

RESPONSIBLE RECREATION

in the Vancouver,
Coast & Mountains
Tourism Region

Executive Summary Report

Commissioned by:

Sea-to-Sky Destination Management Council
(September 2024)

Research Supporting **“Don’t Love It To Death”**
Responsible Recreation Program.

Report by:



Larose Research & Strategy
Land Use. Tourism. Transport.

FOREWORD

The results of this extensive research clearly demonstrate that outdoor recreation requires careful planning, management, and robust communications.

It is imperative to explain to users about the rules and good practices, especially in highly populated and globally recognized recreation destinations such as the Vancouver, Coast & Mountains tourism region.

These issues and impacts should, however, be considered in the appropriate context. With an estimated 400+ established recreation areas in the region, the 20-25 notable “problem areas” in the study and the associated impacts represent only a fraction of the recreation in the region. Most outdoor recreation occurs without significant negative impacts on nearby communities, the environment, or other recreationists. It should also be noted that the results are public perceptions – the beliefs and perspectives of individuals.

While a thorough review of the report was undertaken by several specialists in recreation and tourism in the region, and many of these perspectives were generally confirmed as being valid, they nonetheless are the perceptions and opinions of individuals. Several of the impacts are well-known and are already being addressed by various organizations in the region, including the *Don't Love It To Death* program managers.

Overall, the results strongly suggest that more can and should be done to address these undesirable impacts of irresponsible outdoor recreation in the region. This will ensure that recreation can continue to be responsibly developed and managed so that its myriad benefits can be realized, for physical and mental health, community well-being, economic resilience, and environmental awareness.



Photo: Abby Cooper (@abbydells)

REPORT OVERVIEW

In April 2024, outdoor recreationists in the Vancouver, Coast & Mountains (VCM) tourism region were engaged in a first-ever comprehensive evaluation of responsible recreation for the region, which extends from Hope and E.C. Manning Provincial Park in the southeast to Pemberton and Lillooet in the northwest.

The research supports the *Don't Love It To Death* (dontloveittodeath.com) responsible recreation program of the Sea-to-Sky Destination Management Council, and included an anonymous survey comprising more than 700 responses and 2,850 written comments on the specific nature of irresponsible recreation issues and possible solutions.

The focus of the survey and accompanying research included:

- Recreationist awareness of “impact areas” such as garbage, unsafe behaviours, and human-wildlife interactions that are the focus of *Don't Love It To Death*, as well as perceptions on the severity of impacts, specific problem activities and geographic areas of concern.
- Perceptions on root causes of these issues by recreationists from different activity sectors.
- Recommendations to address the impacts, including- but not limited to- the role of persuasion campaigns such as *Don't Love It To Death*, BC AdventureSmart, WildSafe BC, and others.

The six **Don't Love It To Death** impact areas were assessed.



Garbage and
Human Waste



Human-wildlife
Conflict



Unsafe Behaviour,
Lack of Preparedness



Lack of Respect
People & Environment



Trespassing &
Disrespectful Use



Overcrowding,
Overuse & Traffic

The information is being used by the Sea-to-Sky Destination Management Council and its partners to assist with further refining their strategies to support more responsible recreation in the region.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

A special thank you to Substrate Studios for assistance with tracking survey marginals and adjusting survey promotions to ensure a robust and broadly representative survey dataset with a confidence level of +/- 3.6% - 4.2%, 19 times out of 20.

Also thank you to the draw prize donors whose generous contributions encouraged responses to the survey: Holiday Inn and Suites North Vancouver, Capilano Suspension Bridge, Grouse Mountain, Vancouver’s North Shore Tourism Association, Sea to Sky Gondola, Britannia Mine Museum, Sandman Hotel Squamish, and Tourism Whistler.

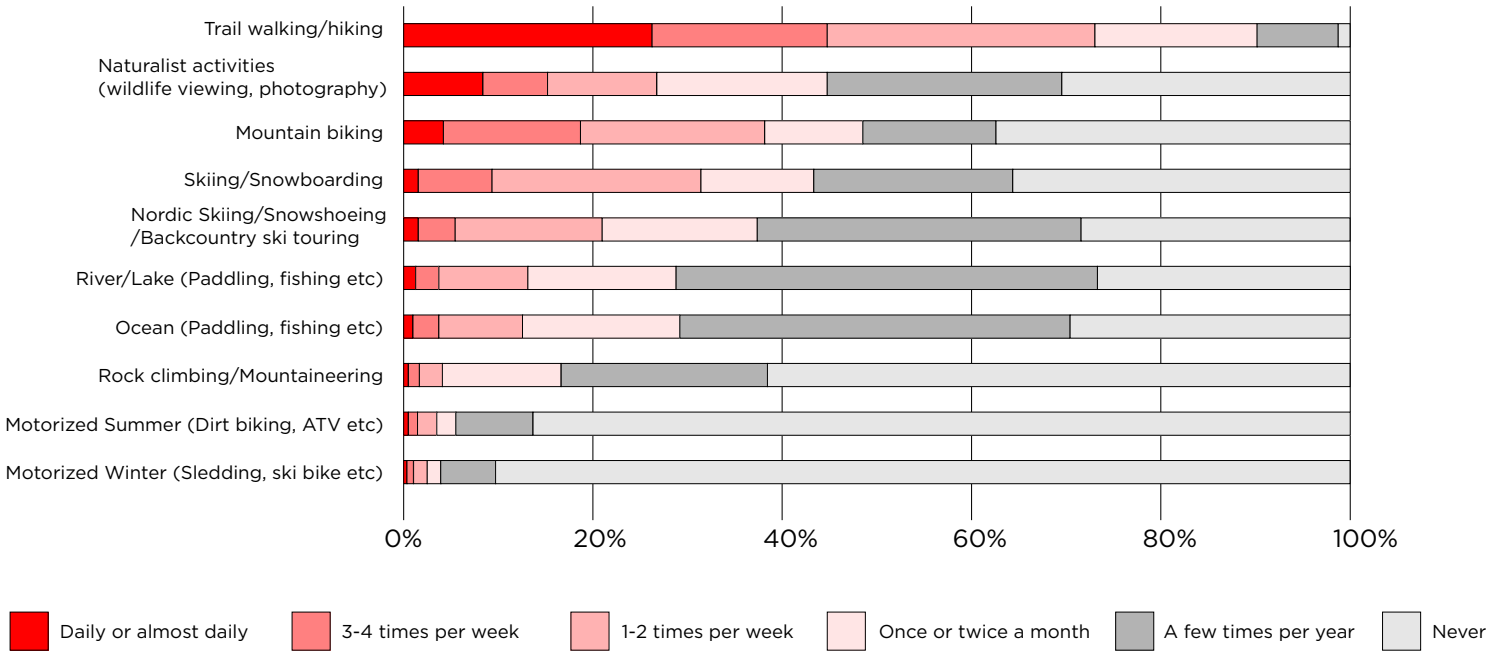
Finally, heartfelt gratitude to the many individuals and organizations who are dedicated to preserving these unique and special places: BC Conservation Officers, Indigenous Land Guardians, recreation clubs and other community organizations, BC Wildfire Service, BC Parks, municipal governments, Recreation Sites & Trails BC, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) at all levels, and non-profit organizations such as BC AdventureSmart, WildSafeBC, Leave No Trace, Avalanche Canada, BC Search and Rescue (SAR) organizations – and many others.

TYPES OF RECREATIONISTS IN THE RESEARCH

Trail walkers / hikers were the most common respondents to the survey, followed by light naturalists and mountain bikers. Survey response levels do not necessarily reflect user group volumes, but they are strongly correlated due to the high volume of responses and randomization procedures. Many types of recreation activities have users who

are at least weekly participants. One notable trend is that more than 70% of trail walkers / hikers participate in the activity at least once weekly (top row). Winter recreationists tend to participate with less frequency in part due to the shorter available season and in part due to winter recreation areas typically being further away from population centres.

How Often Do You Participate In The Following Activities?

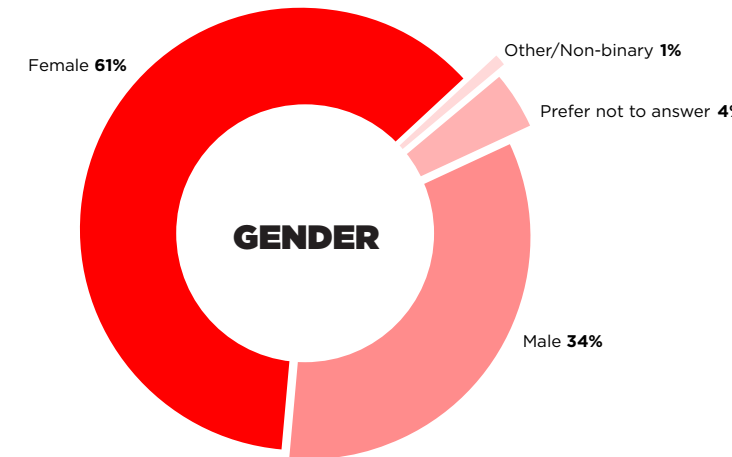
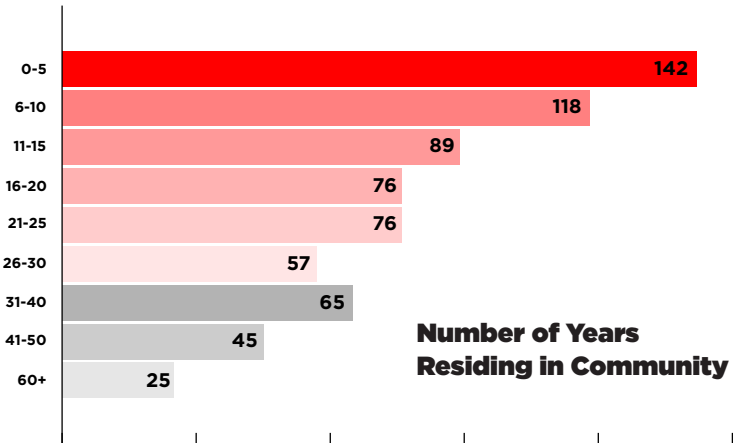
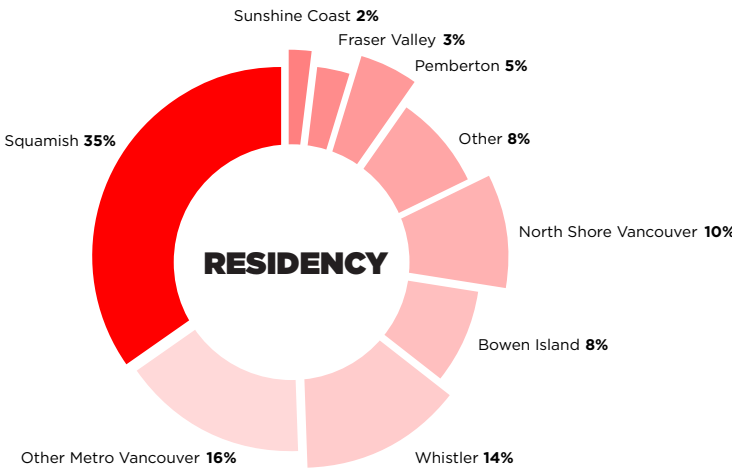
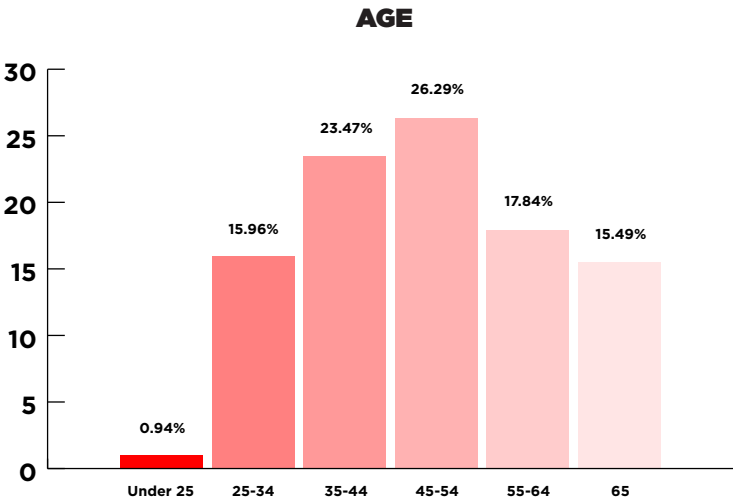


RESEARCH FINDINGS

Respondent Residence, Age, Residency Duration, and Gender

Among the **705 respondents**, over one-third (35%) were from Squamish, 16% were from other Metro Vancouver areas, 14% from Whistler, and 10% from Vancouver's North Shore – in addition to respondents from other parts of the VCM region. The age profile of respondents was also broadly representative of most adult age groups, except for the under-25 cohort.

Respondents who were relatively newer to their current community (10 years) responded in highest proportion, however more than 300 respondents had lived in their current community for 20+ years. Female respondents outnumbered males by a 2:1 ratio, while 5% were non-binary or did not respond.



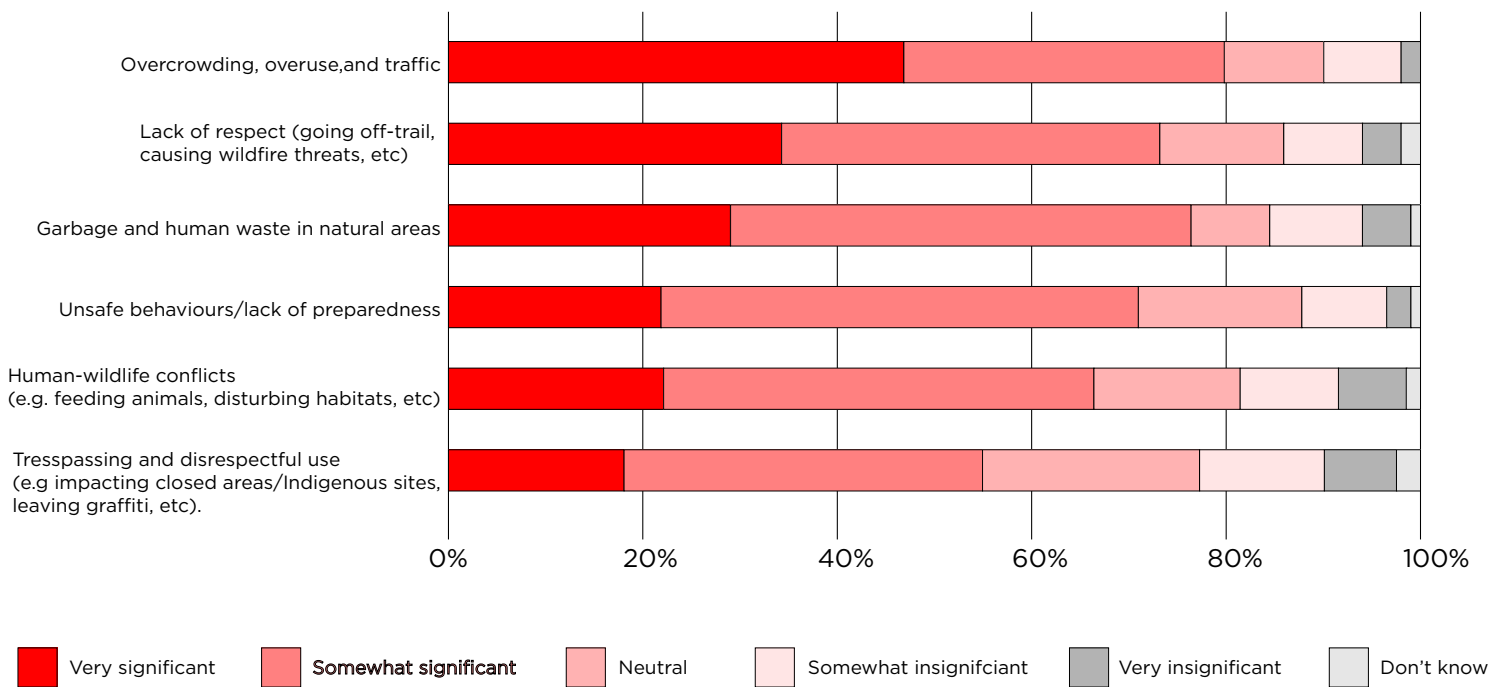


SEVERITY OF ISSUES - ASSESSING THE SIX IMPACT AREAS

The *Don't Love it to Death* (DLITD) impact areas generally have high overall levels of (negative) impact, which is an important finding overall. The most significant impact is “overcrowding, overuse, and traffic” with the highest proportion of “very significant” (47%) and somewhat significant (33%) impacts.

It should be noted that this category (overcrowding, overuse, and traffic) is a slightly different category than the others, as it contributes to challenges in other impact areas, as the increasing use and crowding puts pressure on recreation infrastructure, local flora and fauna, and other recreationist experiences.

How significant a problem do you consider the following to be in the region?



Regional Variations – the significance of the six impact areas was mostly consistent throughout the sub-regions in this study. The only notable difference was that negative impacts due to overcrowding, overuse, and traffic were more severe in high volume / high traffic areas such as Metro Vancouver and the Sea-to-Sky region, which stretches from Vancouver’s North Shore up the east side of Howe Sound to Squamish, Whistler, Pemberton, and Lillooet. Less populated and lower volume areas, such as the Pemberton-to-Lillooet area were more concerned with garbage and human waste, as well as adverse interactions with wildlife.



Photo: BC Parks

RECREATIONIST PERSPECTIVES ON TYPES OF IMPACTS

A thorough evaluation of 2,850 written comments was undertaken to better understand the specific nature of the six DLITD impact areas, including the specific types of actions that are causing the problems, geographic areas where the issues are most prevalent, and recommendations to address the impacts. The site-specific impacts are categorized based on the number of mentions in the survey.

Impact #1



(Most Significant): Overcrowding, Overuse and Traffic

Main Aspects of the Issue:

- Popular attractions such as parks, mountains / trails, and waterways have the most prevalent impacts – especially, but not exclusively, in peak summer months and on weekends.
- Travel along major transportation corridors to popular attractions on the North Shore and Sea-to-Sky can be extremely congested in peak periods, with many residents avoiding these areas during known busy periods, which are increasing in geographic spread and temporal frequency.
- Social media exacerbates crowding at signature attractions and recreation areas in the region.
- Significant parking and access issues exist throughout the entire region, but are most commonly mentioned on Vancouver’s North Shore and through to Squamish and Whistler during summer.
- Growth in certain activities such as mountain biking, e-biking, e-motorcycles (e.g., Surrans) are placing increasing pressure on already over-burdened recreation infrastructure in some areas.
- Reservation requirements and/or user caps for popular public attractions can disperse use and lessen crowding pressures.

Areas / Attractions Most Impacted

HEAVILY IMPACTED	IMPACTED	SOMEWHAT IMPACTED
Joffre Lakes, Lynn Valley, Vancouver North Shore (overall), Sea-to-Sky (overall), Diamond Head (Squamish), Cat Lake, Crippen Park, Quarry Rock.	Cypress Provincial Park, Murrin Park, Duffey Lake area (beyond Joffre), Garibaldi Park, Cape Rodger Curtis, Murrin Park, Golden Ears Park, Semaphore Lakes, Squamish River Valley, Squamish Estuary, Bowen Island, Stanley Park.	Alice Lake, Elfin Lakes, Brohm Lake, Seymour Arm, Squamish Smoke Bluffs.

“Generally people are respectful and well prepared, there are often several [emergency] calls throughout the summer that highlight lack of preparation.”



Photo: Patrick Ryan

Impact #2

(Second Most Significant): Lack of Respect, Going Off-trail, Causing Wildfire Threats, etc.

Main Aspects of the Issue:

- Alpine hiking has significant impacts even with moderate volumes of use, due to the highly sensitive nature of pristine mountain ecosystems.
- Recreationists in many activities often ignore area closures / signage / gates / fences.
- Bluetooth speakers with loud music are far too common and highly disruptive to most users.
- Dogs on trails and in riparian areas, particularly off-leash, is a commonly identified concern.
- Campgrounds have significant litter and human waste issues. Leave No Trace principles need to be followed far more often, especially in the frontcountry and in high volume camping areas.
- Mountain biking has grown rapidly throughout the region, and unsanctioned trail construction continues to be an issue, as well as other disruptive uses (riding hiking-only trails, trail braiding, etc.).
- E-biking has grown exponentially in the past five-plus years and while this has improved access to new outdoor experiences for many groups, it has produced numerous new challenges, particularly related to higher speed ascension of typically downhill trails, and trail erosion.
- Campfires around the Stawamus Chief are often not extinguished by climbers, hikers, and riders.
- Crowding pressures.

Areas / Attractions Most Impacted

HEAVILY IMPACTED	IMPACTED	SOMEWHAT IMPACTED
Joffre Lakes, Garibaldi Park, Squamish River Valley, North Shore MTB trails.	Squamish Estuary, Grouse Mtn / Grind, Cat Lake, Mt. Gardner (Bowen), Elfin Lakes, Lynn Canyon / Creek.	Cypress Provincial Park (St. Mark's Summit), Lost Lake trails, Alice Lake, E.C. Manning Park.

“I always pick up bottles on my walks because people think they can treat the environment like a garbage dump.”



Impact #3



Garbage and Human Waste in Natural Areas

Main Aspects of the Issue:

- Areas with higher volumes of use have concentrated, more visible impacts, such as several Sea-to-Sky attractions, Golden Ears Provincial Park, Vancouver’s North Shore, and other frontcountry parks.
- Well-known / high-volume recreation areas like Squamish mountain biking staging areas (Pseudo, Half Nelson, Mikis Shelter), North Shore trails, and Metro Vancouver Regional Parks lack washroom facilities.
- The most common littering concern was “doggie poop bags” left along trail edges, often not collected after the end of the hike.
- Temporary campers / “van lifers” / squatters using outdoors as bathrooms has reached epidemic levels in areas between Squamish and Whistler, in particular. Multiple comments were made regarding dog poisonings (from human waste) and water contamination from this issue.
- Vancouver North Shore and Squamish trails were commonly cited as having significant issues with human waste along trails, correlated with a lack of outhouse facilities in those areas.
- In general, even modest garbage / waste impacts of individuals in very busy areas can produce severe cumulative impacts, whereas in the more remote backcountry areas low levels of garbage and human waste can have significant impacts in these sensitive ecosystems.

Areas / Attractions Most Impacted

HEAVILY IMPACTED	IMPACTED	SOMEWHAT IMPACTED
Squamish River Valley, Mamquam FSR, Squamish Estuary, Crippen Park, Alice Lake, Stawamus Chief.	Chilliwack River Valley, Garibaldi Park (Panorama Ridge, Black Tusk), Grouse Grind / BCMC, Joffre Lakes, Cat Lake, Cheakamus Canyon	Davis Lake Prov Park, Elk Mtn, Mosquito Creek, Porteau Cove Trailhead, Quarry Rock, Vedder River, Mt. Wedge.

“I have had to call SAR on multiple occasions for others.”



Photo: Penticton Search and Rescue / BC Search and Rescue Association

Impact #4



Unsafe Behaviours / Lack of Preparedness

Main Aspects of the Issue:

- There are two main dimensions to this issue: 1) Inexperienced, mostly urban residents with easy frontcountry access who are completely unprepared for the outdoors. 2) More experienced recreationists who may underestimate the highly challenging and volatile backcountry conditions of the Coast Mountains.
- Social media promotes areas that less experienced recreationists believe to be safe due to their popularity, not understanding the rugged and unpredictable nature of the region's mountains.
- Easy access via mountain resort chairlifts and gondolas enables less experienced users to access higher risk backcountry terrain without adequate skills, and technologies such as mobile devices, GPS, and digital maps, giving them a false sense of security in highly challenging terrain.
- Frequent, though lower severity, issues arise with less experienced, typically urban residents who hike frontcountry areas in flip flops and city wear. Often, they do not pack water, safety equipment or navigational aids, and do not share their itineraries with friends or family.
- Visitors to Canada and British Columbia are often unaware of how vast and rugged the recreation terrain can be, even in the frontcountry, and often put themselves in danger.
- Water-based recreationists in the Átl'katsem / Howe Sound / and Salish Sea area underestimate cold water temperatures. The ease of watercraft rentals and ocean access can place them in dangerous circumstances without proper equipment or training (weather aids, navigation devices, appropriate PFDs /knowledge of use, etc.).

Areas / Attractions Most Impacted

HEAVILY IMPACTED	IMPACTED	SOMEWHAT IMPACTED
Joffre Lakes, Garibaldi Park, Squamish River Valley, North Shore MTB trails.	Squamish Estuary, Grouse Mtn / Grind, Cat Lake, Mt. Gardner (Bowen), Elfin Lakes, Lynn Canyon / Creek.	Cypress Provincial Park (St. Mark's Summit), Lost Lake trails, Alice Lake, E.C. Manning Park.



Impact #5

Human-Wildlife Conflicts

Main Aspects of the Issue:

- Feeding animals in urban interface / frontcountry areas is far too common – birds, ducks, squirrels, raccoons, and sometimes larger mammals.
- Visitors following bears on trails for photos / interacting from vehicles is also far too common.
- Residential encroachment – especially in the Fraser Valley, Whistler, and Pemberton Valley areas is causing far more bear encounters than in the past, with many trailheads within communities.
- Trails at higher elevation / backcountry / wilderness edges (Whistler / Pemberton) are resulting in increasing Grizzly encounters that threaten both the bears and humans.
- Food storage is lacking for mid/backcountry areas – e.g., insufficient storage, tree caches, etc.

Areas / Attractions Most Impacted

HEAVILY IMPACTED	IMPACTED	SOMEWHAT IMPACTED
Squamish Estuary, Crippen Park, Lindeman Lake area, Mamquam River, Squamish River Valley, Wedge Mtn.	Pemberton area, Bowen Island, Lynn Loop / Headwaters, “every North Shore hike with a view,” Train Wreck area, all urban parks (mostly feeding birds).	Lost Lake, Luckakuck Creek, Whistler valley trails.

“I feel the negative behaviors I see (overcrowding/garbage/trespassing) are a result of people focused on their PERSONAL needs/desires with little concern for overall good for the environment or others.”



Impact #6



Trespassing and Disrespectful Use

Main Aspects of the Issue:

- “Out of bounds” signage & fencing are often ignored.
- Graffiti on park / trail signage can be an issue in frontcountry and urban trail areas.
- Recreation in First Nation lands – whether reserves, title areas, or other important cultural areas – often occurs without authorization and impacts Indigenous values. Noise, garbage, adverse wildlife interactions, and foraging of Indigenous plants & medicines were often noted.
- Recreationists with off-leash dogs often result in dog waste and undesirable interactions with other trails users, wildlife, and flora.
- Children are often not managed in sensitive areas and/or on unstable and dangerous terrain.
- The practice of leaving painted rocks on trail edges and construction of rock cairns should end.
- Loud music via portable Bluetooth speakers is a very significant issue, and use of drones is also increasingly becoming problematic for those seeking peace and tranquility in nature.
- Trespassing onto private property for access remains an issue in some areas.
- Incompatible use is too prevalent – dirt bikes / quads /e-motorcycles on mountain biking and hiking trails, mountain bikes on hiking trails, snowmobiles in non-motorized (ski tour) areas, etc.
- Campfires around the Stawamus Chief are often not extinguished by climbers, hikers, and riders.
- Crowding pressures.

Areas / Attractions Most Impacted

HEAVILY IMPACTED	IMPACTED	SOMEWHAT IMPACTED
Squamish Valley, Joffre Lakes, Mamquam FSR area (Squamish).	Bowen Island, Indian Arm, Pemberton Valley, Keyhole, Frosty Mtn Meadows,	Mt Daniel (Pender Harbour – disrespecting Indigenous sites), Brandywine, Indian Arm,

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This research provides a rich tapestry of insights via an immense volume of data and detailed insights from recreationists in the Vancouver, Coast & Mountains region. The research shows clear trends about the nature and extent of issues, with variances and nuances

related to specific geographic areas, and the activities being undertaken by users. Demographic factors such as age, gender, and the duration of residence in the community also play an important role in impacts and awareness of issues.

This information can be used in a variety of different and complementary ways, including but not limited to:

- ✓ Identifying specific areas and attractions requiring specific types of education and persuasion messaging to influence responsible recreationist patterns.
- ✓ Understanding the focus and tone of messaging that resonates strongest to modify undesirable recreationist patterns in different geographic areas and for different activities.
- ✓ Understanding the varying demographic factors (age, gender, residency) that will influence the receptivity of recreationists to different types of messaging.

THE MOST IMPORTANT TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS RESEARCH ARE SUMMARIZED BELOW.

- 1 “Tipping points” related to new technologies** – new technologies such as lightweight / high-powered Bluetooth speakers drown-out the sounds of nature. Social media sharing has exposed what were once “hidden gems” to global travellers. New riding technologies such as e-bikes, e-motorcycles, side-by-sides, and electric sleds have challenged traditional boundaries between motorized and non-motorized activities. Drones routinely cause noise and privacy concerns. Over-reliance on handheld GPS / digital maps creates a false sense of security.
- 2 Impacts (and limitations) of persuasion campaigns** – education and persuasion are most effective for recreationists with low awareness and experience levels. More experienced recreationists who cause negative impacts – while less frequent in number and severity – typically understand the nature of the decisions they are making and therefore compliance and enforcement would be more effective.
- 3 Leveraging current management infrastructure & programs** – considering the depth and diversity of responsible recreation programs currently in existence, and their specialized focus areas, there is a need to leverage these existing programs, draw upon their successes and limitations, and amplify their messaging with shared resources and communications platforms. More can be done to bring these programs and their host agencies together for sharing, learning, and economies of scale.



- 4 Multiple recreationist touchpoints are needed, but with consistent messages** - current channels of communications can be better used to reach recreationists in different areas and contexts, reinforced multiple times and in different ways throughout the “travel cycle,” including i) Research and trip planning (typically online); ii) Transportation / travel processes; iii) On-site (in-situ) experiences on trails and in recreation areas; and iv) Post-trip communications and sharing.
- 5 Multiple methods of communications are needed** - research clearly shows that recreationists will be influenced by different types of messaging through varying channels appropriate to each travel cycle phase (including local travel). This includes online information shared by DMOs, governments, and/or recreation clubs about current issues and related recommendations to avoid negative impacts. Messaging should be reinforced through highway billboards, on kiosks and trail signage in recreation areas, on the sides of buildings / outhouses, and, perhaps most importantly, through direct human interaction on-site. With regard to the messaging, a combination of positive reinforcement and slightly “edgier” messaging such as *“Don’t Love It To Death”* are generally deemed to be more impactful than either on its own.
- 6 The importance of human interaction** - direct human interaction within recreation areas was mentioned by many to be a key, and often missing piece to current education and persuasion efforts. Survey respondents identified tourism / recreation “ambassadors” as one possible human touchpoint, which can include summer students working with DMOs and/or other organizations. Indigenous Land Guardians, the Conservation Officer Service, and recreation club volunteers were also identified as key partners in helping get out the message(s) on-site.
- 7 Not everyone is the same** - different types of recreationists have varying levels of awareness, concern, and propensity to act in the interests of responsible and sustainable recreation. The highest level of awareness and active engagement are generally younger recreationists, female, and frequent recreationists who are relatively newer to their communities. They are generally more likely to be involved in light naturalist activities (photography, animal viewing, etc.) than adrenaline seeking ones.



Photo: Adam Howell

- 8 Significance of impacts varies** – the most harmful impacts are correlated with the volume of use. Impacts are more severe in summers, generally, and in highly populated areas such as Metro Vancouver, the North Shore, Squamish, and Whistler. However, remote backcountry areas with lower use have highly sensitive ecologies where flora and fauna are easily disrupted - particularly high elevation alpine areas with short growing seasons and sensitive habitats. High biodiversity riparian areas such as the Squamish Estuary, the region's many small lakes, Cheakamus River, Joffre Lakes, and others are highly impacted by even lower levels of human waste, litter, roaming dogs, and pollution.
- 9 Social media is a source of issues** - but can be part of the solution – hundreds of comments identified social media (doing it for the 'gram) as a primary factor driving large volumes of less experienced users to pristine natural areas without the knowledge and skills to act responsibly. However, the enormous powers of social/digital media can also compel desirable behaviours. More than half of survey respondents indicated that the DLITD program is already having a positive impact. Many DMOs are also now engaging more meaningfully in responsible recreation social spaces, such as Destination BC, Tourism Squamish, Tourism Whistler, and Vancouver's North Shore Tourism Association among others. DMO expertise is critical to getting the right types of messaging to the right targets through the most effective channels and at the right times. This should continue and even expand.
- 10 The need to address temporary encampments** - near the top of the list of issues are the many temporary encampments in the region, with the Squamish to Pemberton area being most commonly cited. These encampments are often near fresh water sources, which can then be contaminated by human waste. This is also believed to be a product of social media, with so-called “van lifers” blogging about their carefree and natural lifestyles. The cost and (lack of) availability of housing is also believed to be correlated with this phenomenon. The boundary between people experiencing homelessness and “lifestyle / back-to-nature” campers is also becoming more blurred. Despite uncertainty about the cause of this problem, there is near consensus about the need for increased enforcement.



For more information about responsible recreation in the Vancouver, Coast & Mountains region visit dontloveittodeath.com.

**DON'T
LOVE IT
TO DEATH**

Photo: Sylvia Dolson