30.4%, far outpacing the national average of 5.5% (Invest Comox, 2011). Additionally, from 2001-2009 assessed local property values in Cumberland tripled (Invest Comox, 2011). Anecdotally, the most significant increase in population has occurred amongst younger professionals who could be categorized as amenity migrants (Moss, 2006), or lifestyle migrants (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009). Amenity migration is characterized by, “individuals drawn to regions with outstanding natural environments, recreational opportunities, and high quality facilities and services” (Ooi et al., 2015, p. 59). While influxes of amenity migrants have been linked to conflicts between stakeholders within a host community over issues such as land use, price inflation, resident displacement, and differing social values (Ooi et al., 2015), The Village of Cumberland has escaped these negative outcomes. Development has been occurring throughout the entire community and has not led to gentrification or economic isolation as found in resort communities (Nepal and Jamal, 2011). Contrary to Moss (2006) and Siemens (2015)
the entrepreneurs in Cumberland are not older, local businesses are generally smaller and locally owned with a greater focus on quality of life than on profits. The community of Cumberland demonstrates tremendous social cohesion with high level of involvement and recreational interest; formalized private land access agreements for recreational mountain biking will only improve Cumberland's attraction as a site of amenity migration.

**Implications and Lessons learned**

The development of mountain biking trail access in Cumberland, British Columbia, has been an innovative process of collaborative recreational management (Weiss et al. 2007). Through a unique cross-sector partnership the United Riders of Cumberland, the Village of Cumberland and private forest landowners are able to better utilize forest resources for recreational purposes and create a safe and permissible mountain biking environment that distinguishes the community as a premier outdoor recreation destination, strengthening community and economic development. This demonstrates the power of collaborative relationships where varying natural resource interests are able to consolidate their expertise to an end that allows each party to benefit. Private land ownership is not a barrier to recreational access and multi-interest collaboration can create greater land access opportunities (Weiss et al., 2007). UROC also demonstrates the power that user-driven organizations can harness within a community to help direct the use of local resources; this power is enhanced through UROC's innovative partnership with the Village of Cumberland. The use and popularity of the mountain biking trail network in Cumberland demonstrates how competing interests – be they for recreation, preservation, or economic gain – may coproduce a situation that ensures a more holistic understanding between stakeholders and ultimately yields the best use of resources for all parties. By working together the Village of Cumberland is able to ensure the conservation of forest resources through their safe, responsible and inclusive use by recreational users in a manner that does not threaten the operations of private forest interests. The collaborative partnership that led to secure access for mountain biking in Cumberland may be utilized in other diverse leisure contexts. Innovations in rural recreational access can occur across different land ownership statuses with varying leisure interests (Weiss et al., 2007).

**Discussion Questions**

1. What are the potential risks of allowing open access to private land for all recreational users?
2. What kind of partnerships may need to take place in communities with mixed or competing recreational land use?
3. How can natural resources and recreation in your own community contribute to community development?
4. Discuss the costs and benefits associated with private land access that must be shared between landowners, public officials and not-for-profit organizations
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Private land, public interest: Securing private land access to encourage amenity based migration for community development

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UROC. (August 4, 2015d). With the recent logging activity that has begun... Message posted to https://www.facebook.com/UnitedRidersofCumberland.


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