



Hikers work toward national trail

Feb 21, 2013 by Justin Brisbane, Rocky Mountain Outlook

Doug and Mary Campbell's first hiking journeys were through English fields, sometimes on rainy days. If only they knew where that journey would take them. Through overseas adventures and countless meetings, discussions and dreams, the journey has led them to a trail that spans a nation. "In the long-term, we've cut enough backpack sandwiches to feed an army," Campbell said. At the time, Campbell had no idea their initial journeys would plant the seeds of an idea for a cross-country trail across Canada, a conquest that has taken much of his life.

Forty years in the making, the National Hiking Trail is still several disconnected strands of trail, which Campbell envisions one day will include 10,000 kilometres of well-maintained trails free of motorized-vehicles. "The main word to remember is national. This is a national story," Campbell said. Progress has been made, including more than 1,000 kilometres of connected trail in Quebec, and several municipalities in British Columbia have recently expressed interest in linking together. Thousands of kilometres have been dedicated, but the connections are far between. "There was no predetermined planning with this trail. It evolved from events and experiences, and is inching towards a conclusion that remains elusive," Campbell said.

Campbell shared his dreams, triumphs and frustrations with a packed house at the Creekside Seniors Centre on Feb. 13. Since 1957, he's volunteered his time with Canadian trails, beginning in Ontario before moving west. After planning long-distance hikes in England, and inspired by the Bruce Trail on the Niagara Escarpment in Ontario, Campbell saw the conservation potential of a national trail. Bringing together land managers and trail builders, the Bruce Trail created a network of 700 kilometres.

When Campbell moved to British Columbia for 18 months, he heard about hiking plans to traverse the province. Dreaming big, he began to ponder creating a trail that could connect a continuous route across the country. "Could you possibly reach over and grab the end of the Bruce Trail and take it across the Prairies?" Campbell asked.

In 1971, the national trail movement was created on April 29 and ideas began to percolate. Campbell said pieces of trail continued to surface, as well as grand ideas: a trail through the Fraser Valley from the coast to Mount Robson, east to Jasper and to Banff and into the foothills to the Cypress Hills. Tracing North West Mounted Police trails, it would traverse the prairies until it reached the shores of Lake Superior along the Voyageur Trail and down to the Bruce Trail along the Niagara Escarpment. Quebec was full of trails, and the options in the Maritimes were plentiful as well.

"The first thought of the route was Alexander Mackenzie. A lot of it was canoe, fur trader trails. A lot was through harsh country up north," Campbell said. The purpose of the trail was often debated, as protecting such a large swath of land would certainly have implications. "We had to fix on the theme. Maybe this trail would become a backbone trail for groups across the country, so they could form their own trails off it. It might become a natural environmental trail, become a bit of a refuge for prairie wildlife, serve education and fitness" Campbell said. The grand dream began to reach realization slowly, in small links. The first section was dedicated in Manitoba in the early '70s, but it wasn't until 1984 they received their first bit of government funding. Then it wasn't until 1987 the first official trail marker went up on Ottawa's Parliament Hill, complete with approval from then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

More sections joined the fold: 18 km near Medicine Hat, 600 km in Quebec as the project snowballed. Large, expansive bridges popped up in the Maritimes as part of the project. By 1991, the Bow Valley got involved. The trail still stretches from Barrier Lake, through Dead Man's Flats and into Three Sisters, towards the Nordic Centre and beyond to the Cave and Basin. By 2005, Banff and Jasper National Park approved an undefined trail that would stretch 350 km.

But then came another project – the Trans Canada Trail. "Everything I have spoken about was done before the Trans Canada Trail was on the drawing boards. The National Trail to Banff opened in 1991, and 1992 was the 125th year of confederation when the federal government set up a committee to celebrate." The Trans Canada Trail would be a multi-purpose trail and received greater support. The National Trail remained active, but struggled for attention. With renovations, Banff National Park took down its National Trail marker at the Cave and Basin. Campbell said supporting the new trail made sense, but isn't giving up hope for the National Trail. "The Trans Canada Trail was much broader in base, and the organizers could start fresh from day one," Campbell said. "The Trans Canada Trail will get there first. They're aiming for 2017 completion." That hasn't stopped Campbell in his pursuits, as he and Mary are still a common sight, trekking along Bow Valley trails, nor has it tarnished his proudest moment in the birth of the trail.

"Putting that trail marker at the Cave and Basin, heart of our national park system." There was a togetherness about it. ○