

## BC Parks and Crest Creek a Decade Later

In December 2014, after two decades of dedicated volunteer work at Crest Creek, and thirty years of volunteering in Strathcona Park more broadly, the Heathens club was issued a “Stop Work Order”. This arose as a result of a dispute over new agreements that volunteers were being required to sign in 2013. During the year preceding the order, a large volume of work had been completed at the crags including a difficult trail project connecting the original crags to the Sunrise area and refurbishing access trails and staging areas at the newer crags. Local climbers and volunteers enjoyed a positive feeling about the crags at that time.



However, the club refused to sign the new agreement in its original form, instead requesting changes to reduce the administrative burden for volunteers. Yet even after two years of negotiations the Ministry remained unmoved. In July of 2016, the club protested the new requirements and Park’s lack of cooperation at their traditional summer camp location. Parks mobilized Conservation Officers and tickets were issued to protesters camped at Crest Creek. A settlement was reached over the charges during a court hearing where the protestors each agreed to a one dollar fine for illegal camping while the Ministry wasted a bucket of tax dollars bringing the case.

At the hearing, Justice Gordon commented on the volunteer agreements;

*I am glad, Mr. Pauwels, that you have said that BC Parks is prepared to let bygones be bygones and try to work at some kind of resolution to this. I hope that you will, because it did strike me that the Heathens have been doing and presumably would continue to do if they could, to the benefits not only of the public, but presumably the purse of BC Parks, because the Heathens are doing some work that is not coming out of the pocket of the government coffers.*

*I guess both as a lawyer previously, and up here, I have always railed against what I call standard form agreements and if there is something unique about some situation..., you know if there is a reason for departing from the standard form, but can still meet the interest of both sides, then just because that is the form that we use for everybody else should not necessarily mean that it should be a form of agreement used for here.*

However, Parks failed to contact the club to re-establish a relationship and no other group came forward to accept responsibility for maintenance at the crags. With no one working there the crags deteriorated; routes regreened and bolts went uninspected so the climbs became more difficult and dangerous, while windfall littered overgrown trails that had become hazardous due to weakening structures and footbed erosion. Still, the crags remained busy despite the increasing risk that mishaps might occur, so the Ministry’s regrettable refusal to negotiate in good faith and their failure to re-establish a relationship with volunteers resulted in dangerous conditions at Crest.

During the ensuing eight year period conditions continued to worsen, so individuals resorted to “guerilla” trailwork tactics to make their climbing outings safer and more enjoyable by cleaning trails, removing obstacles and picking up litter. According to the “Work Stop Order” these efforts were illegal, but local climbers had decided that the risk of getting a ticket for doing unsanctioned work was

preferable to pulling off a loose bolt hanger! These measures provided a basic level of maintenance, but without an organized group to undertake larger projects, acquire grants, purchase, salvage, and transport materials or maintain relationships with local corporate support, things continued to deteriorate.

One really unfortunate consequence of this entropy was the dissolution of Heather's youth group projects, which, as Alex Ratson describes below, operated on a work for education basis;

*The cost was sweat equity, you gave back to the climbing community and he (Chris) hoped you could teach the next generation. Being trained in a grounded grasp of both technical and soft skills is something I (Alex) continue to value to this day.*

The club sought other locations where the programs could be run such as in cooperation with the Haig-Brown Institute at the Quinsam River nature trail and other climbing areas like Comox Lake, but none of these options could provide the long-term predictability or convenient teaching venues necessary for the curricula. Sadly, the dispute had created a situation where young climbers would be entering the scene with less savvy and incomplete training. Additionally, there was no longer an example of cooperation between recreationists and land managers to help shape their vision of a future in recreation, conservation, or volunteering.

But things have begun to improve, because as usage and impacts both continue to increase at the crags, officials and climbers all realize that the status quo is unacceptable. I credit my old friend Bill Phipps for reinitiating contact with the Ministry and for harnessing the energy of local climbers, resulting in a realignment of motivations between the groups. A new cadre of volunteers has emerged, eager to renew the necessary enthusiasm to maintain the safety and quality of Crest Creek climbing. Meanwhile, the arrival of Jessie Moore as Strathcona Zone Manager, along with dedicated workers Eric Krasmen, and Chris Branting has resulted in a simplified volunteer policy that drastically reduces the administrative burden. Thanks to these forward thinking officials volunteering is fun again, but more importantly, faith in land managers has been somewhat restored. The return of common sense to Crest Creek policy is a breath of fresh mountain air and the future seems much more promising, but, it is important to recognize that this future has a past.



It is widely believed that the heavy handed volunteer agreements of 2013 originated to facilitate the expansion of LNG development and potential pipeline construction championed by "Liberal in name only" governments prior to 2017. In any case, it is prudent to assume that the lobbying power of industry will affect Parks policy again in the future so Ministry officials seem doomed to a fate of being yarded in three (or more) directions at once! As industry lobbies for access to resources, conservationists will call for the preservation of precious public lands, while recreationists will continue to remind us that parks are for people too. We rely on industry to build communities prosperous enough to allow us to set aside protected areas. Concurrently, we rely on conservationists to preserve these lands which provide the potable water, breathable air and the bounty that allows us to flourish here. Recreationists live in our communities and work

in our industries, while their time in nature has shaped their intuitive understanding of how these factors are integrated. Simply put, we are all on the same team.

As someone whose concern regarding the impacts of these dynamics on the environment dates back to the 1970's, I have seen the pendulum swing back and forth many times. The resulting perspective is so informative that the role of elders is critical; something our indigenous friends have long understood. In fact, leadership in any group or organization requires a certain level of emotional maturity in order to prevent regrettable overreactions. Justice Gordon put it this way;

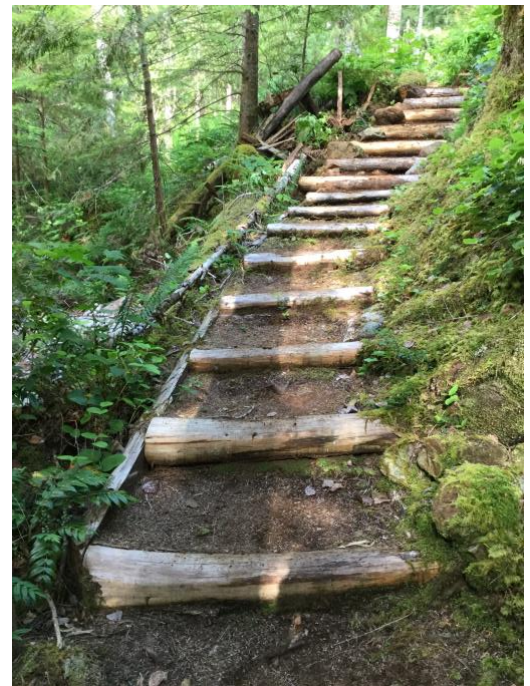
*When emotion steps in, reason steps out. It is far better to keep an even keel.*

There have been times when I have deplored Parks' policies but I refuse to treat their employees with contempt and even as we lament the impacts of industry, we can do so without demonizing folks who are just trying to make a living. Additionally, we can heed the call of conservationists and recreationists without labelling them as extremist or elitist.

There is a middle ground, free of the drastic policy oscillations that began the dispute between the parties at Crest Creek; we just have to move toward it. Thanks to the efforts of Jessie, Bill, Eric, Heathens and many others, work has resumed at Crest Creek. Elders like Paul Rydeen and I can help, not just with trail building knowledge and route development techniques but also by recounting experiences of evolving relationships between stakeholders. I urge all parties involved to ride the wave as it crests while preparing for possible future disturbances, but we must all seek to "Flatten the wavelength" in order to go forward more efficiently and respectfully.

So far, the new efforts at Crest are insufficient in scope and frequency to return the area to its former glory anytime soon, but the pieces are all in place, the efforts are honest and the motivations are sincere. We are now on a path to take positive steps toward safer and more enjoyable recreation. This is in everybody's best interests; we all agree that recreation is necessary for the good health and well-being of our environment and all our citizens, workers, land managers, and volunteers alike.

Chris Barner





Photos: Paul Rydeen