

The Island Guardian

06/06/2011: "Celebrate our Island Trails"

By Steve Ulvi

With summer near at hand interests naturally turn to the pleasures of more frequent outdoor activities. Sure some of our hardcore neighbors regularly hike, bike, run and don wetsuits for saltwater swims throughout the stormy winter months.

Hat's off to 'em but most of us like the extra boost of longer days and t-shirt temperatures.

Forget for a moment the surrounding salt water, fun on the lakes, competitive sports and horticultural hobbies in the mix of options from which we seek personal re-creation. Instead take the time to appreciate our enviable array of public trails and natural areas.

Busy summer roads are decidedly less attractive for activities. With distracted visitors at the wheel glancing at maps and sailing right along late for a reservation the main roads are best avoided if you have recreation in mind. So it is a darned good thing we have so many off-pavement alternatives for outdoor pursuits. The growing network of trails on these islands offers an almost unlimited menu of bucolic settings and big sky vistas to check out. The boost of fresh air, crossing paths with friendly folks, and moderate exercise in natural surroundings is hard to beat.

Back in 1993, when the many healthful benefits of outdoor activities had solid bipartisan political support, President Reagan and the American Hiking Society established the first Saturday in June every year as National Trails Day. The numbers of trails and events to celebrate them have increased exponentially since then. Scores of work parties and thousands of enthusiasts will get out this weekend to celebrate local trails across the State of Washington.

I am sure that you aware of the spate of recent articles breathlessly rating the San Juan Islands as a top destination for pleasure travel, road bike touring, kayaking and whale watching vacations. The underlying reasons for these ratings are complex while the promotional aspects are obvious. But I suspect that the abundance of family-friendly trails threading varied landscapes from secluded bays and deep forest to expansive marine and mountain vistas may play a big part in such positive reviews. And we get to call this place home!

In most areas of the west the sprawl of residential subdivisions and in-fill of what were once outlying farm lands, has energized efforts to preserve greenways and trails as public commons. Most people recognize the deep satisfaction found in natural places and enjoy the many benefits of leaving motorized vehicles behind. Piles of studies reiterate a generally positive and direct correlation between improved public health and nearby public lands for outdoor activities. The many ecosystem services that highly natural areas provide a community are also invaluable. And just how would you measure the calm gained from walking in natural areas or the family cohesion resulting from shared exploration even if only in a few acres of forest?

To be fair, there is an ongoing debate about the net effect of non-motorized trails and greenbelts as factors in attracting talented employees, raising property values and increasing marketability for homes in areas nearby to these amenities. However, numerous studies that focus on suburban and exurban areas with public trails and greenbelts, indicate that there is often at least

a slight increase in property values and marketability. Sometimes marked increases. Perhaps one of these days our local realtors and the Chamber of Commerce will get behind a similar survey to better identify the many attributes of these islands that are so compelling to visitors and prospective new residents.

Agencies and trails groups have made great strides in the last few years improving our network of trails for public enjoyment. The unique Land Bank idea is a gift that keeps on giving....from us, to us, for us. Some private land owners are granting easements and signing permissive use agreements to allow important connections between interest sites and public parcels. PeaceHealth has agreed to incorporate a through trail across the new hospital parcel for public, staff and patient use. Perhaps the most promising increase in the public commons for those of us who love trails are found on Turtleback Mountain and Mitchell Hill. The smart work that made it possible to transfer these large, natural parcels into public ownership is now playing out on the ground driven by strong community interests in advocating for reasonable access, multi-use trail planning and sustainable construction. Many hundreds of us donated money and wrote letters to unlock these landscapes from private ownership and potential development in order to open them for appropriate public uses and preservation for future generations. The careful planning process and sometimes perplexing agency compliance requirements involved can be daunting. But with patience, honest dialogue and inclusive agency planning we will create a legacy of durable trails that serve recreational needs and protect resource values.

The addition of Mitchell Hill to the English Camp unit of San Juan National Historic Park has the potential to evolve into a textbook example of what is possible when strong community recreational interests converge with NPS planning efforts. Besides encompassing some of the only remaining segments of the historic cross-island Military Road this parcel provides key access from the south to existing trails on large adjoining private and public tracts. Hikers, horse riders and mountain bikers have long enjoyed the maze of informal trails in that area. A strong sense of stewardship drives the efforts of locals who have cut in trails, cleaned up trash and by their regular presence have moderated the activities of knuckleheads who lack common sense.

The many miles of trails will certainly need evaluation, removal, re-routing or reconstruction in order to meet the demands of Park Service policy and protect cultural and natural resource values. The Park Service has promised to begin planning this month by listening to the full range of public interests and recreational needs to be considered in the context of larger national preservation interests. The many "friends of Mitchell Hill" I have heard are chomping at the bit to engage in active agency planning in order to avoid closures, reduce potential conflicts and simplify regulatory limitations on appropriate uses in the interim. This is a unique opportunity for cooperative planning and growth of community stewardship skills on low intensity recreational lands. It will be a rare chance for trail enthusiasts to energize a sometimes slow public process, help find a balance between differing values, understand sustainable trail design concepts, acquire new skills, and eventually swing a pulaski.

Please make the time to get out with your kids and friends to celebrate our enduring legacy of public trails this Saturday and everyday! And thank your forward-thinking neighbors for their community support for public trails.

(Steve Ulvi is a member of the the [San Juan Island Trails Committee](#))