



FIRST JOURNEY TRAILS

In Indigenous communities around BC, the benefits of biking go beyond economic

words :: Josh McGarel & Mack Rankin
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Most off-road cycling associations in British Columbia can trace their beginnings to battling to legitimize rogue trail builds, but Indigenous communities have been fighting over land rights for much, much longer—and on a far greater scale. For most rural Indigenous groups around the globe, natural resource extraction has long been the only value given to their lands by colonialism.

In Soda Creek, a tiny farming and First Nations community on the banks of the Fraser River just north of Williams Lake, mountain biking offered a fork in that road. It wasn't an obvious path however, and the local nations needed a trailblazer. Luckily, they already had one in Thomas Schoen.

Originally from Germany, Thomas Schoen literally fell from the sky and landed in Soda Creek in the early 1990s. A paragliding pioneer, Schoen had been sampling thermals on a road trip from Seattle to Alaska when he took a liking to the open rolling hills of BC's Cariboo region and returned to make it his new home.

Foreseeing the fascination European tourists would have with North American Indigenous cultures, and needing some way to convince the Government of Canada to let him stay in the country, Schoen pitched the local First Nations on the idea of building a traditional heritage village to promote cultural tourism, an industry in its infancy at the time.

Schoen was unable to convince the first few Nations he approached, but when he approached the Xat'sull with his pitch, he was suddenly interrupted by a man sitting quietly in the corner. "I've been waiting 15 years for you to ►

TOP LEFT Fine tuning the final few turns of the Canim Lake connector. **TOP RIGHT** Dylan Onikamo follows James Doerfling as the trail crew tests the rhythm section on a Friday afternoon ride. **BOTTOM LEFT** Vince Ready floats off 'The Separator,' one of the biggest features of the Xat'sull Nation trail network at Soda Creek. **MACK RANKIN** **BOTTOM RIGHT** Visionary Thomas Schoen at the Xat'sull Heritage Village.





From the beginning, the Soda Creek trails were designed to traverse the village, offering a mix of adrenaline-fueled fun and the opportunity to interact with the rich history that the Xat'sull people still champion today.

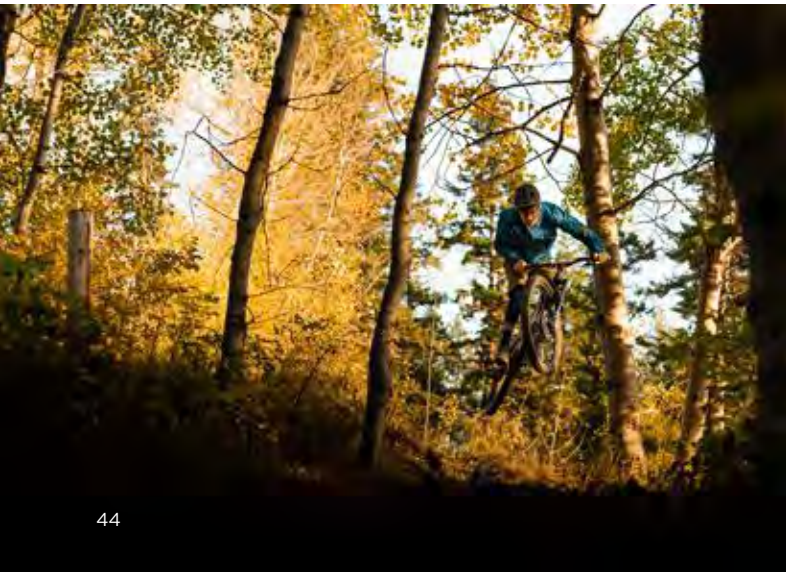
arrive!” exclaimed Ralph Phillips, a community elder. Phillips explained that he’d experienced a vision of Schoen during a sweat lodge ceremony years before—and a partnership was forged. With Schoen’s leadership, grant-writing skills and a sizable volunteer work team, the Xat’sull Heritage Village began to take form on reserve land just off Highway 97. Completed in 2012, the project was the first of its kind in the Cariboo region, and quickly gained national recognition. In addition to attracting (and educating) visitors, the village fuelled economic growth through workshops and demonstrations of traditional cultural practices.

But there was more to come. After buying his first downhill mountain bike in 2007, Schoen had another idea.

“It sure beats flipping burgers or paperwork,” says mountain biker and Xat’sull Nation member Kyle Sellars. As a child, Sellars would ‘guinea

pig’ the jumps he and his friends would build in the forest, and the freedom and thrill of the ride never went away. In 2016, he joined the First Journey Trails crew, a Schoen-led and community-driven project to develop a public campground and more than 32 kilometres of bike trails on traditional Xat’sull land. With an aim to extend the successes of the pre-existing Xat’sull Heritage Village, Schoen, Sellars and a group of local trail builders got to work crafting technical downhill singletrack flowing through fir forests into an open burn, punctuated with berms and jumps before dropping into a rocky, wooded bridge and stunts section through tight aspen groves. The trails loop around and through the reserve before ending at the shuttle pick-up zone beside the heritage village. From the beginning, the Soda Creek trails were designed to traverse the village, offering a mix of adrenaline-fueled fun and the opportunity to interact with the rich history ►

TOP LEFT Dylan Onikamo, mid-build at Canim Lake. **TOP RIGHT** Xat'sull Heritage Village on the shores of the Fraser River. **BOTTOM LEFT** Airing into the spruce leading to the Heritage Village. **BOTTOM RIGHT** The final few corners come together quickly. **© MACK RANKIN**





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that the Xat’sull people still champion today. It’s an experience many riders would be hard pressed to find anywhere else in the province.


As Soda Creek welcomes mountain bikers into their community, Schoen says it’s important to remember that mountain bikers are “only a small part of society. We have to be able to self-reflect as riders, as trail users, as builders and as recreational land users. While we love our sport and take trails as serious business, let’s be respectful and honour the reconciliation process by listening to what the Indigenous community is asking for. I deeply believe in my company motto ‘All Trails Are Indigenous’.”

The crown jewel of the Soda Creek build is the recently-completed, flowy XC trail connecting the Xat’sull-operated campground and the main community down the road. Planned as an economic driver—an easy way for visiting tourists to access the community and heritage village from their accommodation—the benefits of the trail extend far beyond tourism.

“We get the most satisfaction by watching others use our trails,” Schoen said in the summer of 2020. “Elders walking to berry picking grounds, new riders having a blast, band office staff out on a lunch walk... the trail has a profound impact on peoples’ lives.”

Sellars now has kids of his own. He recently moved just a few hours down the highway from Soda Creek to to Canim Lake, where he’s rejoined Schoen and the First Journey Trails on a new project: the development of a multi-use connector linking regions of the Tsq’escenemc community. While the Soda Creek trail network was developed with primarily economic benefits in mind, the Canim trails are decidedly community based. The Tsq’escenemc have obtained bikes for local youth and established riding and repair workshops to ensure people can continue the sport and maintain their own trails. While trail builders gather additional skills in forestry, first aid, and fire-fighting, the local youth gets something much deeper—a new way to connect to the wilderness and their traditional territories.

While there is no silver bullet solution to help small, rural communities and First Nations in BC diversify their economies or reduce reliance on resource extraction methods that often leave scars on both the landscape and communities, mountain biking and recreation are proving beneficial in a number of important ways. And the biggest impact isn’t strictly economic. The act of building and sharing time out on the trails, across generations and user groups has proven crucial to establishing a strong sense of community. For Sellars, that comes with riding with his friends on a Friday after work. And, when his kids are old enough, he’ll bring them out on the same trails he spends all day building.

“Mountain biking has been a thing for me since I was able to ride two wheels,” says Sellars. “Now watch this, I’m going for it!” He launches himself down the trail, pedalling hard all the way to the lip of a roller and takes to the air, weightless once again. For the Xat’sull, the Tsq’escenemc, and for many other Indigenous communities in BC, mountain biking is providing new opportunities for future generations. Maybe for those few moments on a bike, growing up is optional. 



TOP A fast singletrack through the remains of a charred forest. Soda Creek.
BOTTOM Big views of the Fraser River from the Soda Creek trail network.