

The Senate of Canada
Tuesday, May 2 2017

Trans Canada Trail

History, Benefits and Challenges—Inquiry—Debate Continued

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Tardif, calling the attention of the Senate to the Trans Canada Trail—its history, benefits and the challenges it is faced with as it approaches its 25th anniversary.

Hon. Chantal Petitclerc: Honourable senators, I'm not sure if I should thank you in advance for your attention or ask for your forgiveness for keeping you here a bit longer. I will simply repeat what Senator Gagné said enthusiastically a few weeks ago, "Honourable senators, the night is still young."

Last June 26, Senator Tardif drew our attention to two major challenges regarding the Trans Canada Trail, also known as the Great Trail. Today, I am adding my voice to this important debate.

The Great Trail was the dream of Quebecer Pierre Camu and Albertan Bill Pratt, two visionaries who hoped to see Canada's recreational trails connected as a single gigantic trail.

The creation of this interconnected network of trails started in 1992 as part of Canada's 125th anniversary celebrations. Twenty-five years later, it is 91 per cent complete, measures 21 500 kilometers, and is the longest recreational trail in the world. Here is what the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean said about this trail:

A path through the fields, a bridge over a river, a trail deep in the forest or on the mountainside, a rowboat across a lake—it is a living tapestry that takes your breath away, and so much more still.

[English]

The wish of many, including myself, is that the Grand Trail be completed this year, for Canada's one hundred and fiftieth anniversary. Imagine that 432 local trails will be connected. It will measure 24,000 kilometres and connect more than 15,000 communities from all corners of all provinces and territories.

[Translation]

Like the Trans-Canada Highway, the Trans Canada Trail brings us closer and gives us the opportunity to discover the vastness of our country. I'm not the only one who thinks so.

[English]

Matthew Stevenson, a cyclist from Toronto, says:

The Trail is one of the ways we link ourselves together — just as we know we can go to British Columbia and listen to the CBC and hear the same stories we hear in Ontario. Or, we all have the same five-dollar bill with Wilfrid Laurier on it. It's about connection.

Since 2015, Dianne Whelan has been travelling across Canada through those trails. She draws from this experience, that the Trans Canada Trail is an umbilical cord that connects us all.

(2030)

[Translation]

Honourable colleagues, like all Canadians, you can walk, bike, ski, snowshoe, kayak or canoe the Great Trail, and it's even wheelchair accessible.

I'm sure you know, as all the experts do, that regular physical activity is beneficial to both physical and mental health. I was less aware of the specific benefits of physical activity in a natural setting.

In 2009, researchers studied the health benefits of walking in a forest compared to walking in an urban environment. The subjects that went for a walk in the forest had lower and more stable blood pressures and heart rates. Another study using a similar methodology showed that levels of the stress hormone cortisol in the saliva were lower after a walk in the woods.

[English]

So it is worth enjoying it, especially when 80 per cent of Canadians live within 30 minutes of one or more completed sections of the great trail.

[Translation]

Honourable colleagues, I said earlier that the trail is only 91 per cent complete. In her inquiry, Senator Tardif lamented the fact that lack of funding delayed the final connections. Thankfully, in the most recent budget, the federal government set aside \$30 million over five years for the connection, improvement and maintenance of the Trans Canada Trail.

I wish the news were as good regarding improving safety on certain parts of the trail, which was the other challenge raised by Senator Tardif. I agree, Senator Tardif, that a lot more has to be done in that regard.

Your former colleague Edmund Auger, who was also my political science professor, taught me the importance of setting standards, even minimal ones, for construction, security and access over the entire Trans Canada Trail network.

Mr. Auger spent a lot of time on the trail with his wife, Elizabeth Sovis. In 2012, she was tragically and fatally hit by a car while she was biking on the trail. The

accident occurred when the couple was forced to leave the trail and bike along a highway because there was no bike path.

[English]

Mr. Auger said that there was no shoulder. He had seen that he had to leave the trail, but he never imagined that it would have been necessary for him to ride on the highway.

[Translation]

Still today, sections of the trail are actually roads, usually secondary roads, used by motor vehicles. Cyclists often risk being struck by cars because they have no other choice but to use these roads, which don't always have paved shoulders. According to the Chair of the Sudbury Cyclist Union, Rachelle Niemela, Mr. Auger's demands are justified because some sections of the Trans Canada Trail are obviously more dangerous than others.

[English]

I agree with Professor Auger, who is proposing a comprehensive plan to allow the federal and provincial governments to frame the construction of trails. These levels of governments should be guided by the same model used for the Trans-Canada Highway, which required exchanges between the federal government and the provinces regarding funding, construction standards and the route the trail should follow.

[Translation]

Also, having standards would mean that the trail would be universally accessible to people living with disabilities, inasmuch as it is possible, of course.

Honourable colleagues, this year being Canada's 150th anniversary, it seems appropriate to note that the Trans Canada Trail is one of the largest volunteer projects ever undertaken in Canada. Thousands of donors and volunteers have been involved throughout the country. The vastness of our land only reinforces the importance of initiatives that bring us closer together. The Great Trail is such a unifying project and is worthy of our attention.

[English]

Thank you again, Senator Tardif, for this opportunity to learn more about the history and the potential of this interconnected network of trails. With the good weather coming, I invite you, dear colleagues, to take the time not only to familiarize yourself with this project but especially to take advantage of it. So go out and recharge your batteries; go for a few kilometres on foot or on your bike and enjoy these trails that we are so lucky to have. But not tonight.

(On motion of Senator Mercer, for Senator Day, debate adjourned.)