



10 Steps to Developing a Hiking Trail in a Wilderness Area

Nova Scotia boasts an inspiring array of diverse and beautiful landscapes and ecosystems. Some of the finest are protected within provincially designated wilderness areas. Trail developers and stewards working within these areas can give Nova Scotians a natural legacy for generations to enjoy.

About Wilderness Areas

Nova Scotia's designated wilderness areas are managed by Nova Scotia Environment in partnership with the Department of Natural Resources, trail groups, and other organizations. These properties are protected under the Wilderness Areas Protection Act, "to provide for the establishment, management, protection, and use of wilderness areas, in perpetuity, for present and future generations."

Wilderness areas protect

- natural processes and native biological diversity
- typical examples of Nova Scotia's natural landscapes and ecosystems
- typical, unique, rare, and vulnerable species, and natural features and phenomena



Hiking trails in these areas provide opportunities for Nova Scotians and visitors to explore nature in a setting removed from our sometimes busy and hectic lives — and experience renewal, challenge, and inspiration.

Trails provide opportunities for active and healthy lifestyles. They increase public appreciation of wild spaces. They also support community economic development by providing local, nature-based tourism opportunities and enhancing our quality of life.

How You Can Help

By following this guide on trail planning and development, you and your group can help protect nature and offer high quality wilderness recreation opportunities. Careful planning will lessen the need for trail maintenance and highlight the best natural and recreational features of wilderness areas.

The Importance of Planning

A multi-step planning process for hiking trails in wilderness areas keeps everyone informed and moving in the same direction. It includes two opportunities for public consultation and ensures that trail planning and development is a fair and open process.

The process ensures that groups have the support of Nova Scotia Environment's Protected Areas staff, to provide advice and guidance and to help solve issues as they arise.

As a trail project proceeds, expertise and resources may be provided by partners from other government agencies, local economic development and recreation and tourism groups, professional trail builders, and the local pool of talented people who share your interest and passion.

Funding will likely be needed for the planning process for

- expertise for developing a trail development proposal and flagging trail alignment
- writing the trail construction plan
- materials and construction

Step 1 — Express your interest to NSE

If your group, organization, or municipality is interested in developing and maintaining a hiking trail in a wilderness area, the first step is to contact Nova Scotia Environment's regional protected areas coordinator. Be ready to describe your idea and to identify other groups who could play a role in trail development (sponsors, partners, etc.).

The regional coordinator will let you know if anyone else has expressed a similar interest, and whether the hiking trail project is consistent with management goals for the wilderness area.

If your idea has potential, the regional coordinator arranges to meet with your group. The meeting between your group and staff at Nova Scotia Environment provides a chance to discuss the wilderness area trail development process — and to do a "reality check" about your group's interests and abilities. This meeting is also a good time to share ideas about the proposed trail, review maps, and discuss recreational opportunities within the wilderness area.

Step 2 – Submit a trail concept letter

If NSE staff and your group are both enthusiastic about moving forward after your meeting, your group prepares and submits a written Trail Concept to the department. This one- or two-page letter

- outlines your group's vision for the trail system
- identifies potential partners
- confirms your group's commitment to working through the trail development process

If your Trail Concept is accepted, the department issues a Letter of Support to your group. This letter offers support in principle and identifies certain conditions to help direct the trail development process. The letter also provides information useful to your group for writing a formal Trail Development Proposal.

As you develop your Trail Concept, your group is encouraged to reach out to local Mi'kmaw communities to get an idea about the Mi'kmaw perspective, including any concerns and possible partnership on the project. Although early communication with Mi'kmaq is important, Nova Scotia Environment also has a legal duty to consult formally with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia. That will occur at a later step, if appropriate, once a formal proposal has been created.

Step 3 – Submit a trail development proposal

If your group agrees to proceed as outlined in the Letter of Support, the next step is to prepare a Trail Development Proposal. The document should highlight the regional significance and community benefits and provide detailed information on the

- envisioned routing
- relevant maps
- anticipated use (including fees/costs, if appropriate)
- infrastructure requirements
- priority actions
- timing

The document is reviewed by Protected Areas staff, who may ask for more information and/or changes.

At this stage, it is a good time for your group to begin exploring funding opportunities and other kinds of support from partners.



Step 4 – Seek feedback, adjust, resubmit

The planning process for developing trails in wilderness areas requires a minimum of two public consultations. Consultation helps ensure that all interested persons have an opportunity to learn about and provide input on the proposed trail. It also helps identify potential partners and gain wider support. The first consultation should take place before any work gets done “on the ground.”

After the first public and Mi'kmaq consultation, your group reviews the input and provides a summary to Nova Scotia Environment staff. You may also need to make adjustments to the Trail Development Proposal and resubmit it to the department.

NSE staff considers information collected from this first session and your final Trail Development Proposal to assess whether trail development should proceed and, if so, how.

About Public Consultation #1

Typically, the public consultation consists of an open house in the evening, organized and hosted by your group. Protected Areas staff will be available, mostly to answer questions broader in scope than the trail project. The open house session should be advertised to target both the local community and a broader audience.

Most of the open house should be for informal and unstructured discussion, supported by displays and/or written materials, including your Trail Development Proposal. A short presentation (15 to 20 minutes) is typically delivered jointly by your group and Protected Areas staff. Participants at the open house should be encouraged to record their comments and concerns on comment sheets for collection during or after the session, or by other means.

About Mi'kmaq Consultation (at the same time as Public Consultation)

As a result of Supreme Court of Canada decisions, the Province of Nova Scotia has a duty to consult with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia when considering decisions or actions that might adversely affect Mi'kmaq established or potential Aboriginal and treaty rights.

With support from the Nova Scotia Office of Aboriginal Affairs, Nova Scotia Environment will undertake formal consultation with the Mi'kmaq on the Trail Development Proposal, if appropriate. You may be asked to provide a presentation to the Mi'kmaq or additional information to aid in the formal consultation process. Feedback from this consultation may lead to changes to the proposed trail alignment, or may require archaeological work or other actions.

Step 5 – Sign a trail planning agreement

If department staff accepts your final proposal, your group is asked to sign a Trail Planning Agreement. This document provides the legal authority under the Wilderness Areas Protection Act for your group to start planning the trail “on the ground” by flagging initial trail alignment and writing a Trail Construction Plan. It does not authorize construction, maintenance, or operation of the trail. All activities must be carried out in accordance with the terms and conditions outlined in the agreement.

Step 6 – Submit a trail construction plan

Initial planning and flagging of the trail route or alignment is usually completed with assistance from an experienced hiking trail consultant. They can help you write a Trail Construction Plan that complements the Trail Development Proposal and provides specifics of the proposed alignment and design. The plan needs to outline construction standards, the schedule, and estimated costs, and include relevant maps. The plan will be helpful for fundraising for trail development.

Trail design must follow specific wilderness area trail standards, which are outlined in the information sheet Hiking Trail Standards for Wilderness Areas.

Protected Areas staff reviews the Trail Construction Plan and inspects the initial flagged alignment. Alterations to the trail alignment or plan may be required before the plan is approved for the second public consultation.

Well-planned trail alignment protects the environment and safety of users and also minimizes long-term maintenance.

Step 7 – Seek feedback, adjust, resubmit

After requested alterations to the alignment and Trail Construction Plan have been approved, a second public consultation session is required. This offers a final opportunity for input before construction begins.

About Public Consultation #2 and Mi'kmaq Consultation

The process, presentation, and advertisement of the second consultation should be similar to the first one. If formal consultation with the Mi'kmaq was initiated by Nova Scotia Environment, this process continues with a final opportunity for Mi'kmaq input.

Following public consultation, your group reviews the input and provides a summary to Nova Scotia Environment staff. Your group may also need to make any appropriate adjustments to the Trail Construction Plan and resubmit it to the department for consideration.



Step 8 – Enter into a trail management agreement

After NSE has reviewed and accepted your final Trail Construction Plan, you will be asked to enter into a Trail Management Agreement. This agreement is signed by both the Minister and your group. It allows your group to undertake activities that are required for trail development that would otherwise be prohibited by the Wilderness Areas Protection Act. This agreement formally defines responsibilities for each party related to construction, operation, and maintenance of the trail. It also covers financial and legal liability matters.

Your group or organization may need to become a legal entity, such as a society under the Societies Act, before entering into this agreement. A sample Trail Management Agreement is available for review.

Step 9 – Construct the trail

Using the approved Trail Construction Plan and operating under the conditions of the Trail Management Agreement, you can now begin to build the hiking trail.

Nova Scotia Environment staff monitors construction throughout the process and conducts a final inspection before the official trail opening, with a focus on safety and environmental protection.

Step 10 – Open the trail

Once inspections and any adjustments are done, the trail can be opened to the public.

A trail opening can be an exciting event and provide an opportunity to celebrate your success and thank everyone who contributed.

After the trail has been opened for public use, you must fulfill ongoing trail maintenance and management responsibilities as assigned in the Trail Management Agreement – in cooperation with Nova Scotia Environment and other partners.

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