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Myra Canyon Rail bridge near Kelowna in August of 2003, one month before it was destroyed by a forest fire.

## OUTDOOR ADVOCACY

# Kelowna's South Slopes has fierce defenders

By J.P. SQUIRE

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The general public doesn't hear much about the Friends of the South Slopes Society.

Yet local outdoor recreation enthusiasts enjoy some of the best backcountry trails in the Okanagan, and know who to thank for almost three decades of ongoing maintenance, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of improvements and the expansion of the public recreation area in the hills south of Kelowna.

The South Slopes comprises a huge area of 37,000 square hectares, extending from Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park to Mission Creek, and from the south side of the City of Kelowna to Chute Lake, Little White Mountain and McCulloch Lake.

No other non-profit organization in the Okanagan has assumed stewardship for two provincial parks – Okanagan Mountain and Myra-Bellevue, plus help out in several city and regional district parks.

The Friends origin story begins with a small number of people who incorporated the society on Feb. 29, 1996. Their purpose was to oppose (successfully) an application by Arthon Construction to operate a gravel pit and concrete/asphalt recycling plant on Crown land near the current location of the Stewart Road East trailhead for Myra-Bellevue Provincial Park, according to long-

time volunteer Penny Gubbels.

"In November 1997, a few people interested in orderly management of the Crown lands on the South Slopes started meeting informally to develop a plan for recreational use and environmental preservation," Gubbels said. "Various groups that recreated there endorsed the concept of an umbrella organization, resurrected the society and held the first AGM in 1998."

They had big dreams as it took hundreds of people over the years to create the legacy of sustainable and accessible trails for the benefit of the entire community. Myra-Bellevue, alone, has 97 kilometres of GPS-marked trails.

Members of the modern board of directors have not rested on their laurels despite receiving B.C. Parks' 2014 Volunteer Group of the Year award.

Last year marked another milestone with the society accepting responsibility from the now-defunct Myra Canyon Trestle Restoration Society for the Okanagan's top backcountry attraction – the Myra Canyon with its 16 wood trestles, two huge steel trestles and two rock tunnels. Some say it's the best part of the Trans Canada Trail and is visited by 70,000 annually.

This year could mark another milestone – the 'Let's Dream Big' campaign to create the ultimate South Slopes 'greenbelt' linking Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park to the Johns Family Conservancy Regional Park,

the Myra-Bellevue Provincial Park and the KLO Creek-Myra Recreation Area.

But first, a little history documenting the perseverance, resilience and "can-do" attitude of the Friends.

In the early years of the new millennium, the first order of business was constructing the Stewart Road East trailhead, information kiosk and parking lot to provide easy access to Myra-Bellevue.

The second was including the unique Angel Springs area in the provincial park and successfully opposing a tufa mining claim.

Disaster struck in 2003 when a ferocious wildfire swept through Okanagan Mountain Park and Myra-Bellevue destroying trails, bridges and 12 wooden trestles in the Myra Canyon, and damaging the two steel spans.

While the National Historic Site KVR trestles were rebuilt, thanks to \$17 million in federal and provincial funding, the society received a \$90,500 grant from the Interior Savings Credit Union's community development fund and a \$22,000 grant from the Central Okanagan Foundation paid for bridge and boardwalk materials, culverts, signs, many other trail improvements including a trail map.

The Friends partnered with Katim Enterprises and B.C. Parks for a federal grant through the Human Resource Development Canada Job Creation Partnership to create employment opportunities for unemployed people and to enhance economic development by providing safe use of trails in the two provincial parks. Katim had a crew of four to six people working there for most of 2004. The society supported the crews with volunteers and materials from the two grants.

The Friends also developed the Angel Springs interpretive trail, introduced the highly-successful Adopt-a-Trail program in 2007 and expanded it in 2012 to include a business sponsorship component. In 2013, the society signed a B.C. Parks partnership agreement to carry out approved projects. It also received a Canada 150 grant in 2017 and hired a trail maintenance contractor in 2019.

A record number of new trail maintenance volunteers signed up 2021, relocating two bridges from Priest Creek Park to Myra-Bellevue, improving the Golden Mile entrance to Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park and completing a major upgrade to its Wildhorse Canyon Trail all the way to Goode's Creek in 2022.

In both 2021 and 2022, the society offered up more than 3,000 volunteer hours, the majority of those on trail maintenance, said trail manager Milt Stevenson. "In 2021, we had about 30 volunteers. This rose to 40 in 2022. This spring, with our annual intake and orientation of volunteers, we now are 55 strong."

After 12 years of lobbying, the 16-hectare Myra wetlands – bordered on three sides by Myra-Bellevue Park – was acquired by the province in 2018 protecting a unique ecosystem and providing trail connectivity.

The society has what it calls a unique opportunity to provide the crucial remaining links between the Mission Creek Greenway, KLO Creek Regional Park, Myra-Bellevue Provincial Park, the Kettle Valley Railway and Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park.

The society is promoting amalgamation of the City of Kelowna's 42-hectare utility property and its five kilometres of popular trails – located above Field Road, and bordered by Crown land and KLO Creek Regional Park – into the regional park.

The Friends have also applied to B.C. Recreation Sites and Trails for a section 57 trail-use agreement on two parcels of Crown land west of the city's utility property.

In late March, Gubbels, Daphne Richards and Teresa McKenzie presented that vision to the Central Okanagan Naturalists' Club with plans to present their 'Let's Dream Big' PowerPoint presentation to local governments, and other recreation and conservation groups.

**Next Week: Friends of the South Slopes explain the secret to their success**