Owning Up: Building Local Ownership in the Trail-based Recreation Economy

Josh Wilson, Executive Director, Barkeater Trails Alliance
BETA builds, maintains and advocates for a system of community and backcountry trails for ski touring and mountain biking in the greater High Peaks region of the Adirondack Park.
We Are Here
How we do what we do:

Volunteers:
Over 2500 hours of [mostly local] volunteer labor contributed annually

Professional Trail Crews:
For the past 2 years, BETA has fielded a paid, summer trail crew to construct new trails thanks to private funding

Partnerships:
With NYSDEC, other trail organizations, municipalities, businesses, and schools
Who uses our trails?

• Locals & Visitors
• Kids & Families
• Mountain bikers
• Backcountry skiers
• Hikers
• Trail Runners
• Dog walkers
Our “back-in-the-day” story

• For years mountain biking was not taken seriously by local governments or land managers in the Adk Park

• Misinformation about the impacts of bikes on trails and “anti-MTB” sentiments were common

• The Park lacked quality riding opportunities and therefore the MTB community was small and scattered

• Without a dedicated advocacy group, motivation to change policies or the way mountain biking was managed was low, and resources were non-existent
Early efforts

• **1990s:** Tim Tierney - yes, *that* Tim Tierney - as trails director for the ADK Mountain Club, was advocating for MTB trails in what is now the BETA region...but stakeholder and NYS state support was not there.

• **2000-2005:**
  – Adirondack Mountain Biking Initiative (AMBI) was formed to promote MTB opportunities across the Park.
  – It provided a blueprint to establish towns as hubs for MTB trails.
  – Primary goal was economic stimulus.
  – AMBI had some success and created excitement around the economic potential of MTB.
  – Trails systems were planned and developed in the SW corner of the Park and AMBI was an early driver of the trails in Wilmington.
What was Missing?

Here's how to develop the Adirondacks into a leading Northeast mountain biking destination.  

by Tim Blumenthal - Executive Director,  
International Mountain Bicycling Association (circa 2001)

1. Excellent trail maps and info  
2. Abundant trails for cyclists of all abilities.  
3. Great views  
4. Hut-to-hut and/or inn-to-inn riding possibilities.  
5. Great photos for brochures, magazines and newspapers.  
6. Offer press trips to promote the area  
7. Accurate trail signs  
8. **Durable, sustainable trails**  
9. Other recreational activities & vacation elements that appeal to mountain bikers  
10. Develop package deals that appeal to mountain bikers
Early efforts *(continued)*

- AMBI paid less attention to building local ownership of its long-term goals.

- Much positive work was done to foster a few riding “destinations,” but lacked significant local “buy in” from mountain bikers who would need to maintain the trails once built.

- After the founders left the area AMBI lost momentum and became essentially defunct.

**AMBI had the right idea,**

**but further momentum needed 2 things:**

- A more narrow focus on a single community or region of the Park

- An established core group of local individuals in the area with the ways and means to build and maintain the trails to the highest standard over the long-term
Opportunity for Action

• **2005:** NYS approves the Wilmington Wild Forest UMP, includes the Park’s first purpose-built MTB trail network w/ 20+ miles of trails

• **2005-2009:** Trail building begins with ADK Mtn Club, local bikers, and strong support from the Town of Wilmington

• **2009:** Handful of mountain bikers from the region organize to build & maintain trails, form the Barkeater Trails Alliance into grassroots volunteer army
Engaging Local Volunteers

- Motivate, train and guide local trail users to take care of the trails they use
- Adoption model that works
- Community-level organization & friendly rivalries
- Leverage volunteer efforts to add value and ROI
- Give volunteers a voice in decision making
Building Community

- Events (big & small) that showcase and celebrate the trails and show appreciation for the people behind them

- Trails that contribute to quality of life and identity of the community

- Welcoming new arrivals and visitors as potential volunteers, ambassadors, supporters and friends

- Mountain bike & ski outings in our region are usually also a social gathering
Creating Ambassadors

• When locals are proud of their trails & knowledgeable about the work required to build/maintain them, it shows

• Visitor experiences improve when welcomed into the “local scene”

• Spirit of the “Adk Guide” is strong in our region – locals want to share what they love with visitors

• Start them young!
Fostering Partnerships

• Collaborative trail development w/ other trail organizations, land trusts, private landowners, municipalities, schools

• Relationships w/ local businesses that have stake in the success of the trail-based recreation economy

• Gaining legitimacy and driving policy change with public land managers
The Impact of BETA’s “Local” Approach to Trail Development & Advocacy

- More & better trails, now 75+ miles on the ground w/ the expansion of BETA into a 4th community (Elizabethtown)
- Policy changes
- Government support
- Positive economic activity & new driver of tourism for the region
- Local business “buy in”
- Increased participation in trail riding
Then & Now
If we’re being honest...

• In many regards, BETA was lucky.

• We started with a fully approved, mostly “yet-to-be-built” trail plan and strong “institutional knowledge” about trail building & stewardship

• We never have had to “battle” land managers, agencies, or other user groups in order to gain access to public lands

• We never have had to fight to preserve access to trails that people had been riding on for years.

• We benefitted early on from the presence of an eager and willing community of trail users willing to get their hands dirty...and landowners and municipalities who were open-minded about trail development
That said, some takeaway questions...

• Are you being realistic about trail development goals?

• Do you have all the pieces in place for successful implementation and long-term stewardship?

• Is the trail-using community on-board? Is the host community on-board?

• What can you reasonably accomplish with the volunteers, knowledge and resources you have? Can you get more of either?

• Why are you doing this? For the benefit of the community? For tourism and economic impact? The “why” and “for who” questions matter when it comes time to build and maintain trails to high standard.
Final Word

The primary reason BETA has been so successful is the unwavering commitment of local residents who are willing to give up their evenings, weekends, and first-born children in order to create a high-quality trail system that primarily benefits them.

When 40 people show up for a volunteer trail day – very few of them are there because they are interested in growing the outdoor recreation tourism economy of the region – and that’s okay!

Supporting and growing the local trail community will lead to great trail systems that will in turn lead to something that attracts visitors and economic activity. It rarely works in the opposite direction.
Thank You!

Josh Wilson, Executive Director
Barkeater Trails Alliance (BETA)

www.BETAtrails.org
BETAtrails@gmail.com
518-523-1365