



Bluff Trail Stewardship Program (BTSP) Year in Review 2024

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). 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 ninth 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 2024.

Contributions & Program Valuation

Initial Program Funding (2024)		\$16,000.00
Private Contributions from supporters of BTSP, WRWEO, and SMBSA	\$1,000	
Nova Scotia Environment and Climate Change	\$15,000	
Additional Funding		\$7,614.00
Five Bridge Wilderness Heritage Trust	\$5,000	
North Brewing fundraiser	\$1,114	
BBQ fundraiser	\$1,500	
In-kind Contributions		\$55,703.33
On-Trail Labour Value (minus paid time)	\$51,576.23	
Off-Trail Labour and Services	\$3,877.10	
Materials & Equipment	\$250.00	

Table 1

2024 BTSP Approximate Total Program Value **\$79,067.33**

2017-2024 BTSP Approximate Total Program Value Generated \$625,585.70



Photo by Mike Lancaster, Summer Stewardship Assistants and Trail Stewards at work

BTSP by the Numbers: 2024

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

Trained

4 BTSP Stewards – an average of 1 BTSP Steward trained every 3 months

Collected

130 Reports from BTSP Stewards, staff, and other trail users – an average of 2.5 per week documenting:

103 Days of BTSP Stewardship Presence on the trail – an average of 2 days per week

37 Days with presence on Hay Marsh Loop

26 Days with presence on Bluff Loop

50 Days with presence on Mi'kmaw Hill Loop

104 Days with presence on Pot Lake Loop

1,999.16 Hours of BTSP Stewardship Presence on the trail and broader Wilderness Area – an average of 166.6 hours/month, or the equivalent of one person working over 38 hours/week, year-round.

560.23 hours (28%) were paid and 1,438.93 hours (72%) were volunteer hours

Observed

2,2265 trail users observed & **1,904** of them were engaged – an incredible **84%** engagement rate - our highest ever!

256 Dogs Observed on the trail – approximately 27% of the dogs observed were off leash
Approximately 73% of the dogs observed were on leash
Approximately only 8% 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 **47** times – on average, close to once a week
Crow/Ka'qaquj was checked on **47** times – on average, close to once a week
Squirrel/Atutu'wej was checked on **12** times – on average, once a month
Moose/Tia'm was checked on **27** times – on average, about twice a month

Remediated

An estimated 400+ trail spur, widening, and braiding barriers constructed/refurbished
20 fire pits remediated - not ideal but still below the average
40+ fallen trees removed, repairs completed on three boardwalk sections, **dozens** of trail markers repainted or replaced

Generated

More than a **\$55,000** value for donated volunteer labour¹, materials, and equipment:

More than **\$4,000 per month** of on-trail labour (paid and unpaid), over \$300 per month of off-trail labour, and \$20 per month of donated materials and equipment. **An annual total of \$79,067 with a monthly average of over \$6,500.**

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 Five Bridge Wilderness Heritage Trust, 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 a 2024 report 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 \$28.30/hr.

BTSP Data Comparison 2017-2024

2017 data not depicted to save space

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Average *	Above Average **
Number of Stewards Trained	52	14	4	26	28	12	4	22	
Number of Reports Collected	198	223	204	203	186	240	130	195	
Days of Presence on trail and/or in FBLWA	151	158	137	138	143	161	106	140	
Days of Presence on Pot Lake Loop	137	149	131	123	140	150	107	132	
Days of Presence on Mi'kmaw Hill Loop	58	71	87	81	98	110	50	78	
Days of Presence on Bluff Loop	39	27	47	56	51	82	26	45	
Days of Presence on Hay Marsh Loop	30	19	27	48	39	58	37	35	✓
Hours of Presence on trail and/or in FBLWA	2443	1853	2525	2580	2842	3024	1999	2378	
Check-Ins at Coyote/U'lukwej	49	58	80	90	90	117	47	72	
Check-Ins at Crow/Ka'qaquj	54	58	80	90	90	117	47	72	
Check-Ins at Squirrel/Atutu'we j	14	12	24	33	24	25	12	20	
Check-Ins at Moose/Tia'm	8	14	14	45	28	23	27	20	✓
Illegal fire pits remediated	30	20	30	30	23	13	20	27	✓
People Observed	2773	3702	3845	3850	3223	2816	2265	3190	N/A
People Engaged	1024	2013	1801	1378	1530	1815	1904	1580	✓
Percentage of Observed People Engaged	37%	54%	47%	36%	47%	64%	84%	51%	✓
Dogs Observed	414	662	511	496	456	315	256	459	N/A
Percentage of dogs off-leash	48%	46%	56%	24%	11%	10%	8%	33%	✓

(changed to 'Causing Harm' in 2021)									
Approximate total In-Kind Contributions	\$36,000	\$17,354	\$44,309	\$41,762	\$54,670	\$65,602	\$55,703	\$44,175	✓
Approximate In-Kind Labour On Trail	\$30,652	\$14,160	\$29,081	\$33,670	\$50,014	\$60,635	\$51,576	\$36,691	✓
Approximate In-Kind Labour Off Trail	\$5,162	\$3,073	\$15,227	\$7,942	\$4,664	\$4,717	\$3,877	\$7,264	
Approximate In-Kind Materials & Equipment	\$342	\$120	\$100	\$150	\$250	\$250	\$250	\$329	
Approximate Total Program Value	\$81,000	\$50,925	\$74,000	\$82,115	\$88,342	\$100,135	\$79,067	\$78,198	✓

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 2025. The fact that we were not granted funds through the Canada Summer Jobs program greatly diminished our capacity to have summer staff on the trail during our busiest season. This translated to a decline in:

- volunteer trail report submissions
- LNT site check-ins
- total hours of on-trail presence, value, and labour
- a decline in the total program contributions and general value

Despite this setback, 2024 should be considered to be a successful year for the BTSP. Our results and data are continuing to depict some wonderful trends, bearing the fruit of literal thousands of hours of dedicated efforts. In 2024 we had:

- a below average number 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 - an incredible 84%!

These are largely positive statistics to convey as many of them continue to display 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 few 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 2025 is to put more efforts into recruiting and training new Trail Stewards. We have already booked one of the hiking clubs and hope to collaborate with other recreational groups in the future.

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.