



Bluff Trail Stewardship Program (BTSP) Year in Review 2023

WRWEO respectfully acknowledges that we are located in Mi'kma'ki, the unceded and unsundered ancestral land of the Mi'kmaq (L'nu). We are all treaty people.

Background

Completed in 2005, **The Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail** was constructed by the Woodens River Watershed Environmental Organization (WRWEO) under a letter of authority from the Nova Scotia Department of Lands and Forestry (DLF, now the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables). The trail runs through ecologically sensitive barrens, reaching into the dwindling habitat of the critically endangered mainland moose, and broom crowberry, a coastal plain species threatened globally. The purpose of the trail was to allow the public to become aware of the extraordinary natural assets of this area, in the belief that awareness was the first step in protection. In 2011, the Province designated Five Bridge Lakes Wilderness Area under the *Wilderness Areas Protection Act*. However, by 2015, the trail and the wilderness area were showing signs of distress, abuse, and over-use. As a result of the significant increase in the volume of visitors, there was an alarming increase in harmful human impacts. Visitors expressed concern and disappointment about the damage caused by the ever-widening trail, the increased amount of garbage, toilet paper, and human waste in the area, harm caused by inappropriate camping, the cutting of trees, and the damage to the soil surface and tree canopy caused by campfires. These observations were reiterated in the annual trail inspections performed by Department of Natural Resources and Renewables staff.

Now entering its eighth season, the BTSP continues to be a joint project of the Woodens River Watershed Environmental Organization (WRWEO) and the St. Margaret's Bay Stewardship Association (SMBSA). With support from the Nova Scotia Environment and Climate Change – Protected Areas and Ecosystems Branch, and contributions from individuals, the program seeks to decrease the number and severity of harmful human impacts and to ensure the careful and responsible management of The Bluff Trail and the surrounding area.

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to the stewardship of the trail. One of those challenges was a large increase of new users to the trail and subsequent

rise in illegal and harmful activities. However, the BTSP has carried out another successful year of engaging with the community, spreading awareness on the impacts that the trail faces, and reducing and remediating harms enacted upon the trail and surrounding Wilderness Area.

The following **Year in Review (YIR) Report** offers an overview of the **Bluff Trail Stewardship Program** from January to December 2023.

Contributions & Program Valuation

Initial Program Funding (2023)		\$16,000.00
Private Contributions from supporters of BTSP, WRWEO, and SMBSA	\$1,000	
Nova Scotia Environment and Climate Change	\$15,000	
Additional Funding		\$18,533.00
Canada Summer Jobs Program	\$18,533	
In-kind Contributions		
On-Trail Labour Value (minus monetary funding)	\$60,635.47	
Off-Trail Labour and Services	\$4,717.00	
Materials & Equipment	\$250.00	

Table 1

2023 BTSP Approximate Total Program Value **\$100,135.47**

2017-2023 BTSP Approximate Total Program Value Generated \$546,518.37



BTSP by the Numbers: 2023

During its seventh year of operation, the Bluff Trail Stewardship Program:

Trained

12 BTSP Stewards – an average of 1 BTSP Steward trained every month

Collected

240 Reports from BTSP Stewards, staff, and other trail users – an average of 20 per month documenting:

161 Days of BTSP Stewardship Presence on the trail – an average of over 13 days per month

23 Days with presence in the wider Five Bridge Lakes Wilderness Area (FBLWA)

57 Days with presence on Hay Marsh Loop

54 Days with presence on Bluff Loop

101 Days with presence on Mi'kmaw Hill Loop

153 Days with presence on Pot Lake Loop

3,023.98 Hours of BTSP Stewardship Presence on the trail and broader Wilderness Area – an average of 252 hours/month, or the equivalent of two people working over 30 hours/week

1,048.85 hours (34.7%) were paid and 1,963.58 hours (65.3%) were volunteer hours

Observed

2,816 People Observed & 1,815 People Engaged – 64% of visitors observed on the trail

315 Dogs Observed on the trail – approximately 55% of the dogs observed were off leash

Approximately 45% of the dogs observed were on leash

Approximately 10% of the dogs observed were disturbing other users and/or the environment

Monitored

The four Leave No Trace (LNT) Educational Camping Sites were regularly checked on:

Coyote/U'lukwej was checked on **117** times – on average, over twice a week

Crow/Ka'qaquj was checked on **117** times – on average, almost twice a week

Squirrel/Atutu'wej was checked on **25** times – on average, twice a month

Moose/Tia'm was checked on **23** times – on average, about twice a month

Remediated

An estimated 300+ trail spur, widening, and braiding barriers constructed/refurbished

13 fire pits remediated - the lowest number in the program's history!

40+ fallen trees removed, repairs completed on three boardwalk sections, **dozens** of trail markers repainted or replaced

Generated

More than a **\$65,000** value for donated volunteer labour¹, materials, and equipment:

More than **\$5,400 per month** of on-trail labour (paid and unpaid), over \$400 per month of off-trail labour, and \$20 per month of donated materials and equipment. **An annual total of \$100,135 with a monthly average of \$8,344.62.**

SMBSA and WRWEO wish to express their sincere appreciation for the collaboration with the Nova Scotia Environment and Climate Change: Protected Areas and Ecosystems Branch, and the support of Canada Summer Jobs Program, and the many individual donors who have made the BTSP possible. We are especially grateful to the volunteers who have given so generously of their time to help ensure the continued careful and responsible management of The Bluff Trail and the surrounding area.

¹ WRWEO calculates the value of volunteer labour according to the 2023 study, *Working for a Living, Not Living for Work 2022*, released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Nova Scotia in partnership with United Way – Halifax. The report used the Canadian Living Wage Framework to calculate the living wage for Halifax at \$26.50/hr.

BTSP Data Comparison 2017-2022

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Average *	Above Average **
Number of Stewards Trained	40	52	14	4	26	28	12	25	
Number of Reports Collected	180	198	223	204	203	186	240	205	✓
Days of Presence on trail and/or in FBLWA	130	151	158	137	138	143	161	145	✓
Days of Presence on Pot Lake Loop	121	137	149	131	123	140	150	136	✓
Days of Presence on Mi'kmaw Hill Loop	70	58	71	87	81	98	110	82	✓
Days of Presence on Bluff Loop	34	39	27	47	56	51	82	48	✓
Days of Presence on Hay Marsh Loop	25	30	19	27	48	39	58	35	✓
Hours of Presence on trail and/or in FBLWA	1757	2443	1853	2525	2580	2842	3024	2432	✓
Check-Ins at Coyote/U'lukwej	38	49	58	80	90	90	117	75	✓
Check-Ins at Crow/Ka'qaquj	36	54	58	80	90	90	117	75	✓
Check-Ins at Squirrel/Atutu'wej	14	14	12	24	33	24	25	21	✓
Check-Ins at Moose/Tia'm	11	8	14	14	45	28	23	19	✓
Illegal fire pits remediated	53	30	20	30	30	23	13	28	✓
People Observed	3045	2773	3702	3845	3850	3223	2816	3322	N/A
People Engaged	1181	1024	2013	1801	1378	1530	1815	1534	✓
Percentage of Observed People Engaged	39%	37%	54%	47%	36%	47%	64%	46%	✓
Dogs Observed	562	414	662	511	496	456	315	488	N/A
Percentage of dogs off-leash (changed to 'Causing Harm' in 2021)	63%	48%	46%	56%	24%	11%	10%	37%	✓

Approximate total In-Kind Contributions	\$38,000	\$36,000	\$17,354	\$44,309	\$41,762	\$54,670	\$65,602	\$42,528	✓
Approximate In-Kind Labour On Trail	\$23,744	\$30,652	\$14,160	\$29,081	\$33,670	\$50,014	\$60,635	\$34,565	✓
Approximate In-Kind Labour Off Trail	\$13,453	\$5,162	\$3,073	\$15,227	\$7,942	\$4,664	\$4,717	\$7,748	
Approximate In-Kind Materials & Equipment	\$1,170	\$342	\$120	\$100	\$150	\$250	\$250	\$340	
Approximate Total Program Value	\$70,000	\$81,000	\$50,925	\$74,000	\$82,115	\$88,342	\$100,135	\$78,074	✓

Table 2

*Averages are based on every year of the program’s existence, including the immediate year of the report.

**Above average means a performance that was better than the established average performance.

Sometimes this means a high number - i.e. number of visitors engaged - and sometimes it means a lower number - i.e. number of illegal fire pits remediated.

Data Analysis

Due to the inconsistencies of funding and circumstance, achieving an accurate method of informed comparison of the data from the BTSP over the years can be difficult. As noted in Table 2, we also will periodically change how we use our data to determine the scope of issues as well as our level of success. However, as the seventh year of the program has come to a close, there are many categories for which data is collected that can be used to determine trends, issues, and the subsequent assignment of priorities for 2024.

Simply put, 2023 was a great year for the BTSP. Our results and data are beginning to depict some wonderful trends, bearing the fruit of literal thousands of hours of dedicated efforts. In 2023 we had:

- the lowest ever number of illegal fire pits dismantled
- the lowest ever number of dogs conducting harmful behaviours
- the second-highest ever number of trail users engaged
- the highest percentage ever for the number of trail users engaged
- the highest ever number of person-hours spent on the trail
- the highest total program value ever generated in one year

These are very rewarding statistics to convey as many of them clearly depict the differences that the BTSP is making in our efforts to change the culture and community use patterns around the use of this amazing trail.

Although we have made great progress over the past seven years, there will likely not be a time when the BTSP is no longer needed to help guide ecologically-responsible use of the Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail. We must continue our efforts to ensure that this momentum is carried forward.

An area where we aim to improve in 2024 is to put more efforts into recruiting and training new Trail Stewards, especially within the trail running community. We have already booked one of the run clubs, the Halifax Hares, that uses the trail frequently to have at least one Trail Steward training session for their members and hope to complete more later in the year.

This document contains a brief summary of the data analysis but WRWEO engages in more fulsome dissection, review, and data-driven planning and management using the data displayed here as well as that which is not.

Note: in 2024 and beyond WRWEO will not report on “Check-Ins at Coyote/U’lukwej” and “Check-Ins at Crow/Ka’qaquj”.