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'Unsafe' Trans Canada Trail left his wife dead, now he's fighting for change

In memory of Elizabeth: Edmund Aunger's cross-country
odyssey stops in Sudbury today



Cross-country cyclist Edmund Aunger, seen with his wife, Elizabeth Sovis, who was killed while cycling the Trans Canada Trail, pedals into town July 7 during his 12,500-km Ride the Trail for Elizabeth journey. Supplied photo.

An Alberta man whose wife was killed four years ago in a horrific cycling accident, travels through Sudbury today on the fourth leg of his 12,500-km cross-country journey, a trip he affectionately named Ride the Trail for Elizabeth.

Edmund Aunger is riding the Trans Canada Trail from Victoria, B.C., to Charlottetown, P.E.I., in an effort to get the Trans Canada Trail off roads and highways. He is honouring his wife, Elizabeth Sovis, and promoting her vision.

“She wanted to see a Trans Canada Trail that was a true greenway, not a motorized roadway,” he said in a news release. “She complained bitterly that the existing trail was not only incomplete; it was often inaccessible and unsafe. And she was right.”

During a cycling holiday on the Trans Canada Trail in Prince Edward Island, the guidebook took the couple off the hard-packed gravel trail and onto a two-lane highway, he said. Several minutes later, Sovis was struck by a full-size van. The impact threw her body 50 metres.

“I have taken up her cause, and I am working to restore the trail’s original objectives,” Aunger said.

When it was first announced in 1992, the Trans Canada Trail was intended to get pedestrians and cyclists off dangerous roadways, and away from motorized vehicles. Now, however, 45 per cent of the land-based trail is on roads and highways, and an estimated 30 per cent is used by off-road motor vehicles, Aunger said.

“This is absolutely perverse. Northern Ontario, in particular, has been very poorly served,” he said. “Crossing the border from Manitoba to Ontario, the Trans Canada Trail splashes along a 1,100-kilometre chain of rivers and lakes leading to Thunder Bay, before plunging another 990 kilometres eastward through Lake Superior to Sault Ste. Marie.

“Consequently, pedestrians and cyclists have little option but to take a life-threatening journey along Highway 17.”

The 340-kilometre land-based route from Sault Ste. Marie to Sudbury is only marginally better, he said, running for the most part on roads and highways including, once again, the narrow shoulders of Highway 17.

In his campaign, Aunger is calling upon the Ontario government to intervene and – in collaboration with the federal government – to set minimum standards for the Trans Canada Trail.

“First and foremost, no section of the Trans Canada Trail should be motorized — it must be clearly designated as a public greenway, and it should be hard-packed, well-drained and at least three metres wide.

“We should abandon our current plans for a 24,000-kilometre maze of roads, ruts and rivers, and build an 8,000-kilometre cross-country spine trail that is safe and accessible and passable.

“It’s better to do this right, than to do this fast. Claiming that the Trans Canada Trail will be fully connected by July 1, 2017 is simply a dangerous hoax.”

Aunger pedals into town this afternoon, stopping first at the Trans Canada Trail Pavilion in Fielding Memorial Park about 3:30 p.m., and then at the Sudbury Canoe Club about 5 p.m.