

Back Country Ski Trail issues in the Gatineau Park in 2009

By Harold Blount

... with input from park users via <http://ski.nordicwind.ca>

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Introduction

The Gatineau Park offers the best cross-country skiing in North America for skate or classic skiing.

When you throw on your classic skis, there is nothing like the kick and glide on soft, fresh snow on a lightly groomed secondary trail or a skier-set backcountry trail.

In fact, for many, the BEST trails are those trails that a machine has not touched - where you glide through the woods or swamps lost in another world in tracks perfectly set by the skier before you, or better yet, where you find yourself to be the first to break trail after a fresh dump of snow.



Unfortunately, it is becoming harder and harder to find this experience in the Gatineau Park.

It seems every year the NCC is pushing harder to put a snowmobile/groomer down every trail it can find on the miss-guided opinion that machines make better ski trails.

This has resulted in disaster on many of our favorite trails with ice-bridges on creeks destroyed, ruts and hard-pack snow greeting you on the down hills and black challenging skier-set trails becoming blue intermediate groomed trails with cement tracks down the centre.

To make things worse, we are now finding snowshoers on these trails creating holes the size of watermelons and in, some cases, compacted tunnel-tracks on the downhills creating difficult and dangerous ski conditions.

The document you are about to read is a compilation of user feedback collected in the ski year 2008/2009 on the website <http://ski.nordicwind.ca> culminating in a Proposal for Six Policy Changes that we believe would contribute significantly in improving the ski experience in the park for all levels of classic skiers.

We also think the implementation of many of these ideas would result in improvements to the snowshoeing trails that would be welcomed by snowshoers and skiers alike.

Why should the NCC consider these proposed Policy Changes?

In the NCC's Gatineau Park Master Plan 2005 one of the principal objectives is to create *a respectful recreational experience by maintaining compatible recreational activities and by enhancing the quality of the recreational experience.*

We think it is clear that the quality of the traditional classic ski experience in the park is declining year over year due to over-grooming of ski trails and the incursion of snowshoers and hikers on ski trails in the winter months.

The use of heavy machinery on many of these ski trails is incompatible with the conservation goals of the park and results in the destruction of habitat through machine gouging of trails, noise and fumes (especially 2-stroke snowmobile engines) from this machinery and the subsequent trail maintenance and widening that happens in the off-season in preparation for these winter machines.

Surely the push towards a 'Green Transportation Plan' in the park should also consider the impact of the NCC's own heavy machinery on the park!

We urge the NCC to apply a new level of standard to the park's ski trail maintenance program that would appeal to a diverse group of users including those that enjoy the untouched beauty of the back-country ski trails.

We think this would be consistent with the environmental goals of the park in reducing CO2 emissions, reduce fuel consumption and reduce destruction of habitat on some of the most beautiful trails in the country.

We also think there is a missed opportunity to encourage the growing numbers of snowshoers and hikers (who do NOT pay a usage fee) to explore the park in a manner that does not conflict with the present ski population (who DO pay a winter usage fee!). We think you can provide a more exciting experience to these users by exposing them to terrain that is not of interest to skiers making them wonder why they every thought snowshoeing on a ski trail was fun!

There are many different ways of enjoying this beautiful Park. The NCC should be actively promoting these different ways of enjoying the park and permit some trails to be back country trails, some trails to be lightly groomed for traditional classic skiing and other trails for skate-skiers, snowshoers and hikers.

Proposal for Six Policy Changes:

In summary, the six policy changes are:

1. Revert back to the old days (i.e. 3 years ago) and NOT machine groom back country ski trails especially after a fresh dump of snow!
2. Ban snowshoeing on all cross country ski trails - especially the back country ski trails.
3. Establish a sign and user education policy within the park (not just at the trail heads) to properly indicate to snowshoers, hikers and walkers that they are not allowed to go on ski trails.
4. Develop a network of snowshoe trails in the park that cross ski trails at right-angles where ever possible and mark these crossings with the appropriate signs to keep ski trails from suffering snowshoe/hiker damage.
5. Create a volunteer 'Adopt a trail' program for the back country trails in the park.
6. Return to the 5cm rule on secondary non-skating trails so skiers learn to appreciate the joys of fresh snow. The 5cm rule is 'no grooming unless 5cm of new snow has accumulated'.

As you can see from the emails and individual comments in the Appendices, the proposed Six Policy Changes reflects the concerns and interests of a number of users of the Gatineau Park ski trails.

In the following pages, these six proposals are explained in detail.

Policy Change #1:

Revert back to the old days (i.e. 3 years ago) and NOT machine groom back country ski trails especially after a fresh dump of snow!

Why?

- The back country trails in the Gatineau park are best enjoyed with fresh snow. Back country skiers LOVE fresh snow and if you run a groomer down them BEFORE we get to enjoy the powder, we get very upset. It's like some one stole Christmas!
- What makes them unique is that they are narrow little trails through rough terrain with lots of little bumps and challenging turns. They have been skier-set by people who love them for over 50 years. Running any kind of groomer down them fills in the bumps, widens the turns and basically destroys them!

Safety

There has been a lot of discussion about safety on the back country trails and that the reason to run a snowmobile down them is to ensure that a skier could be rescued in the event of an accident.

We think you are trying to address (incorrectly) one safety issue (snowmobile rescue capability) at the expense of other safety issues.

When you run a snowmobile down a back country ski trail you do the following:

- break through ice bridges over creek crossings usually at the bottom of a hill creating a safety hazard for skiers.
Examples are: #11 close to Keogan, #22 at swamp after crossing tower road, #17 going east before intersection with #31, #21 before it meets #20
- pack down and widen the trail so the skier is traveling at a higher velocity increasing the risk of injury in the event of a fall. (note: riding a ski in the soft snow on one side of a skier-set track is a great way to slow a skier down.. something you can't do when the trail has been groomed 2 metres wide).
- create ruts especially on the faster turns that a skier does not expect or see and, because of faster velocity, this increases the risk of a fall and injury.

A snowmobile-only attitude towards ski trail safety ignores other techniques that CAN drastically improve skier safety such as:

- trimming or removing hazardous tree-loops stuck in down hill tracks that un-attentive skiers can get snared in.
- fixing of open water hazards at creek crossings through route diversion or artificial ice-bridge fabrication (i.e.. throw down a wood pallet over that stream crossing and pile some snow on it)
- trimming or removal of fallen branches on routes that you have not been running a snowmobile on (ie. #12 had a tree across it for the longest time ...)
- trail diversion when it's clear that the current route is a hazard.
(I'm thinking of #21 coming down to the swamp before the #20. All last year the ice bridge was broken and a pain to go right off that hill. It was actually easier to go left and cross the swamp/creek higher up. You could very easily encourage skiers to take that route without having to actually clear any brush.)

- training of NCC staff to be able to use snowshoes or skis (skins?) with toboggans to rescue skiers and snowshoers in the back country.
- NCC skier patrol (ie. get the drivers off their machines) with a shovel and clippers to check out these trails and do minor trail repair without the need or expensive of a gas-consuming snowmobile (but you might have to buy them lunch).

What is the rescue plan for #54, or #38, or Wolf Trail?

- If running a snowmobile down a trail is the prerequisite for establishing a rescue plan for a trail, then what about the trails that you have NOT run a snowmobile down?
- Do they not have a rescue plan?
- If a skier or snowshoer gets injured on these trails, are you not going to rescue them?

Obviously you do have a plan for these trails. All we are asking is that you apply this same plan to the remaining of the back country trails.

Western Trail #9

When I look at the number of times a snowmobile has been down the #9 this year (2008/2009), I really question whether this is to prove you can rescue someone on that trail or if it is some other reason such as plans to further develop this trail to take a wider groomer and turn it into a secondary 'groomed' trail. I'm sure that Western has been groomed a half dozen times in December and January and so this can't been an exercise in proving that a rescue could be executed!

I can only conclude that, whenever it snows, the NCC feels it needs to re-affirm that it can execute a snowmobile rescue on this (and other?) trails. I don't understand the logic in this.

What you should do is understand what would STOP you from executing a snowmobile rescue, then go and ski down that trail and see if any conditions exist that would make that snowmobile rescue impossible. If you find something, fix it (fallen tree?).

If you are concerned about the creek before the #9 comes out at the #12 crossing, the question is : 'has the snowmobile ever had to turn around from that creek in the past few years that you've been snowmobiling this trail?' I think not. In fact, knowing the creek is there, you could always run your rescue from the #12 side if the injured skier is in that area.

When should a snowmobile be run over a back country trail?

There are some trails that are so popular that after many weeks of no new snow and a lot of skier traffic, you might be tempted to run a machine over it to smooth things out.

I would say resist that temptation and post a sign saying that the trail is in poor condition and let skiers make their own decisions. There are a lot of trails in the park and if the back country trails are in poor shape because of lack of snow, so be it.

That said, sending a NCC skier over the trail with a shovel and clippers could make a big difference filling in some of the worst 'sit-marks'. This would not take as much time as you might think and it would keep the NCC informed as to the condition of the trail .. and it would improve safety on the trail.

Policy Change #2

Ban snowshoeing on all cross country ski trails - especially the back country ski trails.

Why?

- Snowshoers create deep depressions in the snow the size of water melons making it difficult for ski wax to stick.
- They also create deep, straight-line trenches on downhill slopes making it difficult for skiers to control speed.
- On heavily groomed surfaces (like #40), their walking in the centre of the 'road' gouges out holes from their footwear. These centre surfaces of heavily groomed trails are important for skiers as often the tracks become cement-like and the centre is the only place you can get some fresh snow for traction on the ups.
- Snowshoers do not pay to walk on the ski trails in the park and so they should have no right to destroy these trails for those of us that do pay!

Policy Change #3:

Establish a sign and user education policy within the park (not just at the trail heads) to properly indicate to snowshoers, hikers and walkers that they are not allowed to go on ski trails.

Why?

The snowshoeing population has exploded in recent years and it needs to be communicated to these park users that snowshoeing damages the ski trails.

Many snowshoers think that they are HELPING the skiers by packing down the trails. This is not the case for reasons described in Proposal #2. This mis-conception needs to be communicated to them.

Asking a skier to talk to a snowshoer about destroying ski trails is a bit like asking the public to tell Ottawa bus drivers why they've been so hard done by with the bus strike. You open up a can of emotions which can only lead to a souring of skier-snowshoer relations. What we need are clear signs at the trail heads AND at skier/snowshoer trail crossings to clearly state the NCC's policy on this.

Many cross-country ski centres in Quebec have a thriving skier and snowshoe business with absolutely no issues with snowshoers on ski trails. I believe this is because:

- they have signs everywhere.
- when ever these trails cross, there is a sign reminding snowshoers to stay off the ski trails.
- they create more snowshoeing trails as demand rises.
- they make sure snowshoe trails cross at right-angles with ski trails so there is no temptation for a snowshoer to take the ski trail as an alternate way to get to their destination.
- they don't rely on one sign at the trailhead to tell people the trail restrictions - because often people are too much in a hurry at the trailhead to take the time to read the signs!

Trail #38

Trail #38 T's with #16 coming up from P13. Now that #16 is a shared snowshoe/skier trail it is imperative that specific no-snowshoeing and no-walking/hiking signs be posted at the junction of the #38 to stop snowshoers and hikers from destroying this beautiful back country trail.

If you come down the #16 from ridge road and stop at this #38 junction you see two signs indicating that straight is #16 and to the right is #38 - both black trails. Below each of these signs is a hiking sign. There is nothing that indicates that the #38 is skiing only.

About once or twice a week snowshoers come down this trail to the #40 and continue on to trails like the #21 creating large melon sized holes on the back country trails.

What about walkers and hikers?

One communication with the NCC we have had recently talks about the move of hikers to becoming snowshoers. This is partially true but you have to realize that when a snowshoe trail becomes packed down to the point where it's just as easy to hike or walk on the trail, you will see a dramatic spike in the number of walkers/hikers on the trail.

For this reason it is really important that you create your sign-age such that it is clear that snowshoers, hikers and walkers are not allowed on the ski trails.

I'm sure that the snowshoers would also welcome signs telling hikers to stay off snowshoe trails!

Policy Change #4

Develop a network of snowshoe trails in the park that cross ski trails at right-angles where ever possible and mark these crossings with the appropriate signs to keep ski trails from suffering snowshoe/hiker damage.

Why?

Well, why not?

Making snowshoe trails is dead-simple. You don't have to do any preparation to the surface before the snow arrives. All you have to do is figure out some interesting routes and mark them and, if necessary, clip some branches out of the way.

The beauty of snowshoeing is that you can have trails that go straight up a hill on a narrow path close to trees and rock out-croppings with great views.

Creating more imaginative snowshoe trails can open up a whole new perspective for the users of the Gatineau Park. When you do it this way, there will be no reason for a snowshoer to want to use a 'boring' ski trail!

In fact, why don't you rally the snowshoer community to help you find these fabulous routes?

You could have a competition to help the NCC select five new routes every season and give a prize to the snowshoers that come up with the most imaginative routes!

Policy Change #5:

Create a volunteer 'Adopt a trail' program for the back country trails in the park.

How would it work?

Volunteers would 'groom' the back country trails simply by skiing the trails and clip back brush and obstacles to maintain the trails.

When a tree falls down and blocks the trail that is beyond the capability of the volunteers to address, report it to the park maintenance manager for a resolution. Note that in the spirit of back country skiing, removing a fallen tree is not necessarily the best solution if an obvious divergent route solves the problem for the remainder of the season or even longer.

Organizing Volunteers

There are a number of ways to organize volunteers. The obvious solution is by having different organizations adopting a particular route and organize patrols, reporting of trail conditions and interfacing with the park maintenance manager.

Interactive Website

Another tool that would complement an 'Adopt a trail' program would be an interactive website that skiers would use to feedback ski conditions to the park users and trail maintenance volunteers. I would imagine feedback on trail conditions (untracked, lightly tracked, icy downs, watch out for stream crossing 'here', tree down 'here' .. that sort of thing) would be the major use of this website. Of course the volunteers themselves would update this website with recent activities on trail, safety issues etc.

Applicable to Snowshoe trails ...

Many of these 'Adopt a trail' ideas could be applied to the snowshoe trails and an interactive website could also provide a communications tool for good snowshoe trail etiquette, snowshoe route finding suggestions and new trail ideas.

Policy Change #6

Return to the 5cm rule on secondary non-skating trails so skiers learn to appreciate the joys of fresh snow. The 5cm rule is 'no grooming unless 5cm of new snow has accumulated'.

Why ?

The current policy *seems* to be to groom every primary and secondary ski trail in the park every day irrespective of snow fall. In reality, a number of days can go by on a secondary trail with out grooming and then some fresh snow arrives and the trails are groomed every day.

For the secondary ski trails that are non-skating trails it does not make sense to groom so often.

Every time you run a machine over a trail you compact the snow squeezing out moisture to be frozen into the snow pack on the next freeze cycle (usually over night). These compacted trails do nothing to improve classic skiing but they do create the illusion for some novice skiers that they are getting their moneys worth.

As an example, on February 9th 2009, 1cm of powdery snow fell the night before and by 9am the next day the O'Brien trail (#36) had been machine groomed. The trail was pretty slippery at times with this compacted snow, but in a few places where the groomer missed, the trail was excellent with a light dusting of snow in the track or on the side of the trail. If only the groomer had not been through!

If you only ran a groomer over a trail if it had a minimum of 5cm of fresh snow, you would find that:

- it only takes one or two skiers to re-set the ski track after a small snow fall which would not be an issue on many of these busy secondary trails.
- classic skiers would find the track smooth with the fresher snow and easy to wax for.
- classic skiers would enjoy a more natural ski experience without the obvious intrusion of heavy machinery
- the trails would be safer because the surface would not be as hard and the fresher snow would keep the skiers speed in check on colder days.
- some trails currently suffer from sand and gravel exposure from over grooming (#36 from O'Brien as an example in Jan. 2009). These problems would disappear with less grooming.
- the contractor and NCC would save a lot of money on gas and wages
- the NCC could boast that their park is working on CO2 emission reduction by only grooming as needed (Just in Time grooming).

The down side to not grooming secondary non-skating ski trails excessively would be:

- some novice skiers will complain that the track has not been machine set.
- novice skiers might get annoyed that they can't find the track if they are the first on the trail after 4cm of fresh snow.
- the NCC would have to communicate to skiers the new policy and why it is a better ski experience and better for the environment and the budget.

Appendix 1:

Emails to the NCC - and responses - mostly 2008/2009 season

In the following section, I've collected various emails sent to the NCC with concerns about the over-grooming of back-country ski trails in the Gatineau Park.

They are arranged in chronological order and are from various people that have shared their emails with me. They are mostly talking about the January-February 2009 season although the first email from myself talks about the state of the #16 in the 2006/2007 season.

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Subject: Ski trail feedback - good and bad

Date: Wed, January 31, 2007 11:29 am

To: info@ncc-ccn.ca

HI,

We'd like to give you some feedback on the work you do in the park on the ski-trails. First, the GOOD feedback:

We are just back from a weekend in skiing 'up north' and I want to tell you that the NCC does a fabulous job grooming ski trails in the Gatineau park! Many ski centres around the country could learn alot about grooming from you guys. Congratulations.

I particularly like your 5cm rule as Marion and I love to ski trails that have soft snow on them (who does not?) and you have managed to groom just at the right times and never too often.

We were particularly amazed at the quality of the skate-skiing on the parkway so early in the season with such little snow!

With the more recent cold temperatures and modest snow falls, we've been mostly classic on as many powder trails as we can find .. the park has many!

Now the NOT-SO-GOOD feedback:

re:#6

Last week we were quite disappointed to find on the #6 that a ski-doo had been through 'grooming' the trail. This is a trail we like to think of as a 'don't groom' trail as it winds up and down alot and grooming takes much away from it's beauty. Infact, the grooming has created alot of problems with way too much 'track setting' on difficult turns and up-slopes with no chance to 'slow down' in soft snow. If you feel that for some legal or safety reason you need to go into the #6 with a ski-doo, our recommendation would be to NOT lay any kind of track. We would still prefer it to be 'people set' much like you have been treating Berma (#3).

re:#38

Yesterday we were on the #38 and unfortunately people have been snowshoeing and hiking this trail and it was not in great shape as these non-ski modes pack the snow down and create snow-holes making it difficult to get stick on the ups and to maintain control on the downs. Infact, I almost ran into two hikers and a dog at the mouth of the #38 as it empties into the #16.

re:#16

Ofcourse, the #16 was a highway and we met another hiker coming down. The conditions are such that most snowshoers find it easier to remove the snowshoes and hike.

I'm not sure what the solution to the #16 is. I hate to see more rules and I'm not sure they would solve the problem. Infact, when the snow is good, we all get along quite well! I definitely don't think the hikers should be allowed on the #38 and more signs to discourage that might be useful. I notice 'hiking' signs on many of the ski trails which might be re-enforcing the hikers thoughts that this is 'ok'. I suspect most hikers simply prefer to ignore the sign at the bottom of the #16 saying walking on the trials is not allowed (maybe they think 'hiking' is not 'walking'?).

At the moment, we have not skied the #16 full length because of the hiking traffic combined with the low snow amounts. If it was not for the hikers, we probably would have skied from parking lot #13 by now!

Another solution ofcourse would be to create alternate hiking/snowshoeing trails that give the hikers and skiers some separation and yet still let the hikers do there favorite loop (wolf) .. but there is not much opportunity to do that on the corridor between #38 and #1.

Summary:

In summary, you guys are doing a great job, we'd like to see no grooming on the #6 and something needs to be done about the hikers on the #38.

If you would like to talk further about these issues, let me know.

Regards,
Harold Blount

NCC Response:

Date: Wed, February 7, 2007 11:15 am

To: bluestar@nordicwind.ca

Thank you for your feedback in respect to our cross country ski trail maintenance practices in Gatineau Park.

Walking on the ski trails represents a serious issue. Several measures are in the process of being implemented in order to bring this problem to an acceptable level. A Conservation Officer is now patrolling the trail network three days a week to specifically act upon this situation. New signage is in production to replace the signs at the trailhead with a message that is more explicit.

In the case of trail #6 at this point this season, a single mechanical treatment was performed in order to set a base. The creation of a proper base represents a key phase in our trail preparation. It aims at covering obstacles (rocks, depression), maximizing the width of the corridor while providing a surface that will contribute in maximizing the benefits of each subsequent snowfall. This trail figures in the group of trail with the highest priority in our maintenance program as you may see on our Web site at: http://www.canadascapital.gc.ca/bins/ncc_web_content_page.asp?cid=16297-16299-10170-16405-28595

This implies that mechanical treatments are performed according to a regular weekly schedule once sufficient snow coverage is available. This is a fairly popular trail and our understanding of the public preferences was to have it groomed and tracksetted occasionally. In comparison, trail #3 is mechanically groomed and tracksetted on a more frequent basis. We are willing to reconsider our position for trail #6 and to perform grooming only when the trail is judged in poor condition by our ski patrollers. As you know things have been quite different this year due to the limited quantity of snow.

Please do not hesitate to contact Mr. Daniel Blais at (819) 827-6016 if you would like to further discuss any aspect of the maintenance program or any other subjects relating to Gatineau Park.

We hope the information provided is helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact us again in the future. You can reach us by e-mail at info@ncc-ccn.ca

Information Services
National Capital Commission Subject:grooming of ski trails

Subject: Grooming of Backcountry trails

Date: Tue, January 20, 2009 8:49 am

To: info@ncc-ccn.ca

The last few weeks we've seen that just about every trail in the Gatineau Park has had a ski-doo/groomer down it creating a wide packed-down track of up to 2 metres in width.

This is a real disappointment. Ski-doo tracking of secondary and backcountry trails spoils the trails, makes it unpleasant to ski on and destroys many sections where there is water crossings with creeks.

We are particularly disappointed in what you are doing to the Western Trail(#9). Last year when we complained about ski-doo grooming on this trail you specifically said that this was not suppose to be happening and especially after a new dump of snow!

In the last few days we've had a wonderful dump of powder snow making this trail heaven .. but you have turned it into hell as I see you have groomed it yet again (according to your website .. we will check it out later this morning).

What is it that you don't understand about cross-country skiing? It seems that you put someone on a ski-doo and all he wants to do is drive it everywhere thinking he/she is making us skiers happy .. how far from the truth!

The thing that concerns me the most is that you seem to be grooming very wide swaths which suggests you are trying to prove that a larger machine could go down these black trails. Maybe you are hoping you can cut a few strategic trees to make this happen for some perverse reason .. probably something to do with making it cheaper to groom these trails .. but NO .. we don't want you grooming these wonderful trails snaking through the woods! You can save your money simply by not grooming!

The #6 trail, a black trail, is an example of heavy machinery that does not fit the trail. I have not talked to one person that likes what you have done to this trail. Everyone I talk to finds that the machine creates ruts, hard, fast corners down steep turns and spoils this beautiful trail. If you think novice skiers want this, you are wrong as it creates an even more hazardous condition for these skiers and yet draws them in on the flats before they realize what they've done.

The truth is that trails that are 'people' groomed are the best trails .. especially after a recent snow fall as we have experienced in the last few days.

Why do you deny us this privilege of skiing fresh snow?

Why do you not listen to the silent majority?

Why should I keep buying a ski-pass if all you do is destroy the best trails in the park with cement tracks?

This fall I was encouraging my friends to talk to the NCC about the trails as anytime I've done that, I've found I've met like-minded people concerned about the trails and the ski experience .. yet the actions I've seen in the Park this year tell me I've been talking to the wrong people.

Please tell me how we can change your actions that are resulting in you destroying these beautiful trails!

On a second note, snowshoeing on trail #38 is starting to become a problem.

There are no signs that explicitly tell snowshoers not to snowshoe on #38 .. infact #16 and #38 (at the junction) look identical and the one sign you do have, talking about the new snowshoe policy, has to be read carefully before you realize what is snowshoe only (and it points the wrong direction as most people do the loop counter-clockwise).

With the over-flows from P13 we are getting more and more snowshoers starting from P12. Most of the time they stay away from the ski trails but it only takes ONE snowshoer to spoil a secondary ski trail with huge depressions in the track making our waxes not stick. Multiple snowshoers create deep tracks on the downs that are difficult to get out of to control speed

Two years ago you told us that the signs were being updated in the park and that this problem will be fixed. I'm sorry, but the problem is not fixed and will only get worse. You need to work on your signs to tell snowshoers where they can not go.

I know this is a long email, but I have to say one more thing. There is a great opportunity here to create a win-win solution. Your expenses are probably rising every year (hence the increase in our ski-passes). Ski-doo's and heavy machinery in the park are counter to a green environment (CO2 emissions, diesel and oil pollution and fumes) and cost money to operate frequently. The solution we would like you to apply is employing more people on skis to check the trails, do minor trail repair (yes, bring a shovel and pruners) and call in the heavy machinery only when it is necessary to remove fallen trees, repair or build necessary bridges etc.

A 'just-in-time' ski trail grooming policy costs less, improves the safety on the trails and make alot of us alot happier .. because skiing is all about the snow and when you transform the snow with heavy machinery, you spoil the experience.

Finally, finally, you are not improving the safety in many situations with your groomers and ski-doo's. In the last few days we've seen many situations where the groomer has passed and left sapplings with their heads/tips still buried in the frozen snow creating dangerous 'loops' on down hills waiting for an unwary skier to catch a tip. Running a machine down a trail does not make it safe. Sending a skier down a trail with the right mind-set and tools CAN make a trail safe. That's what we need.

My last point: Why don't you make your website so it takes feedback from the ski community? It would be a great way of getting feedback on specific trail conditions, wishes of the ski community and even as a early warning system to let you know when a trail needs some work.

My apologies for such a long email. I hate being so negative but this time you have really managed to push my buttons and I feel I need to respond quickly and with detail.

Please don't hesitate to call and talk to me. There are so many things you DO do right in the park, I promise I won't bite your head off!

Regards,
Harold Blount

Subject: Disaster on #11 and #17

Date: Tue, January 20, 2009 10:42

To: info@ncc-ccn.ca

Hi,

Today we skied on parts of #11 and #17 and were dismayed to find that the fresh snow of the last few days was taken away and replaced with ruts, broken ice-bridges over creeks and exposed dirt and stones all because a snowmobile/groomer was driven over these trails earlier in the day.

It makes absolutely no sense to destroy these trails with grooming.

Specifically, on the #11 coming from Shilly Shally after crossing the parkway the groomer came down a hill to find a creek in the swamp it could not cross and ended up breaking up the ice over this creek making a hazard for skiers racing down the 'groomed' hill. Then the groomer left the scene of the crime with holes and ruts everywhere. Snowmobile/groomers do not belong on this trail and create a huge mess.

Farther along on the #17 we encountered more groomer activity where ruts from the machine made the skiing very unpleasant. Then we encountered a final stretch as we approached Penguin Hill junction where the machine had ripped up stones and dirt on the trail for 100m or more trying to get up a steep hill. Again, the grooming of these trails after such a nice snow fall makes no sense.

You should be only attempting to groom the #17 when there has been no fresh snow for a week or more and **ONLY** if the ski traffic has caused excessive trail ruts and holes.

Harold Blount

Subject: What does a skier say to a snowshoer on Trail #21?

Date: Fri, January 23, 2009 4:00 pm

To: info@ncc-ccn.ca

Hi,

Yesterday we were skiing on #21 and found that a group of snowshoers had recently been walking on this trail. They had come off #3 somewhere and snowshoed the length of #21 and then down #33 and #40 to P12. For some of #21 they tried not to step on the ski track but after a while they gave up and walked down the centre of the track.

Three snowshoers on a ski trail in a snow storm is not a problem. Ten snowshoers on a ski trail without new snow really is a problem.

Snowshoers create deep depressions in the snow the size of water melons making it difficult for ski wax to stick. They also create deep, straight-line trenches on downhill slopes making it difficult for skiers to control speed. On heavily groomed surfaces (like #40), their walking in the centre of the 'road' gouges out holes from their footwear. These centre surfaces of heavily groomed trails are important for skiers as often the tracks become cement-like and the centre is the only place you can get some fresh snow for traction on the ups.

So, yes, snowshoeing on ski trails of all sorts is a problem for skiers.

I think the policy in the park should be zero tolerance for snowshoeing on ski trails of all sorts and the park should have clear signs at many locations telling snowshoers not to snowshoe on ski trails.

With more snowshoers filling P13, we are seeing carloads of snowshoers starting from P12 now. Yesterday we also saw more evidence of snowshoers on trail#38 which is a real concern since they are expanding their territory from P13 and trail #16.

As we came down the #40 we saw these three snowshoers and I dearly wanted to say something to them .. but what?

Should I tell them that snowshoeing on ski trails is prohibited just like walking on ski trails?

Would they turn around and tell me that they have equal rights to the trails?

Should I remind them that it is dangerous for a skier to come down a hill and run into a snowshoer?

Should I smile and call the NCC as soon as I get to a phone?

Should I simply ignore them and make my own tracks off trail and hope they don't follow me?

We buy a ski-pass every year in support of the work that you do in the park for skiers.

Do snowshoers buy a pass also?

If no, are we skiers subsidizing the snowshoers so they can walk all over us?

I'm hoping you can answer these questions.

Regards,
Harold Blount

NCC Response:

date: Tue, February 3, 2009 3:39 pm

from: NCC: Pierre

Mr. Blount,

Thank you for contacting the National Capital Commission (NCC).

In answer to your concerns, the growth in the snowshoe industry in the last few years is phenomenal and is universal to most natural parks and ski areas.

Over the years, the main problem that existed on our ski trails was caused by walkers / hikers damaging the ski conditions.

The occurrence of people walking on the ski trails remains a concern but it has not constituted a major

issue for the last two years. It is quite probable that a large numbers of the users who were walking on the groomed trails in the past have now joined the ranks of the snowshoeing community.

We are aware that the challenge now resides in better communicating this service to this group. Signage encouraging snowshoers to use the designated trails is in preparation and will be posted at various trailheads, such as P12. It is also presumable that many snowshoers are not aware of the negative impact that their activity has when they travel over the tracks made for skiing.

Globally, any skier may contribute to improving the situation by taking a minute to explain to each snowshoer encountered on a ski trail how the elimination of the tracks is affecting the quality of the ski experience. We will also ask the parking lot attendant to pay attention to this particular issue.

If you have any additional questions, comments or suggestions, please feel free to contact us again.

Pierre
*Information Officer
National Capital Commission*

subject: Trail Grooming

I would like to add my vote to back country ski trails not being groomed.

Back country means just that natural trails, untouched by a machine. It is a joy to ski on untracked trails and I would like the park to continue to offer that experience.

There are plenty of trail designed for racing and that is great, let the diversity stay as it is.

Save some funds on grooming, and let us enjoy the park as it should be.

Groomers should stay off the narrow trails, swamps, and steep terrain.

Thank-you,

Julie, a longtime Park skier.

NCC Response:

Subject: RE: Trail grooming

Date: Tue, 3 Feb 2009 15:27:33 -0500

On behalf of the National Capital Commission, I would like to thank you for your comments regarding the grooming of the Gatineau Park tertiary trails.

In answer to your e-mail, the primary reason we mechanically groom these trails is for safety purposes. The Gatineau Park staff has to be assured that a snowmobile can safely rescue an injured skier should this happen on those particular trails (e.g.: 8, 11, and 17)

We are pleased to report that all tertiary trails have been packed and leveled and that we do not foresee any more mechanical grooming in the near future. The conditions should be perfect following the snow accumulation we recently received.

Please be assured that your comments have been brought to the attention of the Management Team of Gatineau Park, who will discuss it more thoroughly with the contractor.

For any other questions or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact us again.

Information Officer

National Capital Commission

Julie's Counter-response:

date: Tue, February 3, 2009 3:57 pm

to: NCC

subject: RE: Trail grooming

Thank-you for your quick response, unfortunately your mechanical grooming is a hazard to skiers and contribute to falls and twists and strains.

If you had a cross country skier on staff and I am sure you must, then they could give you a first hand account of the difficulties that the groomers pose on the narrow trails.

Skiers fell during the early years that the park was open as well as when the park was not groomed. A backcountry snowmobile could get to those trails as easily with no previous grooming. Look to the backcountry rescues that are done in our western parks and ski areas.

Sincerely Julie

Subject: I agree - keep groomers off the back-country trails

to: NCC

date:Wed, February 4, 2009 9:59 am

Please stop destroying the back-country trails! What makes them unique is that they are narrow little trails through rough terrain! They have been track set by people who love them for over 50 years! Making them wide enough and safe enough for a groomer basically destroys them!

Why would you want to do that???????

I also like the other super-groomed trails, you've been doing a great job at track setting them, and that's why I pay for my yearly pass! But I also really enjoy the back-country trails. You get a feeling of getting away from it all on these trails, a really in the woods experience, at step back into the past when all trails were track set by people! These trails go where groomers can't (or shouldn't) and this makes the trails unique, really a lot of fun to ski! This has been echoed to me by many other back-country skiers over the years!

Again keep the groomers off of them, you are really taking a step backwards by trying to groom them!

In fact I'd like more of these trails since you've already destroyed some of my old favorites!

Hope we get through to you!

Thanks, John

NCC Response:

Subject: re: I agree keep groomers off the back-country trails

Date: Wednesday, February 04, 2009 4:13 PM

On behalf of the National Capital Commission, I would like to thank you for your comments regarding the grooming of the Gatineau Park tertiary trails.

In answer to your e-mail, the primary reason we mechanically groom these trails is for safety purposes. The Gatineau Park staff has to be assured that a snowmobile can safely rescue an injured skier should this happen on those particular trails (e.g.: 8, 11, and 17)

We are pleased to report that all tertiary trails have been packed and leveled and that we do not foresee any more mechanical grooming in the near future. The conditions should be perfect following the snow accumulation we recently received.

Please be assured that your comments have been brought to the attention of the Management Team of Gatineau Park, who will discuss it more thoroughly with the contractor.

For any other questions or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact us again.

Information Officer
National Capital Commission

Subject: Grooming on the back country ski trails

To: NCC

Date: Sunday, February 08, 2009 3:58 PM

This email is to voice my concerns with respect to the grooming of cross country ski trails in Gatineau Park.

I have held a cross country ski season pass for Gatineau park for many years now. I have a preference for classic skiing on the trails that are designated back country.

When this designation was first introduced into the park, I understood that the idea was that trails described as such would not be machine groomed in an effort to provide an experience that reflected wilderness skiing. Rather, the grooming, such as it was, would be provided by skiers tracks. This was the case for several years.

It is true that the amount of grooming has varied somewhat over this time, especially when a new contractor is chosen to be responsible for trail maintenance. I suspect that the initial thought from a trail groomer is that more grooming more frequently is better. While this may be true for the "front country" trails and the skate skiing trails, what makes the back country trails "back country" is that they are narrow trails that are less "manicured" than other trails.

For the current 2008/2009 season, there has been an unprecedented increase in both the width of the back country trails (I assume to allow better access for the grooming machines) and the frequency of grooming. I am writing to voice my concerns over these changes, and to ask that the NCC reconsider this policy change with respect to maintenance of back country trails, or possibly remind the contractors of a policy that has not changed.

Sincerely, Paul

NCC Response:

Date: Sunday, February 08, 2009 3:58 PM

Subject: RE: Grooming on the back country ski trails

Thank you for contacting the National Capital Commission (NCC). We appreciate you taking the time to contact us about the Gatineau Park cross country ski trails.

In answer to your e-mail, the primary reason we mechanically groom these trails is for safety purposes. The Gatineau Park staff has to be assured that a snowmobile can safely rescue an injured skier should this happen on those particular trails (e.g.: 8, 11, and 17)

We are pleased to report that all tertiary trails have been packed and leveled and we do not foresee any more mechanical grooming in the near future. The conditions should be perfect following the snow accumulation we recently received.

Please be assured that your comments have been brought to the attention of the Management Team of Gatineau Park, who will discuss it more thoroughly with the contractor.

If you have questions or ideas that you would like to share with us, please feel free to contact us again.

Julie
Information Officer

Paul's Counter-response:

Date: Monday, February 09, 2009 7:05 PM

Subject: Re: Grooming on the back country ski trails

Thank you for your prompt response.

If the backcountry trails are being groomed for snowmobile use, then I understand why they are in a poor state from a cross country skiers perspective. Still, your paying customers are cross country skiers, not snowmobilers.

When considering whether to buy a season pass or not, I think about whether I enjoyed the skiing last year. The state of the trails is an important factor in this enjoyment. I don't buy a pass because I think I will be able to be rescued quickly if something untoward happens. Maybe this is wrong, but it's the way it is. I would guess that most skiers think this way.

I can see that the NCC have a problem if they want to both ensure the fastest emergency response on any trail, and optimum ski conditions for back cross country skiers. "Sticking it" to the cross country skiers is a solution - maybe not the best one.

Paul

Subject: Snowshoers on ski trails

While skiing in the Gatineau Park today at about 1 p.m., I found that trail 18 and 21 (between 18 and 2) had been completely obliterated by snowshoe tracks. From the tracks, it looked as if the snowshoers came up trail 2 from 40, turned onto trail 21 and then onto trail 18.

Can you do anything to prevent this from happening?

A season pass holder, Jean C

NCC Response:

Sent: Monday, February 23, 2009 3:12 PM

Subject: RE: Snowshoers on ski trails

Thank you for contacting the National Capital Commission (NCC).

In answer to your concerns, the growth in the snowshoe industry in the last few years is phenomenal and is universal to most natural parks and ski areas. Over the years, the main problem that existed on our ski trails was caused by walkers / hikers damaging the ski conditions. The occurrence of people walking on the ski trails remains a concern but it has not constituted a major issue for the last two years. It is quite probable that a large numbers of the users who were walking on the groomed trails in the past have now joined the ranks of the snowshoeing community.

We are aware that the challenge now resides in better communicating this service to this group. Signage encouraging snowshoers to use the designated trails is in preparation and will be posted at various trailheads, such as P12. It is also presumable that many snowshoers are not aware of the negative impact that their activity has when they travel over the tracks made for skiing.

Globally, any skier may contribute to improving the situation by taking a minute to explain to each snowshoer encountered on a ski trail how the elimination of the tracks is affecting the quality of the ski experience. We will also ask the parking lot attendant to pay attention to this particular issue. If you have any additional questions, comments or suggestions, please feel free to contact us again.

*Information Officer
National Capital Commission*

Appendix 2

Individual Comments from <http://ski.nordicwind.ca>

Name: **Jean**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **No**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Maybe**

Date: **2009-Mar-11-20.34.10**

Hi Harold,

John and I spent 5 days last week skiing at Mont Ste Anne Park and Camp Mercier. The trails there were in great shape, well-maintained and track-set. However, for variety of trails, the number of trails, and the levels of skiing, the Gatineau Park still wins hands-down. We think that the Park is the best in the East.

Both areas, though, seem to be doing better for the snow-shoers. The snowshoe trails are completely separate from the ski trails, they cross at right angles, and are well-signed.

Name: **Wanda**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **No**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes**

Date: **2009-Feb-23-08.13.40**

I had been away from Gatineau Park for a few winters. When I returned, and visited the park for skiing, I could not believe the state of the grooming, or overgrooming. It was like skiing on a roadway with the actual groomed track as hard as rock. Discovering that most of the park was like this was so disappointing. It was like losing something very important in my life. There is no reason for me to buy a pass or visit the park in the winter anymore. My skis are a little wider than the norm and they don't even fit comfortably into that rock hard track. And more importantly, the grooming is an embarrassment to the park. Where years ago I would sing the praises of the variety of skiing available in the Gatineaus, I just don't do that anymore. For anyone visiting the park to ski, from another province or even from another country, their experience will be far less than exhilarating.

Really, the grooming needs to change and to reflect the variety of skiers using the trails.

Name: **Fay**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **No**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes with some changes**

Date: **2009-Feb-22-19.59.30**

I would like less grooming on the "back-country" trails -- requires more skill to ski and that equals more fun! That is the whole point, after all, isn't it!?

Name: **John**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Maybe**

Date: **2009-Feb-16-21.14.20**

Trail maintenance has definitely not been impressive this year.

I've had three very poor experiences. On one occasion trail #22 was in generally poor shape and strangely rutted. I can't say whether this was due to "grooming" of some form but I have skied this trail for years and have never seen it in such a state. On another occasion a visit to trail #21 was ruined by the fact that it had been rolled and so rendered quite unsuitable for skiing. And just today, when conditions were such that grooming was absolutely essential, we were amazed to find that trail #1 (of all trails) had not been attended to.

In general the trend is depressing. Ever less attention seems to be paid to removing trees and so on, ever more trails are getting taken over by snowshoers (#16 is a particular loss), and skate skiers are encroaching on what should be classic only trails and destroying the tracks (trail #5 is a case in point).

Name: **John**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **No**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes**

Date: **2009-Feb-12-18.48.57**

Please stop destroying the back-country trails! What makes them unique is that they are narrow little trails through rough terrain! They have been track set by people who love them for over 50 years! Making them wide enough and safe enough for a groomer basically destroys them! Why would you want to do that???????

Name: **Dean**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **No**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes**

Date: **2009-Feb-11-21.47.00**

I agree with the basic issues that Harold has expressed. Twenty-five years ago I was a novice(first timer) ck skier and learned a lot by my experiences on back country trails, which inspired me to continue experiencing.... Back then there was no park fees and no grooming. The guy who taught me was Gary Watts who started the Ottawa Outing Club who introduced me and a boat load of people to this great winter outdoor activity. His main motto for teaching was "if you are not falling you are not learning". The experience of the back country day outing on fresh powder is something I will always cherish.

Dean Hammill

ex co owner of the OOC for the past 25 years

Name: **wally**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **50% of the time**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes**

Date: **2009-Feb-11-15.46.00**

Snowshoeing is here to stay. We are selling as many snowshoe units as skis. The profile of this user group is much wider than that of the skier and the potential places they are being used is much broader. The good news is its a great healthy, peaceful, family, social or solo form of exercise. I'd say 30% of the users own both skis and snowshoes and 15% of people that start out as only snowshoers , convert to using both. The problem is twofold: snowshoers do not pay any fees to use the parking lots or Gatineau Park trails (except for taxes) and NCC has not reacted quick enough to create a separate starting point for snowshoers , so the beginning of many trails gets trampled by snowshoers. Novice snowshoers are often nervous about going off trail which leads to conflicts on the backcountry routes. As this market matures we will see less of this I hope. The range of an average snowshoer is less than a third of that of a backcountry skier so usually you ski away from the problem but more education/signage is necessary. We try to begin this right in the store. I thought the Carman Trails snowshoe centre was the right way to go and we should encourage a snowshoe trails entry point

Name: **wally**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **50% of the time**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes**

Date: **2009-Feb-11-15.16.00**

Hi Harold

Thanks for taking the initiative on this issue. As you know I`m only a backcountry skier. There is a lot of confusion about this term because it has such extreme connotations in the west.

All we do is explore all the swamps and old historic trails that are ungroomed but so beautiful in the winter... and unaccessible in the summer. It's slower and less dangerous than skiing a crowded scraped track.

Sometimes it's hard work but you get to enjoy your trail on the way home and until it snows again (unless a snowshoer worried about getting lost insists on walking on, instead of beside, your track). The single track groomed trails that sometimes link our backcountry routes are overgroomed and are safest & most fun when there is fresh snow. I`d have no problem supporting cutbacks in trail grooming if it meant leaving these trails to volunteers. I could see an adopt a trail program where a club or corporate group committed to grooming trails like this by skiing them and hand clipping obstacles. Spend the money on the skate/classic trails and cabins.

Name: **Yvon**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **No**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes**

Date: **2009-Feb-10-17.53.00**

As a classic X-country skier, I much prefer ungroomed trails, especially the "backcountry" trails. There are plenty of other trails for the skate skiers. The back country trails were much better in the old days, before NCC started charging a fee and using grooming machines!

Name: **Tim**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **No**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Maybe**

Date: **2009-Feb-10-17.23.00**

I strongly support not grooming the back country trails. Skiing one of these unprepared trails is a unique experience. There are plenty of groomed trails available for those that prefer them. The NCC should be encouraging skiers to experience cross country skiing in its pure and original form.

Name: **Karen**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes**

Date: **2009-Feb-10-13.11.00**

Although I haven't been able to ski the trails this year, I can see them in my mind as I read these comments. Having learned to cross country ski mostly through the backcountry trails, I mourn the loss of so many of these trails in Gatineau Park. Yes, being able to ski fresh snow is one of the greatest pleasures to a classic skier, the feeling of being alone in a totally black and white world, the freedom to ski where you feel only the animals have gone before, what could be better.

Name: **Julie**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **No**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes**

Date: **2009-Feb-10-13.05.00**

Name: **Anca**

Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails?: **No**

Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?: **Yes**

Date: **2009-Feb-10-10.53.00**

Hi Harold and Marion, I am not an avid user of back-country trails, I "save" the treat for days with lots of fresh snow... So I am really supporting your proposal, to stop grooming the back-country trails and to educate hiker/snow-shoers. I think the beauty of many trails

can be enjoyed so much more without the trails beeing over-groomed...
And NCC could save some money...
All the best, hugs, Anca

Poll results:

	yes	90%	50%	10%	no
Are you happy with the way the NCC is grooming the back-country trails ?			2		11
	no	maybe	yes .. with some changes	yes	
Would you put your name to a Policy Change Proposal to be delivered to the NCC?		3	1		11
