



By Gerry Donohue

CANADIAN SPIRIT: The Trans Canada Trail



Everything about the Trans Canada Trail is huge. At 16,500 kilometers (9,900 miles), it is already the world's longest trail. When completed in 2017, the corridor will stretch 22,500 kilometers (13,500 miles), from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean and from the United States border to the Arctic Ocean. More than 400 local trails compose the overall pathway, which links more than 1,000 communities.

In 1992, two iconic Canadians, Pierre Camu and Bill Pratt—who helped bring

the 1988 Olympics to Calgary—conceived the idea for the Trans Canada Trail (TCT) as a way to bind together the world's second-largest nation. Their goal: Finish building the enormous trail within 25 years, so its completion would coincide with Canada's 150th anniversary in 2017.

Since then, the TCT has become a national movement. More than 100,000 Canadians have volunteered time or contributed money to help build the trail. In a 12-page insert in Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, last summer, the nation's political and

business leaders hailed the TCT as “historic,” a “lasting legacy,” a “celebration of Canadian values,” and a “magnificent gift from Canadians to Canadians.”

Building the trail has been a uniquely Canadian experience, a collaboration of effort at all levels, from the federal government to the 13 provinces and territories, from national organizations to local groups, and from businesses to individuals. And now their ambitious goal is nearly at hand.

Filling in the Gaps

When the national TCT organization was founded approximately 20 years ago, the group faced a hugely daunting task—funding, designing and building a trail across more than 20,000 kilometers of some of the harshest terrain on the globe—and in just 25 years.

There were some advantages. Canada already had a large number of world-class trails, with such colorful names as the Ceilidh Coastal Trail, Sentier Gabrielle-Roy, the Itijjagiaq Trail and the Confederation Trail. The national organization merely needed to catalog the existing inventory and determine which trails would be linked into the TCT.

The TCT was never envisioned to be the shortest line from coast to coast to coast. Instead, it was designed to connect as many communities as possible. It wends and winds its way across the nation and incorporates numerous spurs and branches. When completed, the TCT

will be within a half-hour’s drive for 34 million Canadians.

Once the existing infrastructure was delineated, the real work began—filling in the gaps, many of which are hundreds of kilometers long and run through the most difficult and sparsely populated terrain. These gaps are also the most expensive to build, so the national organization has increasingly focused its efforts on fundraising.

“Now we need to bring in the dollars,” says TCT National Program Manager Jane Murphy. She points to Alberta, where more than half of the trail is completed. Finishing the trail, however, will cost about \$40 million because much of the remaining work is through the Rocky Mountains.

The Canadian government has long been the trail’s major financial supporter. Parks Canada recently granted \$10 million toward completion of the trail; the TCT organization relays those funds directly to local groups to plan and build their sections.

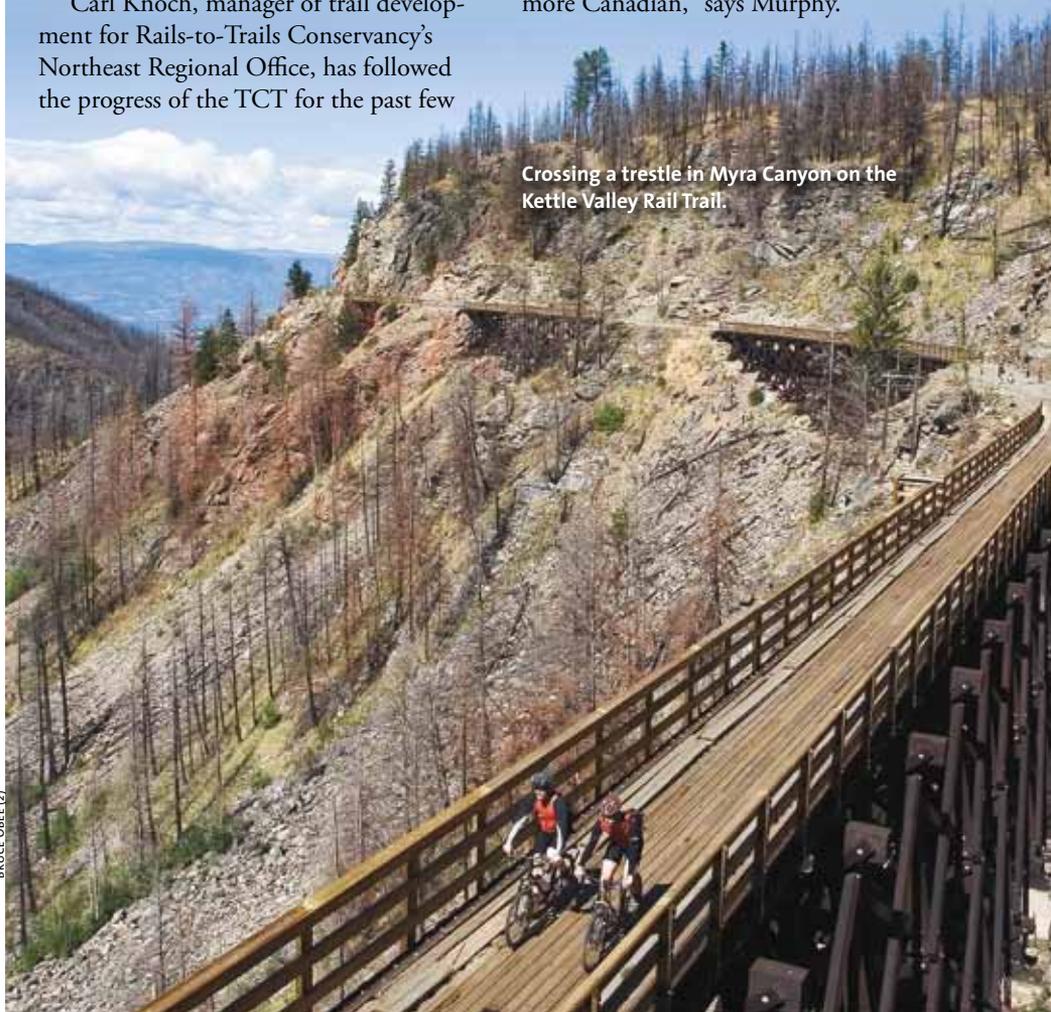
Carl Knoch, manager of trail development for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy’s Northeast Regional Office, has followed the progress of the TCT for the past few

years. He says the Canadian government’s enthusiastic and direct financial support of the project is a substantial advantage. “We have federal funding for trails in the United States, but it goes to the state departments of transportation first,” he says. Management of the funds varies from state to state.

Some of Canada’s largest corporations have also supported the project, including *The Globe and Mail*, the Royal Bank of Canada and the nationwide grocery store chain Loblaws. In its Boots Across Canada campaign in 2009, Keen Canada donated \$5 to the TCT for each uploaded photo of Keen boots on a trail; the campaign raised more than \$28,000.

The national TCT organization has focused on building the trail’s brand to attract individual contributions. “We try to promote the emotional component of the trail, the sheer magnitude of the effort, the inspiration of what we’re trying to accomplish and the idea that being involved with the trail makes you feel more Canadian,” says Murphy.

Crossing a trestle in Myra Canyon on the Kettle Valley Rail Trail.



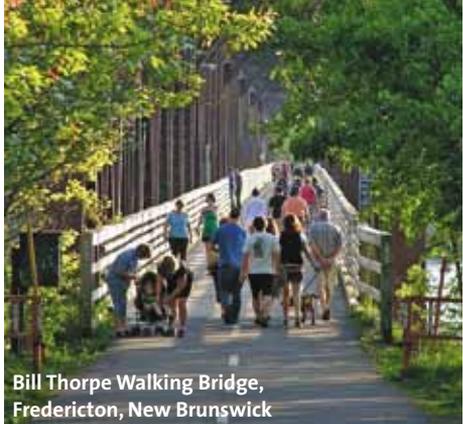
When completed, the Trans Canada Trail (TCT) will stretch 13,500 miles across Canada. Here, part of the TCT route heads toward the Little Tunnel on the Kettle Valley Rail Trail in Okanagan, British Columbia.

BRUCE OBBEE (2)



Kawartha Trans Canada Trail, Ontario

AL MACPHERSON



Bill Thorpe Walking Bridge, Fredericton, New Brunswick

CAROL RANDALL



Confederation Trail, Prince Edward Island

DOUG MURRAY



Iron Horse Trail, Alberta

JEANNETTE KLEIN

Through its new Chapter 150 campaign, TCT hopes to encourage high-income Canadians to make donations of \$500,000 or more. The first donation, by the Richardson Foundation, includes a second \$500,000 matching funds gift also aimed at winning broader participation.

Tens of thousands of Canadians—many of whom have never been on the trail—have donated money for its construction and maintenance, giving as little as \$25 to “buy” a symbolic meter of the TCT.

Rail-Trails in British Columbia

Taking the TCT across British Columbia requires climbing three high mountain passes, crossing hundreds of rivers and ravines, and traversing terrain so harsh that it was used for the first *Rambo* movie.

“Fortunately, a lot of the trail in the province is rail grade,” says Leon Lebrun, vice president of Trails BC, which oversees the TCT in British Columbia. “Of the 1,800-kilometer routing from the Pacific Ocean to the Alberta border, about 40 percent is on rail corridors.”

The Kettle Valley Rail Trail is one. The 80-kilometer trail features dozens of long switchbacks and 18 trestles to accommodate a 3,000-foot elevation change. On Vancouver Island, Trails BC is renovating the 90-year-old Kinsol Trestle, one of the largest and most spectacular timber rail trestle structures in the world. The

national organization has committed \$250,000 to the renovation.

Trails BC has worked closely with the two Canadian railroad companies, Canadian Pacific and Canadian National, to acquire out-of-service rail corridors. “The railroads make a valuation, and then the federal government gives them a tax break in exchange for giving them up,” says Lebrun.

Trails BC works with the provincial and local governments to build usable trails on these railbeds, enlisting numerous local organizations to maintain them.

Trails BC coordinates its efforts with the national TCT organization through the Territorial and Provincial Advisory Council, which meets regularly to address concerns and share ideas, expertise and solutions for completing the trail.

“We’re an all-volunteer organization,” says Lebrun, a retired school principal who has put 15 years into development of the trail. “But when you challenge people to work together on something like this, it’s amazing what you can accomplish.”

Shared Strength

The Central Alberta Regional Trails Society (CARTS) is a model of the spirit of collaboration that infuses development of the TCT. Responsible for about 70 kilometers of the trail around the city of Red Deer, which is halfway between Edmonton and Calgary, CARTS has

One Step at a Time

Dana Miese has seen more of the Trans Canada Trail than any other hiker. He started walking west from Cape Spear, Newfoundland, the east end of the TCT, headed first to the Pacific Ocean and then to the Arctic Ocean. In 2011, he’d walked 9,100 kilometers and made it to just outside of Vancouver.

Miese, who turned 37 this year, hikes six months out of the year as a forest technologist in British Columbia.

While hiking, he averages about 30 kilometers each day, alternating with 20 kilometers of biking. He stresses, though, that nothing about the trail is easy.

“I’ve been on extreme hiking trails in remote sections, where there’s no one of me in any direction,” he says. “And I’ve been on paved bike trails where there’s a lot of people.”

He’s followed straight-as-an-arrow railbeds through the desert and stopped at trailside cafés north of Montreal to pass the time.

Miese plans to write a book about his experiences and the trail. He’ll end the TCT endpoint on the shore of the Arctic Ocean.

“The TCT has become like a highway, connecting communities

a symbiotic relationship with the half dozen municipalities along the way.

“We’re more than just a lobbying group because we have councilors from the towns and cities actually sitting on our committee,” says CARTS President Debbie Olsen. “The people who are responsible for building the trail are at the table with us.”

Olsen, who joined CARTS as a city council member from the town of Lacombe, says town and county staff members frequently meet with her organization to ensure continuity as the trail crosses municipal boundaries.

CARTS also flexes its political muscle at the provincial level. “We recently assisted the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association in securing an additional \$1 million in provincial funding for trails,” Olsen says. “We also asked the province about building trails in highway rights-of-way, and the government has initiated a study.”

In 2010 CARTS was involved in completion of two bridges along the trail, one costing more than \$300,000 and the other more than \$500,000. Once again, the organization’s governmental contacts came into play.

“We were able to bring in the Canadian military to lay the bridge decking as a training exercise, which saved us about \$50,000 in labor,” says Olsen. “What was even better was the publicity we got from it, in the province and even nationally.”

Unique Imprints

“That’s not how they do it in other provinces,” says Holly Woodill, president

body. On May 6, 2008, Miese
 ternmost point on the
 ean. By the summer
 side Thunder Bay, Ontario.
 year, from May to October. During the rest of the year, he works

though when rest days are factored in, the daily average drops
 days is average.

re there was probably not another person within 100 kilometers
 paths with unicyclists and skateboarders.”

ep Ontario wilderness, island-hopped in the Maritime Provinces
 me with people out for a day's recreation.

people he encounters on his way to the hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk,

es across this country,” he says. “It's been an amazing journey.”

of the Cole Harbour Parks and Trail
 Association (CHPTA) in Nova Scotia.

Hers is a familiar refrain. Each vol-
 unteer group brings its own vision to its
 length of trail. The pathway takes on the
 character of the community it serves and
 the people who build it. And when it
 comes to character, CHPTA is in a class
 by itself.

Based just outside Dartmouth, the
 volunteer organization oversees the
 6.5-kilometer Salt Marsh Trail and the
 2.5-kilometer Heritage Trail. CHPTA has
 about 25 trail wardens who patrol and
 repair the TCT on a daily basis through-
 out the year. Even more impressive, the
 group raised the money, bought the land,
 developed the trail and built the provin-
 cial park through which the TCT runs.
 “We do it all,” says Woodill.

The organization's current focus is its
 Salt Marsh Trail, which utilizes an old
 railbed to cut across a large salt marsh on
 the Nova Scotia coast. Storm surges from
 several recent hurricanes have badly dam-
 aged the sides of the trail.

Woodill says her organization raises
 funds “any way that's legal.” Following the
 example of the national TCT organization,
 CHPTA is selling meters of the trail, but
 takes it one step further. “When you buy
 a meter of our trail, you get a picture of it
 and the GPS coordinates so you can see it
 on the map on our website,” says Woodill.
 “You can actually go stand on your meter
 of the Trans Canada Trail.”

**Gerry Donohue is a freelance writer and avid
 bicyclist based in Washington, D.C.**

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