

International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA)
World Mountain Bike Conference
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Whistler, British Columbia, Canada

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The conference was an opportunity to showcase the successes for mountain biking in many parts of the world.

The continuing vein that flowed right through the conference was the importance of community. Community can mean different things in different settings, but the underlying principal is that great outcomes for mountain biking can only be built to with the contribution of a range of people.

Trail building could potentially involve Federal Govt, State Govt, Local Govt, private land owners, race organisers, mountain bike clubs local riders and other users of the area in question.

Historically, a number of the pioneering trails were un-sanctioned or built illegally but have been accepted as suitable trails to amend and include in the approved trail network.

Reports from the principal trail builder for Vancouver's Mount Seymour, on the famed North Shore, Jeremy Powers, made it clear that the challenges we face in Australia are not unique. Jeremy faced negotiation with three different levels of government, just to get one length of trail sanctioned.

In Australia our trails are often established in a similar manner, with four wheel drives, motor bikes and mountain bike riders using an area before it is recognised as an approved area for use.

Once an area is sanctioned for mountain bike use, there is usually significant work needed to bring the trails up to a suitable standard. Improvements need to be made to make the trail as appealing as possible for riders. There is also a common need to improve the sustainability of the trail and minimise its environmental impacts.

There are a number of ways of getting this done. The most successful method in the recent past has been the use of volunteers. They are often affiliated with a club or selection of clubs from the area. The clear advantages are that it provides an inexpensive option, community buy in, and often yields the 'golden volunteer'. A golden volunteer has often been known tire endlessly for planning, building and promoting the trail network. The challenges with relying on volunteers include the need for significant training, support and supervision as well as the provision of tools and materials. There also needs to be allowance made for the possible lack of quality and the fact that the labour force may be unreliable at times.

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A number of the challenges can be overcome with the involvement of clubs in the trail building process. They have a reputation for being more organised and for completing quality trail building. They have a greater tendency to train their own and in time can be set up to be autonomous.

Again, even greater gains can be made with the combining of a number of clubs to see that the necessary trail work is undertaken. There is the simple benefit of numbers but there are also an extra range of skills that can be tapped into. For example, a horse club may be able to assist with moving of materials with horses rather than solely manual labour. This builds partnership and understanding between trail users. There can be challenges in bridging the gap. There may also be some education needed on the specifics of the trail design, but each of these challenges is easily outweighed by the benefits it brings.

The option of using a youth service group or job-start program is a further productive method for trail building. There are further costs involved with the extra training and supervision this requires but a significantly larger amount of construction can be completed as a result.

The members involved in the construction may not be available from one job to the next, requiring further training.

When funds become available for construction, involving professionals is by far the most productive method for furthering the trail network.

If funds are not unlimited, a hybrid combination of professional contractors and volunteers provides an excellent yield. This is the method recommended by the IMBA. The professional trail builder provides the expertise, tools, materials and direction with volunteer labour completing the process. The result can be high quality construction at respectable cost.

Once there is a trail network in place, the priority becomes management of the area, and the implied risks of its use. Risk can be managed in a number of ways.

The most effective management of risk is through consistent design of the trail. Consistency for a portion of trail addresses duty of care but also allows for effective supporting signage. Clear signage and mapping of each portion of trail minimises un-necessary risk taking because riders are aware of the level of skill required for each portion of the ride. Implementing rules and regulations for the area and posting them at the entries is also essential. Finally, an inspection and maintenance program will ensure that any un-necessary hazards on the trail while maintaining the quality of the trail network. This is most cost effectively implemented through local mountain bike clubs. Clubs will have members riding the majority of the trail network on a regular basis allowing them to report regularly on maintenance needs. With the building of good relationships between the land manager and the club riders this has also been proven to be an effective management system.

So, through the building of relationships between land managers, trail users and the surrounding community a fun, manageable and environmentally sustainable trail network is completely attainable.

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