

ZEN



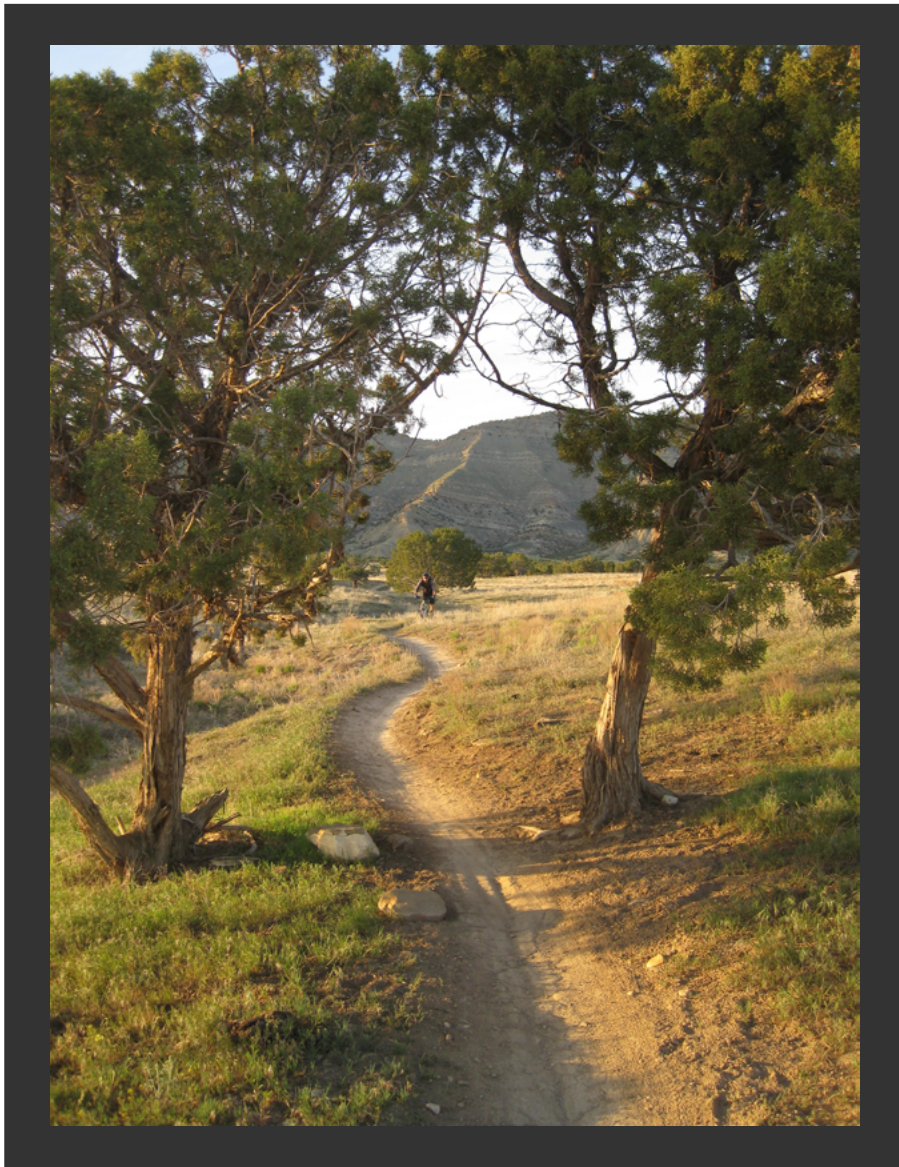
**and the art of
trail maintenance**

Nick Bowman

Zen ...

and the Art of Trail Maintenance

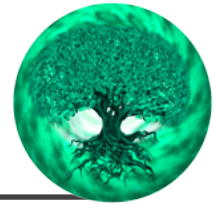
(along with some other tips on advocating for totally radical trails)



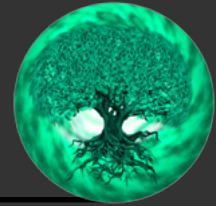
Nicolas Bowman

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Introduction: At the Trailhead



To strive for something better for others is to live an existence of greater significance.

Photo: Slickrock Trailhead, Moab, Utah

A contagious and obsessive dedication it can be. A dedication, to a lifestyle of riding bicycles on dirt trails. Sometimes this passion extends to an obsession to shaping dirt in ways that bring joy, challenge and cosmic flow to a rider. By that I mean, that moment of Zen on a trail when the rider gets deep into their concentration; that feeling of oneness; the singularity. It's that moment of Zen when the entire world melts away and your focus is 100% on the task at hand. Riding a bike on single track is but one way to enter "the zone" and focus ones' thought utterly. Surely art, meditation, sport and other recreational activities can get you there, where you want to be and yet for those of us addicted to mountain biking, single track is the most amazing way to reach "the moment".

This is why I love trails. I am lucky, because I can be in the Zen zone when I am designing and building trails and of course when riding them. It's a whole world to me. Sometimes the challenge is to stop thinking about the trail and just ride! Personally I can spend hours on a single descending turn, shaping, packing, slapping; moulding dirt to my will to ensure optimal flow and speed; speed that is perfect to set the rider up for the next section. Looking back and seeing the perfectly moulded shape, with its lovely curves and smooth lines that is somehow a perfect blend of human creation and nature. When the shapes are right, then the trail blends back into nature over time leaving only a thin line of sweet single track.

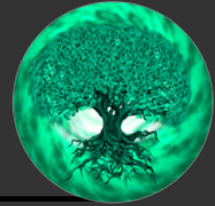
Now, as you have chosen to read this humble text, I can only assume that you too are totally engrossed in creating awesome single track. This is my first major attempt to share my unique perspective on trails and trail development. If this is your path then the trail can take you to many places you would not have imagined yourself to be in. Gorgeous places: forests; mountains; rivers; lakes; quaint villages and awesome people. Once you have started down this path there is no turning back because all other possible past times will pale in comparison; so much so that you can no longer enjoy any other pursuit to this level. If this is your calling!

The benefits of trails to communities are clear to behold. Through this calling we can make a significant difference to this world.

I personally see this pursuit in the greater light of helping communities, encouraging kids to be active, making life more fun for more cool people and through this process I am working with others to save this beautiful planet. Trails make life better, help people to learn about nature and ultimately help to protect beautiful places as the recreational and tourism value of those places becomes an economic driver that can no longer be ignored. This is the way. This is the journey. This is the trail!

And so we begin....

Early Days



From the tiny Eucalyptus seed grows the mighty gum tree.
With gnarly roots and girth so great, it reaches for the sky with limbs of
knotted wood and twisting bark.
Under a relentless sun, in the heat and dry of the desert plains they still
grow strong, while in the mountains they can thrive, despite the fire of
the relentless summer or snow and ice of the winter.
From such a little seed something so great has grown.

Photo: Snow Gum, Thredbo, Snowy Mountains, Australia

In the beginning, there is always an idea, a concept blurted from the boisterous, often during the banter that is associated with mountain bike rider group chats. On line, off line, face to face even; possibly sitting by the fire sipping a brew after a long days riding, or talking it up on a snack break on the side of a hill, buzzed up on adrenaline with limited oxygen supplies to the brain, brainstorming of an almost psychedelic nature begins to materialise. Wacky thoughts become words, words become ideas, ideas become concepts and concepts become plans. Very big plans. Very, very BIG plans! Certainly, radical thoughts can prevail, anything is possible and good humour allows the impossible to become the new norm. “What if we had a trail link from there to there?” Or even “What if we could ask the land owner to give us permission to build a track on that property. Then we could build the most insane trails.....” And as you well know, the banter can continue long into the night.

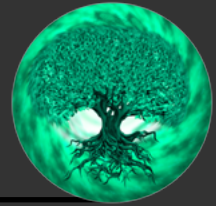
This spark of creativity will lead to many questions, lots of hard work and maybe some super sweet single track. The quest for legitimate mountain bike access has begun.

All good deeds start with an idea. Ideas are worth little without the fortitude to make them a reality. Getting started is crucial. The start maybe small, based on a flippant conversation over a few brews, but where you take it from there is entirely up to you. The potential is real, but the ultimate destiny of the idea is in your hands. If you can see the end result; visualise it in all its facets, then it can materialise. If you truly believe; it can be! However, you cannot expect others to see that of which you have caught a glimpse, a beautiful future. No, you will have to motivate, activate and convince those around you and anyone who will listen. You will need to use every medium at your disposal and work towards formal grant applications, approvals and funding. Consensus is the true test. Getting your ideas on paper is essential. Trail Plans can help officials to visualise what you can visualise, and even with all your positive energy and enthusiasm, it is highly likely that you have a battle on your hands. A wise friend once told me that we trail builders often need to bring officials, communities and even the riders themselves “kicking and screaming into the future!” (Glen Jacobs).

As a result, it is a long path and you will need to take tiny baby steps; so pace yourself. Choose your battles wisely because some project hurdles can drain all your time and energy while more accessible and appropriate opportunities slip by.

At this modest beginning it is about compiling thoughts and ideas into formal plans, application and approvals. Make maps; find examples of similar projects in Australia or abroad. Build your case. Talk to land managers, politicians and bike industry reps in your area. You need to build consensus for your idea. And naturally, you will need help, so recruit advocacy warriors with the fortitude and skill to see it through to a suitable milestone or worthwhile conclusion.

Think Big



Think big, build big! The only real limitation to your ideas is you!
Whatever you can imagine can be real.

Photo: Somewhere in Mitcham, by Sam Roberts

Before you get stuck into the nitty gritty of making a trail project successful, I have a little bit of motivational advice to share. I know this; you must think big, build big! The only real limitation to your ideas is you! Often what holds us back is our fears; our “programming”, our upbringing. I’m talking about negative traits most of us carry about from time to time. Shed those shackles and think anew, for yourself, of what must truly become a reality. Whatever you can imagine can be real.

Your big ideas may be out-there or difficult for others to understand. They may be ambitious or expensive to build. Whatever the case someone has to go for the maximum, and that person may as well be you. Be bold, talk up, make these great ideas heard!

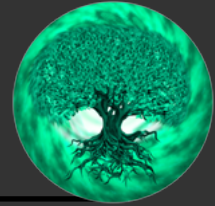
From my experience, with trail development projects; from conception to completion, it is always important to push the boundaries or constraints of the project as far as they can go. Always ask for more trail than you want, because it is extremely likely that your requests will be cut back in the face of community consultation and compromise. So then your plans will be cut back to a model that is closer to what you think will work or what is needed, then that is a win. In all cases I think trail projects should be sensitive to their immediate landscape or ecosystem, although I have very little sympathy for the arguments of selfish citizens, bean counters or risk management representatives who oppose trail projects on bureaucratic grounds and the like. Bigger that for an idea. We are advocating for awesome new lifestyles that are in harmony with nature.

Additionally I believe, you have to push the boundary of what is possible. This is the only way to achieve something that is not obsolete on the day of the trail opening. Bike technology, consumer tastes, cycling fashions and rider ability are evolving very quickly, while approvals for trails and construction timelines are often glacial in pace. Thus it is essential to be innovative in order to anticipate what riders will want in 2 or 3 years’ time, maybe more. This is a significant challenge for mere mortals. I have often said while on the trail “perfection is god’s realm”. We mere mortals are bound to do the best job we can in the most efficient way.

We have no time for perfection. Get it done as best you can as soon as you can. But never forget, if we make it right the first time, then that is better for everyone.

So while you may not be a God, you have to think like one. A trail god. Think of big lines, but also how to get big numbers. In many places around the world there is a huge need for gentle gateway trails that encourage more to ride. If you want a chairlift, go for it. Sure why not. But plan something for everyone for the ultimate smiles and repeat visitation. Some destinations can specialise in areas of the MTB market but for most of us, we need to cover all bases to get the numbers to pay the bills and furthermore, justify to the political powers that be, that trails are awesome and the more bums on the seats of bicycles means healthier, happier communities and in many cases new tourism product.

Planning and Design Stuff



Getting ideas onto paper will always be difficult, but it is a necessary step in making those ideas live and breath.

Photo: Old Man's Valley, Hornsby, Australia

From my perspective there are four main levels to planning and designing trails:

1. Strategic state or regional planning.

(Nickname: Boardroom Level). This level of planning is needed to determine where trails can be developed and designed. It may be the pointy end of obtaining access for a legitimate trail. Where you get access for trails can depend on conservation requirements, foreseeable budgets and or community issues. At this stage it is important to answer questions like; “which parks or areas can accommodate trails?” “Which types of trail users are compatible with the core values of the reserve or land parcel?” Moreover it is necessary to determine strategic links be they political, social or geographic. Establish whether or not the trail network can accommodate competitive events. “How will events fit into the landscape and is it possible to provide staging and event areas, and what level of supporting tourism facilities are in place or needed in the future. This is the high level thinking. It’s very much related to larger projects and the decision making processes that exist in the upper echelons of our democracy. However, similar processes take place whether planning for single public park or a whole state. Whether you are talking to local government representatives or State Ministers, it is only the scale that varies. Not the nature of the decision making process. So to get the very best trail planned in the best place it can be, then trail advocates need to get involved in the decision making process at all levels for all levels. And while you might ask yourself, “why would I want to deal with all those politics, I just wanna dig some trails”, then it’s time to recognise you may not be the best person to be involved in the negotiations through these steps, so look to recruit someone who can clearly see the big picture and preferably someone who has the time to attend a never-ending array of committee meetings and site visits.

Stage 1 complete: Bravo, you have in principle permission to plan your dream trail or slightly compromised version of your dream trail, so celebrate. (Party number 1)

2. Trail planning.

(Nickname: Helicopter Level) Now you can get down to some serious trail planning and design. Get out the topographic maps, aerial photos, and any other info about the land parcel. For trail freaks this is a fun time, drafting lines on maps and playing with trail concepts. But it is absolutely critical to get outside and spend time on the site when working towards a design or concept for a specific bike park or trail network (See Chapter 7). At this time it would be valuable to locate and verify the feasibility of parking areas, lookouts, and iconic trail features. Furthermore, it is advisable to spend time on detail such as trail ink potential and how trails can link to connect riding areas or provide safe access for riders to riding areas. Predominantly we are talking about the trail loops, trail junctions, signs, trail ratings, also direction of trail flow and car parks, trail heads and toilets. Essential facilities to minimise the impacts of trail riding and visitation, but also to ensure the riders (and customers) have a very good time!

Stage 2 complete: Now you pass to the next level, and your trail plan is awarded penultimate approval and funding. (Party number 2)

3. Trail alignment and final approval.

(Nickname: Red Tape Plateau) From here it is now really important to get out on site and divine the flow lines. Finding good alignments is necessary at this point. They may be functional lines, with little room to move around trail planning constraints, however you need to incorporate “some awesome” (Troy Rarick). Even if it is just a little bit of awe inspiring stone work in an urban wasteland. This stage often requires some luck or magic, call it what you want. In areas where there are less constraints the trail designer needs to spend more time on site finding not only alignments that work, but also alignments that link the very best character of the landscape it is passing thorough. This then needs to be documented and GPS located onto plans and construction. Absolutely; this is a very detailed part of the process involving numerous officials and stakeholders. Ideally you will have your planned trail alignments flagged so they can be inspected by experts in various fields such as ecology, hydrology, engineering, risk analysis and heritage.

This is when the final on ground approvals will take place. You may have to adjust the planned trail lines to accommodate patches of rare plants for example, and some proposals may not be given the green light at all. Nevertheless, it is important to be rigorous because any short cuts at this level will come back to bite you later. With this level of detail, construction plans and tender documentation can be produced quite easily.

Stage 3 complete: Go on, have another party!

4. Trail construction and shaping.

(Nickname: Trail Guru Crescendo) The final touches to new trail still need design decisions, on the spot problem solving. You may be working on a flagged alignment but not everything is as it seems. For most projects it is difficult to know what is under the ground until you start digging and then the trail design process can be quite intense at the ground level. Always while building trails we must remember desires and needs of the ultimate trail user. Or rather most typical trail user of the trail we are building. This often over looked detail affects decision making for obstacles, turns and jumps. And we are not just building this trail for ourselves now, are we?

Stage 4 complete: Trail on the ground, ride it, have fun and party!

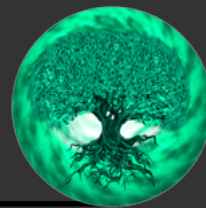
Other important aspects of the trail planning process to consider may be natural factors like terrain, vegetation, local MTB culture, local trail culture and community sentiment. Obviously there are many, many factors that affect your planning; far too many to list here. But I want to talk about a couple of factors.

Terrain will dictate the type of trail; nice deep dirt on gentle slopes makes for great flow trails and good beginner experiences. Steep and rocky terrain means the trails will be more technical. Steep country means your options can be limited. The reality is that everywhere is a bit different and the main aim is to ensure the trail lies lightly on the landscape and minimises any long term impacts.

From a riders perspective we want to maximise fun and flow. To generate hero experiences, so we try to include the most fun and flow as possible in any type of given terrain. This may require engineering type solutions to build across wet areas and rocky ground.

At the end of the day; it's a real balancing act to get it all right. Developing a "framework" (Daffyd Davis) for decision making and allocating resources can really help to keep it all on track!

Something for Everyone



Trails for all ages and all abilities.

Photo: Lynton Free Ride Area, Mitcham, Australia

A mature, holistic and inclusive view of public open space fosters an approach to trail provision that is multi layered. Open space is in short supply in many places, in urban areas in particular. This situation creates some complexity in how those spaces are used and or shared. It's certainly been a challenge for core MTB riders to accept that new Australian bike parks are not filled with "Red Bull Rampage" style features. That new bike parks and trails near the city are inclusive. This is often a prerequisite for tax payer funded facilities in the centre of suburbia. Elite facilities are not the prime driver for MTB trail development in Australia nor is it the style of trail that will yield economic return on its own in our smaller markets. Sure an iconic trail experience that captures the heart of the MTB community is essential for an Aussie trail destination, but it will never make up the bulk of the network. Nor should it. The bigger the network the more diversity it should have.

Speaking from experience, making mistakes seems to be part of my learning style. Learning to build trails for other people to ride, all types of people was a steep learning curve for me. My particular story goes a little like this...

When I was a younger man, blinded somewhat by my passion to build challenging trails, I had a hard time getting my head around the concept on inclusivity. I was driven by my own selfish desire really. My boss at the time, Peter Solly (then CEO of Bicycle South Australia) scolded me while we were building "Immaculate Compaction" in the early days of the Fox Creek Trails; "if my young girls can't ride these trails then what are we doing this for?!!!". At the time we were still building trails by hand and it was extremely difficult to build "gateway trails" on the steep side-slopes, but now, with the edition of the new dozer cut the "EasyRider" trail which has a wide bench and easy gradients, anyone can try riding in the forest. As a result the user numbers have rocketed. On top of this, the trail has the support of all major stakeholders, MTB clubs, including local council, state government and the local winery. It's a win win for sure! With this kind of support the trail network is being taken a whole lot more seriously and future funding is much more likely than it was if we were still focussing on catering for more skilled riders.

In principle: “Dude! It’s not all about you!”

So drop the ego.... Check that baggage at the trailhead and start making fun stuff. As my mate Tony Boone said. We should aim to cater for “All ages, and all abilities”. Not necessarily on the same trail, but somewhere in the mix. Just be inclusive. It won’t kill you.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance to understand we need trails for beginners, maybe lots of them. It provides a gateway into the “sport” and a way to boost participation. This helps to justify investment in broader trails networks, by governments and corporate entities. Then we can begin to consider advanced trails in appropriate places.

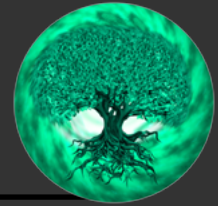
By providing inclusive trails for everyone, we are in a way, helping to shape a better world. By getting more kids on bikes and in the bush we teach them about nature and their place in it. There are so many positives! Nature Play is a big topic now and set to grow in the immediate future. Trail networks can facilitate the implementation of this new paradigm in education systems for reconnecting our society with its origins.

Another important point for inclusivity is the aging population in Australia. Old people still want to have fun too you know. So why exclude people with inappropriately difficult trails. This market is only set to grow over the next 20 years, and this group will also help to justify trails and ultimately source funding. E-bikes will help make this happen, but I don’t think anyone is really sure what is about to happen with E-bikes in relation to, trails and land management. From a purely selfish perspective maybe it’s a good thing that I will still be able to check out some single track when I am 80 with a little E-bike assistance on some sweet flowing gravity trails! In some instances you can develop a fun, possibly generic flow trail for the masses, by building many lines into one trail. In this case you would include lots of options all of which cater to different skill levels and bikes. Not one trail for everyone. No. But one trail for many someones. But this situation is the exception, in most instances trail networks should provide the wide variety of trails and trail experiences for a wide variety of people from a range of different back grounds. Through this method, and the “Stacked Loop Network” concept for trail networks (IMBA), then each

trail can have its specific level of challenge. Where each trail can have its' own individuality and be rated accordingly.

Through these processes and techniques you can cater for all type of trail users and make sure everyone finds the trail they are looking for.

Making it Happen



No one else is going to do it for you...so it's up to you to make your dreams come true.

Photo: Eurovision Trail, Bartagunyah, Melrose, Australia

Dreams come true for those that work towards a goal that is divine and pure. Positive visualisation really works. I am proof of that. One example would be from back in the mid-1990s, sitting around a camp fire on a riding trip to the Flinders Ranges, I told my mates that I wanted to get paid to build trails, to take people out on tours and start a career in MTB. As is the case with most big ideas, most of those lads found this concept amusing, but also exciting at the same time. I then kept saying it for some years afterward and no one really took me seriously. This didn't really phase me because for some reason I could see that this was going to be a big thing. That the future for mountain biking in Australia was going to be a whole new industry and mainstream recreational pursuit.

After much dreaming, talking, University and plenty of riding, 2002 came around and I was getting paid to work on some of the most important trail projects in South Australia and arguably the whole nation, as those early projects helped to set a precedent for other states to move forward on their MTB trail projects. So when I talk about focussing on your goals and dedicating yourself too something, I think I might just know what I am talking about. As surprising as that may be to many! And as I have said before on many occasion to my critics. "I didn't get here by accident!"

So from what these lessons have taught me, essentially, there is no substitute for persistence, for pure stubborn will and determination to make something happen. To go against the tide and push for changes that will improve the current situation. To see well beyond today, and into the future, possibly a vision not shared with others. A glimpse of what might be. To not take no for an answer.

Metaphorically; it's as if you are drawn to build a trail where no one has been before, lighting the way for others to follow, to see, to feel. Whatever your chosen field, you know your calling and the call it is strong.

Back to trails and I think it needs to be said that trail access is political. You need to engage in this political process, on all levels. This reality is the polar opposite of why many folks like to ride bikes on dirt in the first place. But someone has to do it. And that someone might just be you. Essentially, no one else really has to believe. It's you.

What do you believe? Now train your thoughts on the prize and what could be. Then it is a matter of taking the necessary steps to get to the prize. Not all of those steps are pleasant, I can tell you. In this case you need to endure the most tedious of challenges; the committee!

All those meetings, someone must attend. Time and time again, the same old people, and I mean old people, who have problems with something, someone or a somehow. Who have some reason for not sharing the land or the trails with the youth of today. Maybe this is harsh. Maybe it is fair. All I am saying is that you need a truck load of patience and composure to make your way through this mine field of meetings and paperwork and still maintain some level of sanity. So prepare yourself. The battlefield is waiting for you!

In all seriousness, what I can share is that it has been my experience that you need to show your face at these meetings, these discussions which at the time seem so futile, to keep plugging away, to eventually get somewhere. You need to be there when the mood changes or a land manager finally starts to see some benefit to these trails. You need to be there when the penny drops so you can help to guide future decision making sensibly.

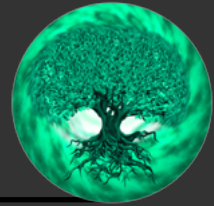
Besides the serious committees and club meetings, make sure you spend some quality time with land managers and government planners. Most of these folks are very reasonable and want to help facilitate positive change. When you sit down to have a beer (or coffee) with them, to find common ground, ideas start to gel and dreams start to seem possible. “Sometimes the biggest decisions are made at the pub!” (Peter Solly).

Whatever you do, the advice of Tim Blumenthal (IMBA, Bikes Belong) is priceless during this process. To promote ecologically sustainable MTB that can rescue small communities through eco-tourism, we must maintain “relentless optimism”.

To inspire real change for the better, in any given field, you may be required to take some risks. Serious risks of various kinds. You may need to bend or even break the rules to force cultural change or new ways of

doing things, but certainly, do not be afraid to fail. The alternatives for not trying are worse. Sometimes you just have to be the dozer, and push on through.

Spitting Chips



Every now and then you have to throw a tantrum.
It might seem prickly at first, but it can be for the greater good.

Photo: A Banksia, somewhere is Australia

Well there comes a time in any project or production where you, as the driver of the project will need to have a tantrum. In Australia, we call it “spitting chips”. This was the advice from Christian Haag, the current and long standing CEO at Bicycle SA. “Never underestimate the power of a well-directed tantrum to get things moving.” (Christian Haag)

Basically, in the face of great adversity you need to state confidently: “It simply must be so!”

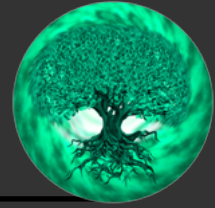
This advice may go against everything you have heard about consultation and diplomacy, however in this situation as trail advocate you are most likely, the antagonist, standing up against the hulking might of the bureaucracy. This tactic is important, if only as a last resort because there is always great danger that the bean counters will be entertaining the most meagre of thoughts; a philosophy of mediocrity as such. Lame ambitious essentially; based on decisions made in fear. So you, yes you, need to take that next step; that final shove to get an idea over the line. It may be an impassioned speech reminding the aristocracy of the freedom they enjoyed in their youth and more; it maybe the assembly and recruitment of a large number of rowdy cyclists whereby you storm the local council chambers. But once this action is initiated... Don't hold back. Don't hold back at all. Tell it like it is! Loudly!

In many regions and even whole states, I have seen government officials back away from promises as soon as the noise is turned down by riders and turned up by anti-trail lobbyists. As soon as the advocates cease to be a problem, then bureaucrats will cease to look for solutions. You must maintain the pressure, the presence and the pestilence. Unleash you inner civil activist!

What you should also know is that you can't always play by the rules either. In many instances, I have seen conservation groups, with their holier than though attitude, flout the convention of good behaviour and appropriate consultation to stop bikes being allowed into public places; using really dirty tricks to discredit professionals who they disagree with and going so far as to make matters personal. I am not saying we should follow this example, but I am hinting that sometimes you may need to be

a really annoying agitator to help end a status quo. So in this instance, you must fight fire with fire. Be the bad cop, but make sure your good cop is ready to pounce at the appropriate time.

Time on the Land



Not until you are outside, will you see the essence of nature,
its' beauty, glory and biorhythmic patterns.
To blend with nature, you must know it.

Photo: O'Halloran Hill Recreation Park, South Australia

The trail planning process will often start in an office, in front of a computer or at a conference table, discussing options and looking at topographic maps. This is a reasonably good place to start. Topographic maps are extremely useful in the trail design process, in fact they are almost essential. Topos will help you to produce conceptual trail alignments and networks on paper to help facilitate negotiations, discussions and the necessary approvals. However, at some point you are going to need to spend some significant time on site to ground truth your conceptual trails in order to test whether or not they can actually work and still be fun.

Before the real, on ground trail alignment design takes place, it is important to check out the area. Wander around and get a feel for the place. Control points or natural features of interest need to be established from the very beginning. Some ruins or other historical features may also add to the trail experience. There is a wide variety of natural or heritage elements that will enhance the overall look and feel of your trail; little things and big things. It might be a view, an overlook or even a funky tree stump. Maybe a billabong or a waterfall; these are the dynamic features that not only make your trail more photogenic but also establish positive control points for designing a trail. These positive control points, once integrated into the trail will help to guide trail users as well as keep them on the trail. Even a well-built berm can work as positive focal points for the trail. You really want to show off the best the area has to offer and from a recreation management perspective keep the users on the trail.

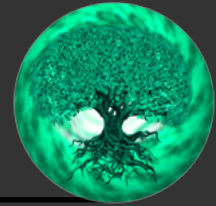
With all that in mind: Take some time; time to absorb the beauty of the area and get a feel for it. No one will give it to you. You must take it, or make it. Managers and bean counters will never understand why you need to sit and ponder for 30 mins or a whole day, just so you can feel the essence of the terrain and visualise the most appropriate trail alignment. To design a trail that blends with nature, which lies lightly on the land, the trail designer must be “at one” with the subject matter, the canvas of this new work of art. This is the kind of trail alignment that will bring the greatest rewards for the trail users and the land in which it lies. I feel pretty strongly about this and I find this approach helps when presented with the ongoing challenges that arise and there is a need for some “guidance” or “understanding”. Gut feeling can really help to get through tough design decisions.

There have been times. The odd occasion; a certain feeling tells when you are out in the bush, all isolated and alone, that the trail cannot go here. Everything is against you. And it's just not meant to be. The rocks shelves, the massive trees, the nasty sharp plants. Just plain old bad vibes man. Listen to your gut. Always. Follow the guidance of nature. Best not to fight it in any pursuit, and definitely not when trying to build a long lasting trail.

I can imagine that some folks may call this holistic notion a whole load of hocus pocus. But I am very much of the mindset that the trail will be there for a long time and it needs to be in the right place the first time. I don't like to fight the forces of nature to make a trail. Yep; I can be a pretty big hippy most of the time and this is my life's work so I feel very connected to the initial crafting and design of a trail. Sometimes, the land talks to me, tells me where the trail will work best, but I have to listen. I need time to listen. And that is what I recommend.

If you can make the time to listen, and are lucky you will hear the inner voice that guides your decisions from the macro to micro level of trail design. This is a good thing. Call it sub conscious, intuition or coincidence, the result is the same. It will feel right. Most importantly of all is the fact that you will only get one chance at this. You will only get so much time on the ground before you need to commit to an alignment and make it work. Just don't rush. Enjoy the moment and spend some quality time to feel and imagine the best trail possible.

Dig it Yo!



Persistent obsessive sculpting of the dirt creates the most memorable trails.

Photo: Another part of Mitcham, by Sam Roberts

Oh yeah, this is the fun part. All the endless approvals, meetings, talking, reporting and planning should be done by now. Now it is time to focus on the task at hand. To get down and to get dirty! Immerse yourself in the now and feel the “flow”. Construction can be a long time coming and then over pretty quickly so I suggest you enjoy it to the max while it is happening.

Primarily, this stage must be a creative process. Art or construction; engineering or feeling; personally I see trail building as using both hemispheres of the brain. If it’s done right. Just be sure to ask yourself, what makes a better trail. Experiment with the dirt. What works where and how. What is the look and feel you are seeking. Who will be the ultimate user of the trail. These are all factors that you need to keep “front of mind” during the construction process. Without discipline is easy to keep falling back to building trail features that you like rather than to provide what is stipulated or required at the site. Stay vigilant and keep ego out of it.

To me, every place and landscape is different and I feel pretty strongly that the trail should reflect this unique element, by being unique itself. Through this process, the trail will naturally be more sensitive to the intermediate surrounds. And this is what helps us to achieve that illusive concept of “sustainability”.

As a trail builder it is important to visit new places and try new trails. One should never grow complacent. Research and development is always required. We need to see how other areas, groups and communities are getting trails on the ground; to share ideas and learn from each other. It is also important to reflect on the consistent theme that landscape and terrain will dictate trail feeling and flow. Rock is one easy example. No rock and good soil with good drainage means happy days as a trail builder. Rocky hillsides and outcrops may provide trail character and solid tread, but it is more challenging in terms of trail design and construction.

On my travels, looking at trails in many places, it is great to see originality that works and is still fun for visitors. Certainly, it is very cool that different areas have evolved differently in terms of trail development to reflect their immediate environments. This is why it is an art form; it’s a form of

expression. An interactive showcase of the surrounds, embracing it, enhancing it, enhancing everything, enhancing the expression, the interaction with nature.

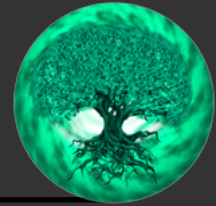
So ask yourself: “What is your area about, what is different”. What local trail building materials are there? What is the local characteristic that makes for great trails? Rock, sturdy logs, what? How will you interpret the landscape? You may need to let it flow a little and just go with it. Start digging and do it. Let it happen. Sometimes the feeling is stronger than the original plan. It is worthwhile being flexible and open minded during to construction so that you as the trail builder can accept new ideas and features as the full situation plays out and you get to know the area better! That’s a key point. Deep into any trail project you will have sniffed out certain features and patch types for interesting trail. You will be starting to know the place intimately.

Choosing the construction techniques is likely to be determined in the planning process, however different techniques will yield different results. Some machines are not suited to particular areas, for instance, a trail dozer, such as the Sutter 500, is not going to be appropriate in extremely rocky areas. Moreover, the use of mini excavators or teams of people in open, undulating terrain is an extremely tedious process and not very efficient in my humble opinion. So it is best to pick the construction techniques that are suited to your terrain and budget. Just keep an open mind and go with your gut feeling, because you will encounter strong opinions and loud voices. The right advice will feel right.

There is no one size fits all. Absolutely, it is fun to innovate with shapes and styles, even flavours of the trail. Creativity is essential in order to give birth to something truly amazing and long lasting. Naturally it will be important to make sure a trail works before you open the trail. This is where trail testing comes into play. Certainly, highly experienced professional trail builders may not need to test a trail with a bike to know that it is working as intended, but for most of us, it is an important part of the process. It can really help to hone your trail design, the final shapes and flow. And of course ensure that the trail is safe for the majority.

Once you are happy with the flow line of the trail; I strongly recommend that you compact that line with one method or another. This final step in construction will ensure your trail is robust and ready for public consumption, but also that the trail will be used that way it needs to be used.

Know the Flow: Some Bike Specifics



“One good shape leads to another; perfect lines in harmony with nature; that is what I seek!”

Photo: Greener Pastures, Melrose, Australia

Sometimes it's hard to know, exactly what needs to be created for your trail users, but once you get started the vision of the trail can solidify.

Not all landscapes are conducive to fast flowing trails. Forcing flow onto a landscape does not seem right somehow. The trail should reflect the landscape and take people to cool places. Sometimes that means trails are a little tighter and narrower, where good flow is harder to find!

In recent times a lot of emphasis has been on machine built trails in order to get good value for money and solid bench trail construction. That makes sense, certainly, but some of the best features are hand built. Even on machine built trails, builders should take time to enhance the character, strength and aesthetic of sections or features of the trail and the whole trail corridor in general. It makes a for a much higher quality trail experience.

From my perspective, flow on a mountain bike is part of the sensation of speed on single track due to the narrow corridor through the bush. The sensation of speed is enhanced, sped up somehow. But where the fun comes in is through the sensation of floating over large rollers or when you are diving into a corner and its gets heavy on the G! (Gravity, G-forces). The action of gliding from left to right, up and down, side to side, up in the air, landing smooth and then hooking around a well-built corner is not only fun, but addictive. This is what we seek as riders and this is what we seek to create as trail builders. As you may have guessed, it is not easy to describe "flow" but once you feel it, you will understand the concept best. Once again I would emphasise the need to ride new trails. Personally I got a lot out of riding trails in Rotorua with their hero dirt and high speed flow, and also the nature of purpose built flow trails in the USA. So inspired was I that I have been trying to bring that type of high paced flow back to Australia ever since.

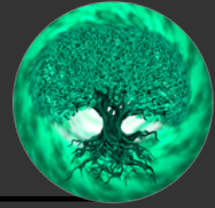
To a degree I am talking about not only the flow of the trail and the way to create flow, but also the flow of trail design and planning. How to keep your "flow" in the trail development process. Some people can just see lines through the bush. That's a rare talent I would suggest. Most of us have to work through the details.

Personally I like tight and technical trails that have virtually no flow at all, where skill, balance, power and strength are required to hop over features and muscle the bike at a slow pace. Yet even this kind of trail will need the features to be rideable but not obviously so. Techy trails will still require the features to be in dimensions that suit bike lengths and modern wheel sizes.

Certainly once you have locked into the “flow” of your particular trail, it is important to maintain consistent flow and pace. It’s nice to be on trails that have a sensible rhythm to them whereby even new comers can rely on the trail, confident that each and every corner will work like the last, that it will not surprise them or wash off speed and momentum unnecessarily. This helps to maximise fun and to ensure your customers keep coming back.

Don’t fight nature. Yet, go with your flow. It does work, trust me.

Icing on the Cake



Do what you must to take it to the next level!

Photo: "The Ducks Guts" trail, Fox Creek, South Australia

Generally I recommend taking it all to the next level..... always. If there is time and money, well then maybe you can go that extra step. That place that no one ever thought to go before. Spend a few days building some crazy rock feature that may only be 5 seconds of the trail experience, but due to its artistic beauty, cements itself into the minds of all who see it. It has been done and you know what you know.

It may be a rest stop complete with bench seats and sculptures. It could be an optional log ride alongside the trail; an outstanding view. Or even simply value added “landscaping” and “artistic flair” to create truly awe inspiring settings for visitors and residents. While these elements may not add to the actual ride itself, they do add something significant to the experience. Providing truly awe inspiring trails will evoke ecstatic experiences leaving trail users completely amazed at what has been achieved out in woods, just for them!

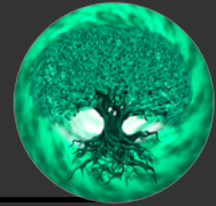
These iconic features will also provide fantastic photo and video opportunities. What you are seeking is the quintessential marketing image that burns itself into the riders mind. A timeless photo that just conjures that sensation for those that see it; “I want to go there”. A destination does need this. It really does, and the marketing value of this investment in the trail is almost priceless. World Trail has achieved this on all of their projects, but Blue Derby and the endless stonework is something that sticks in my mind. The “Twisties” is one such area that seems to have limitless photogenic qualities. But it didn’t stop there, oh no.....

I have never quite seen this pursuit of the “money shot” done like Glen Jacobs. One time during the creation of “Dambusters” trail loop, he had the whole team carve a World Trail logo into the beach on the edge of a lake so that he could film it with a remote control drone from height. It was simply stunning, and took my breathe away like a little kid.... “They did what.... Outstanding, visionary!” That promo took the cake for me!

And this is what trails are all about. Promoting, protecting and pedalling in amazing natural places of great beauty! Sharing the true essence of life on this planet and practically forcing people to see its beauty; to appreciate it and soak it up into their soul.

That's when those of us that seek out these destinations can take some of it home with us and treasure these memories for years, as they help us to continue the battle of the daily grind; giving us that edge to keep on pushing and planning for the next adventure in new places.

Race Day & Other Events



“To party or not to party is never the question. It’s just a matter of how hard you want to go!”

Photo: Lone Gum, Fox Creek, Australia

Race Day and Other Events (ok it's a party)!

Competitive races and recreational events are a great way to test trails, and launch them to the community. To ride the in! Give them a good thrashing in many ways.

The natural level of excitement around an event helps to rally the troops for some trail work and getting the trail dialled. Sponsors may get involved or the event could simply give your MTB club a chance to raise some funds for itself. Tell everyone, tell the whole world. Good news does sell! Through this process of celebration, we can really bring the community together to enjoy the moment and feel great about their achievements; a celebration of single track.

The reality is events are where it is at for many funding agencies and bureaucrats. It is important to catch the eye of local councils and state governments as soon as possible so they can “buy into” the program in future years to help make your events better, but also so they can get involved in trail development. This is why you should spruce up any event you are planning. Add a bit of glam, a bit of sizzle. Pollies love that stuff and it tends to draw the mainstream media in too.

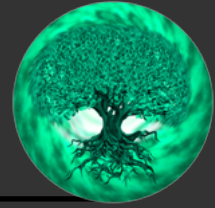
To make the event memorable for the riders you may want to try something radical; maybe something kooky, to get their attention and remind all and sundry to have fun while competing and participating. Single Speeders now how to party, and the format for the 18 hours of Melrose is very unique just to give you a couple of examples. In the case of the 18 Hour Race, it starts at midnight Friday, and then carries on through to finish at 6:00pm on the Saturday, thus providing ample time for riders and supporters to enjoy a gathering before they head home. This event has a fun and party atmosphere from start to finish and then well after that. It makes for a nice change in atmosphere after all the serious racing events on the calendar.

Trail events are a great learning tool as well because they can highlight any weaknesses in the trail or other flow issues on your new trail. An event can pin point what trail upgrades and flow enhancements are required to ensure the final product is solid and fun to ride.

This process will give you unique insight into what does and does not work in that particular area and how the trail will perform over the coming years. The event may also emphasise which components of the trail will need more regular ongoing maintenance to keep it rolling sweet.

Of course this stage is also about celebrating your achievements with your team mates, supporters and land managers. It is important to celebrate these wins. It sets these moments in time and helps everyone to recognise what has been achieved, because it is way too easy to get dragged into the next project without so much as a “by your leave” these days. We all must slow down and take time to reflect on the positive achievements in our lives.

The Final Zen



“The trail we choose will take us to where we need to be”

Photo: Burro Pass, Moab, Utah

True artists are rarely satisfied with their final works. But that is not the point in this instance. What do the trail users think of it? Are your funding bodies and land managers happy? It's these groups and their views that truly determine the success of the trail. In many ways it is the land managers who pay for the trails but it is the riders and community that will be the ones who talk about it; live and breathe it so to speak. Sure there will be those with a negative viewpoint, but it is the silent happy majority who are most worth listening to. Feedback is important, but only if it is constructive! It is also very rare that the trail looks exactly like anyone imagined it to be. After all it will have been through a tumultuous time just to be allowed on the ground in the first place. Changes here or there, ground level challenges, weather events, disrespectful riders who ride past closed signs and ride on soft trails sinking into the trail surface to their spoke nibbles. Wayward wombats may even decide to dig a burrow right in the middle of your trail. It's all happened before and can happen again. So be ready for anything, and that's before the trail is even open.

Personally, in the case of a mountain bike trail, I like to think of a trail as finished once it has been through a full 12 month cycle of seasons and at least one race event in that time. It basically needs to have been broken in, used and abused to a degree, so that you, the trail designer and builder can see any shortfalls in the design or construction. If opportunity allows you will be able to adjust the trail and ensure it is well and truly bedded in properly, and resilient enough to withstand a long life evoking pleasurable experiences and connection to nature. This may not always be possible in our budget driven, time poor world, but I think it is good to know the whole story, so you can make your trail totally rad!

My favourite moments before the trail opens is to get out there with a leaf rake and groom the trail surface until it is so smooth that that it may be akin to the skin of a baby's bottom. Some may consider that practice to be overkill, but I believe it is important to get the trail off to the very best start possible.

So that's about all I can share at the moment. Take what you need. Now go and do it! Make your dirty trail dreams come true!

Acknowledgements

In no particular order, I would like to thank these gentlemen for sharing their wisdom with me over the years.

Glen Jacobs (trail master mind and guru plus director at World Trail)

Troy Rarick (mystic and director of Over the Edge Sports)

Tony Boone (kinaesthetic dirt sculptor, dozer flow wizard and now Tony Boone Trails)

Tim Blumenthal (fearless leader Bikes Belong, formerly International Mountain Bicycling Association)

Christian Haag (the real fixer, CEO, Bicycle SA)

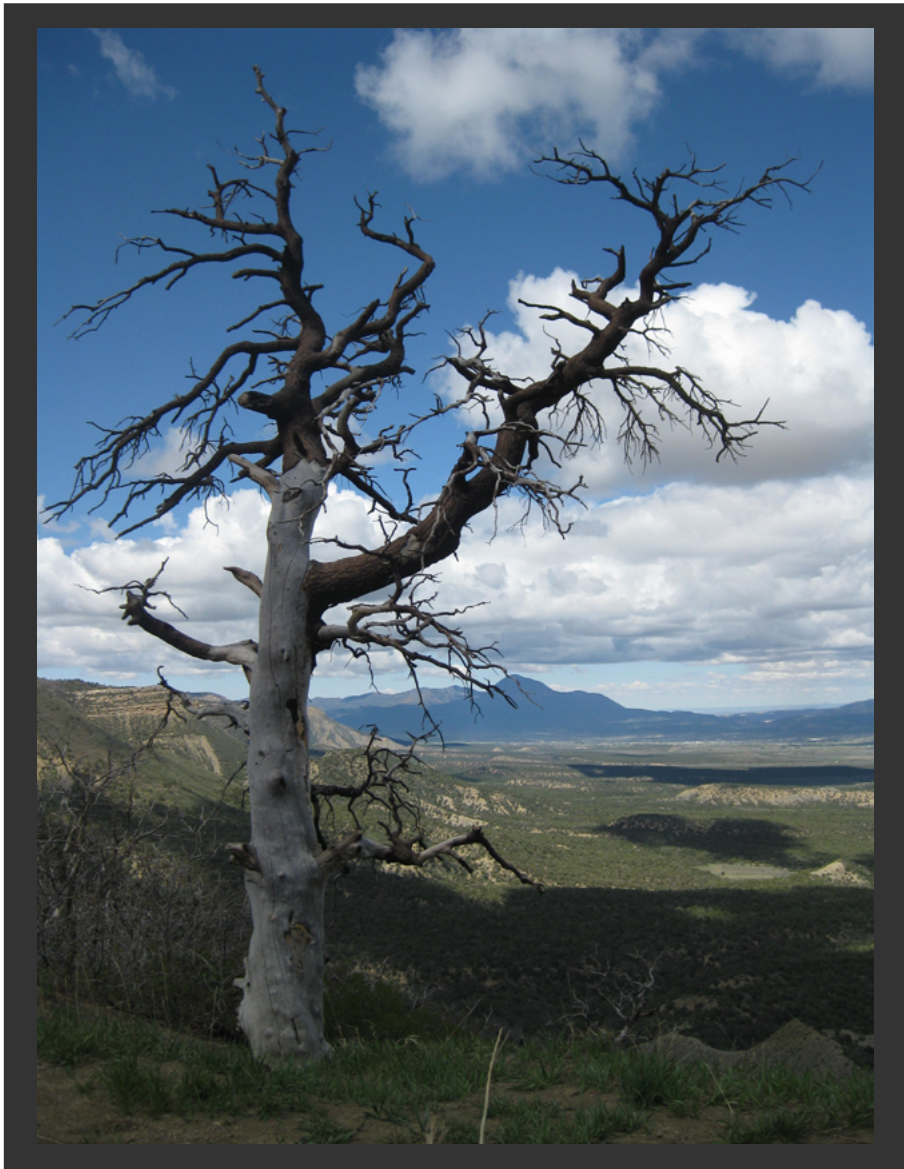
Peter Solly (entrepreneur and true visionary, formerly CEO at Bicycle SA)

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Joey Klein (the trail legend and pioneer of MTB trail building, International Mountain Bicycling Association)

Tony Scott (the pillar of MTB down under, formerly Mountain Bike Australia)

Daffyd Davis (trail genius and son of a stone mason, Trails Wales)



This motivational text is a light hearted and humorous take on the world of trail advocacy. The first official text by Nicolas Bowman intends to inspire and support those trail advocates in Australia who are working hard to gain public access for trails in public lands.

In many ways the text could also be considered a metaphor for life's bigger challenges.

Nick Bowman