

CBC Radio – The 180

With Jim Brown

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It's dangerous to call the Trans Canada Trail complete, says cyclist



This section of the Trans Canada Trail near Nutimik, Man., was completely overgrown, says Aunger. (Edmund Aunger)

The Trans Canada Trail, a project begun in 1992 and now marketed as The Great Trail, is expected to be complete this year.

The trail is built by volunteers, and funded by donors, and provincial and federal governments. According to Edmund Aunger, cyclist and Professor Emeritus in Political Science at the University of Alberta, it began as a response to a fatal accident along the Trans-Canada Highway near Calgary in 1985. It currently stretches over 21,000 kilometres, from B.C. to the Northwest Territories to Newfoundland.

But Aunger says much of what's considered trail isn't actually trail - it's the shoulders of highways. Aunger believes the trail is a risk, and declaring it nearly complete is irresponsible. Aunger's wife, Elizabeth Sovis was killed during a

cycling trip along the Trans Canada Trail in P.E.I., where it is called the Confederation Trail.

"Don't. Don't come. It's too dangerous. Unless you want to ride down roads and highways, please don't come." - Edmund Auger

This interview has been edited for length and clarity

What was the original purpose of the trail?

I remember this very well, and I remember the accident very well too, in 1985 that led to this, it traumatized the whole province, if you can imagine three children being killed and six injured while they were cycling. And the original goal was to create a safe place for people to walk, to cycle, to ride in wheelchairs, and in the winter for cross-country skiing. We can talk about increasing tourism, we could talk about linking this country together, it was called the new national dream, of course the railroad was the original national dream, but safety was the very first priority for the building of this trail.

"It's something that doesn't go away... you don't forget the pools of blood and the kids' mangled bodies." - Trail founder Bill Pratt, describing the accident to the Calgary Herald, Apr. 25, 1994

You know, I've cycled all over Canada, I've cycled in countries in Europe, I don't think people understand fully the health benefits, the safety benefits, but also the economic benefits of a trail of this kind. I've spoken to many people in Europe who've said to me "we would love to come cycling in Western Canada, you know we've heard so much about Canada, that's where we'd really love to do a cycling tour," and I say "Don't. Don't come. It's too dangerous. Unless you want to ride down roads and highways, please don't come."

And that's how we're selling it right now - ready for cycling on Canada Day 2017. Tell me, what is the state of the trail right now?

It is 8,500 kilometres of roads and highways, it is 5,000 kilometres of ATV trails, it is 7,000 kilometres of waterways including Lake Superior. Of course you can't walk and ride your bicycle in it, and people who walk or cycle through that area

still have to go on the Trans-Canada Highway. This, compared to the dream and the promises that were made, this is absolutely horrible.

How did this happen?

It was assumed from the beginning that the Trans Canada Trail could be built by volunteers, private donations, corporate sponsorships, with no government involvement. You can't do that - you couldn't build the railway, you couldn't build the highway with volunteers, you cannot successfully build the Trans Canada Trail without government intervention and government planning. It was supposed to be quick, it was supposed to be cheap, and it was a horrible failure, and in an effort to get it done and say that it was done, what were the alternatives? Well the alternatives were to use snowmobile routes, ATV routes, roads, highways, rivers, and lakes.

You used to have a partner on your summer trail excursions. Tell me about your wife, Elizabeth.

My wife agreed to join me on my cycling trips. She was not a confident cyclist. I'm the person who cycles and she did it really out of love so we could spend time together, and for ten years we took three-week cycling holidays. She was scared of riding on roads. She said it was too dangerous. And one of the conditions she made for our annual cycling trips was that we would not ride on roads. I planned those trips, I did my very best. We managed fairly well in Europe, but in Canada we had a huge number of challenges, because we were often riding on roads and highways. Which were considered to be Trans Canada Trail. And so we cancelled a number of holidays in Canada because she refused to ride on those trails. And when she died, two days before she had actually cancelled part of our trip in New Brunswick. We had taken the train from Moncton to Sackville because the Trans Canada Trail was on a two-lane road. We got to Prince Edward Island which was supposed to be the safest place in Canada to cycle, and the afternoon we arrived we were riding on the Trans Canada Trail, the trail guide took us off the trail, we did 2.9 kilometres on a highway, and she was struck by a drunk driver and killed.



Edmund Aunger and his wife, Elizabeth Sovis, in New Brunswick. Sovis was killed while cycling with Aunger on P.E.I. (Edmund Aunger)

Had my wife known she was going to have to ride on a two-lane highway she would have refused to do that trip.

The P.E.I. government has revised their Trans Canada Trail guide, because they claimed we would never have to leave the trail, that all services were available on the trail. We were staying at recommended accommodation and a recommended spot in the Trans Canada Trail guide. My wife was horrified when she realized we were going to have to ride on the road. We had no alternative, there were no sidewalks. There were no alternative routes to our destination. And she only made it 2.9 kilometres before she was hit.

What would you like to see done about the trail? More government funding for the trail?

I have a petition that's on the House of Commons website, and I'm asking the Canadian government to adopt a Trans Canada Trail Act that sets minimum standards for quality and safety. And so I believe very strongly that nothing

should be designated as Trans Canada Trail unless it's safe and non-motorized and usable. And I think that's the very first step, and so that means no: it will not be completed by July 1st of this year. But I think we're better to be honest about this and have a trail that we can be proud of than to pretend that we have completed a trail that is dangerous and if it takes another 20 years or 50 years to get it done, so be it.