

They will come: Mountain biking emerging as Pender Harbour and

By Brian Lee

Though the sport of mountain biking originated in Marin County, California in the mid-1970s, it has taken almost 30 years to reach Pender Harbour and Egmont. A local group of mountain bikers and trail builders say that could be changing, adopting the motto of “build it and they will come.”

It’s said the sport started when a couple of road cyclists, or “roadies,” grew tired of the hostile environment of the paved world and went about refitting their bikes to handle local hiking trails.

The sport quickly evolved as trail builders, manufacturers and riders continually pushed the boundaries

of what was thought possible on a two-wheeled machine.

Mountain bikers crave “single track” trails. Typically, single track refers to a trail that is the approximate width of a bike, offering some challenge while maintaining a smooth flow. Natural obstacles like roots and rocks add technical difficulty

Early on, bikes were built for multi-purpose riding — cross country riding that involved climbing and downhill elements. By the early 1990s suspension began appearing on mountain bikes, first in the front and then in the rear.

The advent of suspension suddenly thrust mountain biking into a new direction. Suddenly it was possible to tackle rougher trails with

greater speed and ease. It wasn’t long before riders started building stunts into trails, continually redefining the sport.

Wooden ladder bridges and transitions coming off natural or man-made obstacles became common on modern mountain bike trails and required increasingly versatile skills and equipment.

Nowhere did the sport evolve faster than in North Vancouver. With its proximity to miles of accessible and steep terrain, the North Shore quickly became known for producing some of the most extreme trails — and riders who could tackle them.

As word spread, it became a mecca for mountain bikers and today it’s almost impossible to open a mountain bike magazine without finding scores of references to it. As marketers caught on to the wave, catchphrases like “Shore-tested” quickly became de rigueur as companies scrambled to associate themselves with BC’s freeride movement.

Today, the bikes are as varied as the people who ride them. The term “mountain bike” can be broken down into three basic categories. Cross country bikes are lighter, have more gears and are built for longer rides with fewer obstacles. They may or may not have dual suspension which, in this case, is generally intended to smooth the ride – not absorb a 10-foot drop.

On the other end of the spectrum, downhill bikes are just that – bikes built to go downhill, fast. Downhill bikes have large travel shocks, fat knobby tires, stronger (and heavier) components with frame geometry that allows a rider to position their centre of gravity farther back on the bike for descents.



Riders in the BC Bike Race sample some of Pender Harbour’s finest single track on a trail called ‘Cougar’s.’

Egmont's newest attraction

When building a downhill bike, frame designers have little concern for ease of riding uphill. These bikes are for shuttling — carried to the top of a trail by chairlift or car. This practice has long been a topic for debate with purists who insist on earning their gravity — riding to the top of the hill before coming down.

Somewhere in the middle of this polarity is the freeride movement. Freeride bikes carry adequate suspension and are heavy enough to withstand the punishment of modern trail obstacles but are also designed to climb and travel distances without too much discomfort. With such a divergence in the sport, many serious cyclists now have two or more bikes for varying terrain and specialties.

The rise in popularity of the sport was quickly followed by companies trying to cash in by producing gear and clothing. Mountain biking is now a multi-billion-dollar industry as riders who entered the sport 15 to 20 years ago now find themselves in their prime earning years. Not only can they can afford the bikes that can easily run as high as \$4,000 but they like to travel, spawning one of the fastest growing segments of the BC tourism industry.

A study commissioned by the Mountain Bike Tourism Association found that, in 2006 alone, North Shore, Squamish and Whistler trails generated \$10.3 million in spending from non-local riders between June 4 and September 17. These figures don't even include Whistler's bike park, a money machine that uses the ski lifts to ferry bikers up the mountain, seasonally converted into downhill bike nirvana.

The economic benefits of this segment are felt elsewhere too, es-



There's no shame in walking across... unless someone snaps a photo of it. Kyla Paine inspecting the bridge on 'Dry Feet.'

pecially in BC's Interior. Places like Nelson, Fernie and Invermere have all caught on to the fact that trails attract visitors and they market themselves accordingly.

Here on the Sunshine Coast, Gibsons and Sechelt have been nurturing a mountain bike community for years. In turn, the growth of riders has spawned more trail building resulting in an extensive network that starts in Langdale at the Sprockids Mountain Bike Park and extends all the way through Roberts Creek. Other pockets exist near Chapman Creek, West Sechelt and Sargeant Bay Marine Park.

The sport has been slower to catch on at our end of the Coast and many locals don't even seem to know it exists at all.

After a recent ride, a friend stopped by the Garden Bay Pub to rehydrate. Walking onto the deck, one of the patrons took one look at his cycling gear and quickly remarked, "Didja lose a bet?"

The guy apologized when he was told the cleated shoes weren't fashion but necessary athletic gear.

The incident underlines the fact that cycling is not yet widely accepted in the community — but that seems to be slowly changing.

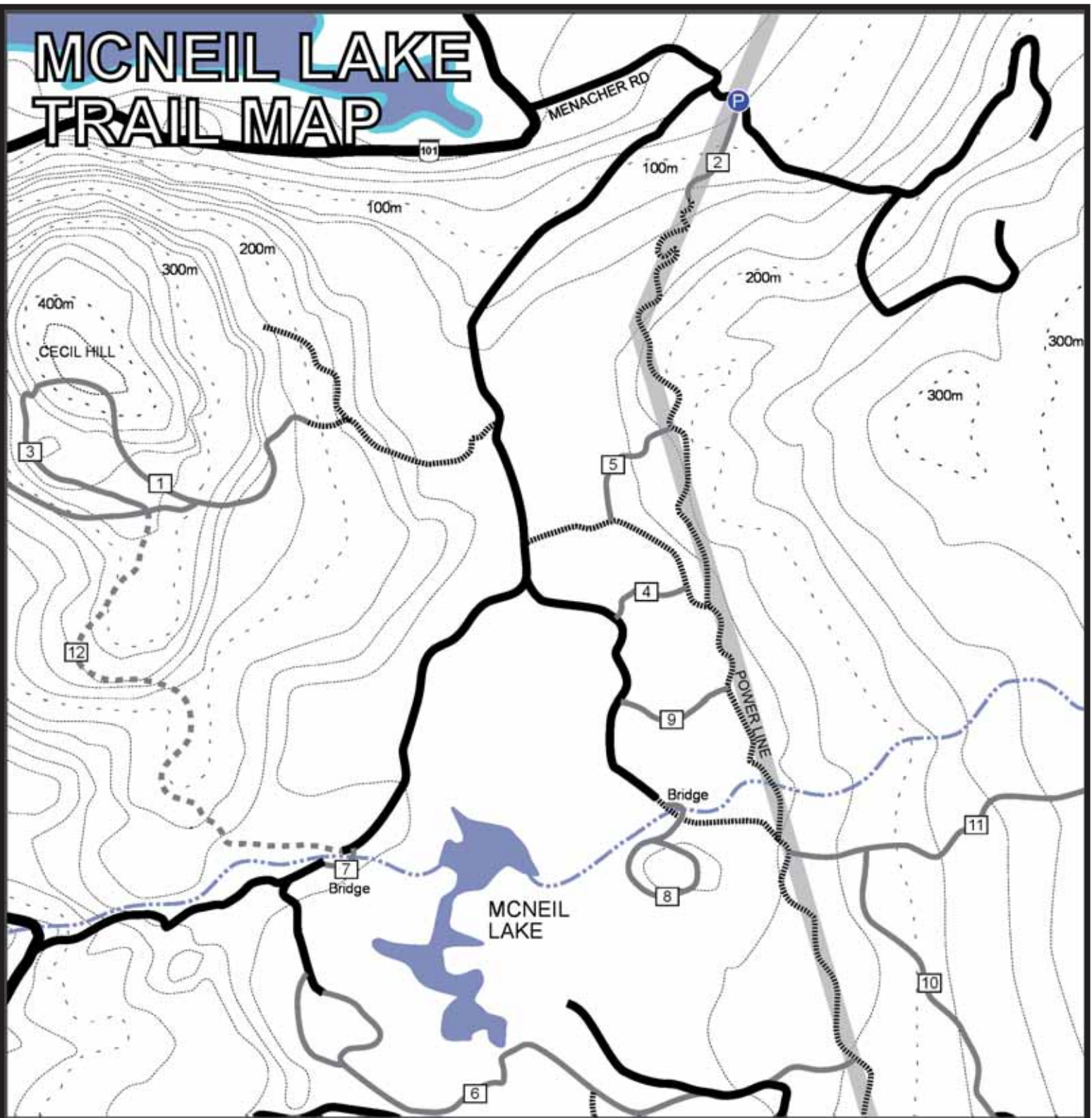
Mountain bikers have been on our logging roads for years but, until recently, the area has lacked genuine single-track trails.

The now defunct Sunshine Coast Trails Society formed to build an off-road trail link down the Sunshine Coast in the 1990s. The Sunshine Coast Trail is mainly made up of gravel logging roads but provided a framework for a dedicated group of local trail builders to pick up where they left off.

These builders have concentrated their efforts in two main areas, the MacNeill Lake watershed (see map, p. 16) to the network of roads near the Malaspina Substation near the Pender Harbour Golf Course.

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MCNEIL LAKE TRAIL MAP



- | | |
|----------------------|------------------|
| 1 CECIL'S HILL | 7 DRY FEET |
| 2 CORRAL RUN | 8 FIFTY FIVE |
| 3 UPPER RIZLA'S | 9 ELK TRAIL |
| 4 COUGARS | 10 LAZY BOY |
| 5 SCARY HILL BY-PASS | 11 CARDIAC HILL |
| 6 COPPER HEAD ROAD | 12 LOWER RIZLA'S |

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Paved Road | |
| Unpaved Road | |
| Trail | |
| Trail (Future) | |
| Decommissioned Road | |
| Creek | |

map by Tony Adamson

Mountain biking (cont.)

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For the past two years, stage four of the BC Bike Race has passed through many of these local trails and has helped to put the Sunshine Coast on the mountain biking map.

“It’s drawing a lot of people — it’s amazing,” says Rod Camposano, course designer for the Sunshine Coast portion of the race.

“The BC Bike Race draws people from all over the world but then they come back.”

Along with the BC Bike Race, two other mountain bike events, the Rat Race and the Suncoast Trail Ride, bring a lot of attention — and people — to the area.

Including friends and spectators, these three events are estimated to draw more than 2,000 people who otherwise wouldn’t have needed to eat or sleep on the Sunshine Coast.

The exposure is starting to pay off as riders from the Lower Mainland look for new areas to ride.

“When I started riding here seven or eight years ago, you wouldn’t see vehicles (with bikes) on the ferry,” says Gary Jackson, owner of Off the Edge Adventure Sports in Sechelt.

“Now anytime you’re on the ferry... you’re always seeing truckloads of bikes. And not Canadian Tire bikes that may or may not be used — you’re seeing people that are taking direct bike vacations.”



The potential for five kilometres of downhill singletrack and views like this show the potential of a trail currently being built on Cecil Hill near Madeira Park.

Trail building has always been intimately linked with the sport of mountain biking and the majority of trails are built illegitimately on Crown land. The popularity of the sport has forced municipalities to confront issues of liability and maintenance.

Most mountain bike clubs work with local government to protect access and to ensure public safety but it’s an ongoing issue in many areas including the Sunshine Coast.

Logging is often a bigger threat to local trails as BC Timber Sales continually slices off sections of local

forest for auction. Trail builders say BC Timber Sales has been very cooperative but some popular trails like “Cougar’s” sit flagged, their fate temporarily spared by a lagging softwood lumber market.

Currently, the network around McNeill Lake (see map, page 16) consists of about 10 kilometres of trails connected by another 40 kilometres of logging road. Because of this trail system, it’s now possible to circumnavigate McNeill Lake on a 16 kilometres route — more than half of which is

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Mountain biking (cont.)

(continued from page 17)

made up of single track trail.

And, thanks to a number of strategically placed bridges, riders can do it without fording the cold streams that previously blocked passage on winter rides.

Locations of trails have only passed through word of mouth so far

but the trails have caught the attention of cyclists from outside the area and riders from down the Coast regularly travel up to test them out.

Sources say a number of ambitious trail projects are in the works including a half-completed trail named “Rizla’s” that runs to the top of Cecil Hill above Madeira Park with views

across to Vancouver Island. The trail follows the ridge of the mountain south and downhill for about four kilometres before exiting near the entrance to “Dry Feet.”

Ralph Linnman, owner of nearby Sunshine Coast Resort, wasn’t even aware the trail network existed. Linnman says he hasn’t seen an appreciable growth in visitors coming here specifically to mountain bike and hasn’t directed his marketing efforts towards the mountain bike sector.

The same goes for Paul Hansen, owner of the West Coast Wilderness Lodge in Egmont. Hansen has bikes on hand for guests and says they’re used a lot but more for recreational riding around the community. He hasn’t seen an appreciable rise in guests coming specifically to ride but says he’s working on it.

Hansen has linked up with a Whistler company to offer heli-biking opportunities to nearby Red Top Mountain across the Skookumchuck. The proposal is still in the planning stages but he says there’s a strong market for international guests looking to access untouched alpine territory and thinks they’re willing to pay for it.

Clearly there’s an opportunity for Pender Harbour and Egmont to take part in what many areas have already capitalized on but it seems there’s some catching up to do.

“I’ve sold 500 trail maps in eight months,” says Gary Jackson, adding that trail maps are often shared by entire groups so the number sold actually reflects a much higher number of visitors.

“The reality is that the trail map is where I tell people to ride and Madeira Park isn’t in that book.”

