

The Great Divide Trail Association



Strategic Plan

2025 – 2029



THE GREAT DIVIDE TRAIL ASSOCIATION

The Great Divide Trail Association is committed to reconciliation which starts by taking this, and every opportunity, to acknowledge our honor and privilege to live, work and play within the Treaty 7 territory.

We honor and acknowledge that the GDT passes through traditional Indigenous territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Stoney (Īyãñé) Nakoda, Tsuut'ina, Cree, Secwepemc, Lheidli T'enneh, Ktunaxa, Sinixt and Métis.

The Great Divide Trail Association would like to invite you to advocate for what you love and to preserve nature for future generations to enjoy, while educating yourselves and others on Indigenous history and perspectives.



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THE GREAT DIVIDE TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Executive Summary

A Strategic Plan is the critical document that ensures that everyone involved in the building, maintaining, and promoting of the Great Divide Trail (GDT) is aligned in vision and action. A Strategic Plan sets the objectives and focus; it provides insight on current activities, a means of prioritizing future activities, and the ability to evaluate the success of these actions.

Over the past year, the Great Divide Trail Association (GDTA) has undertaken a comprehensive strategic planning process to realign its long-term goals. This process began with an in-depth environmental scan and extensive outreach to stakeholders to gather diverse perspectives. The Strategic Planning Committee formulated key questions to obtain critical insights from each stakeholder group. The collected data was then analyzed and presented to the Board. This environmental survey informed a thorough Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis, which in turn formed the basis of our self-evaluation.

The key finding from this exercise is that the GDTA undertakes a lot of work and is succeeding in its mission – there is a lot of great work going on, and it needs to continue. At the same time, the SWOT exercise highlighted a handful of key foundational areas that the GDTA needs to prioritize in the coming years. These have become our **Strategic Priorities** (page 9) and cover aspects of the trail, the association, and our partnerships. By providing focus on these specific areas, we will be able to increase momentum for activities in support of these areas.

Concurrently, the Board and Strategic Planning Committee have reviewed and updated the GDTA's Mission, Vision, and Values to ensure they reflect our current priorities and aspirations. This document outlines the outcomes of these efforts, including the refined strategic plan and the updated mission, vision, and values.



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The Great Divide Trail Association

The Great Divide Trail (GDT) has a rich history and an ongoing development. It is rooted deeply in the Rocky Mountains' landscapes and the diverse cultures that have traversed these territories for centuries. Initially conceptualized in 1966 by the Girl Guides of Canada, the trail spans the border between British Columbia and Alberta, crossing traditional lands of various Indigenous groups such as the Blackfoot Confederacy and the Métis.

Jim Thorsell's 1970 guide marked the beginning of serious planning, with approval from the National Park Service aiming for completion by 1975. Despite setbacks in planning from Parks Canada, the trail began to materialize outside of the national parks through a federal youth program in 1974. These early efforts focused on areas not protected by park status to promote public interest and recreational use while balancing commercial interests.

Significant growth occurred in the 1980s, driven by government grants, volunteer efforts, and trail crews who expanded and maintained the trail. However, the 1990s saw a decline in development due to changing government policies that favoured logging and motorized access which discouraged volunteers and damaged parts of the trail.

Revitalization efforts surged in the 2000s with new guidebooks, renewed volunteer engagement, and organizational restructuring. The Friends of the Great Divide Trail rekindled maintenance and protection efforts, leading to continuous improvements, expansions, and community involvement up through the 2020s. Official recognition and designation of the trail in 2023 highlight its importance and the successful collaboration among volunteers, government entities, and advocates to preserve this natural corridor for future generations. Still, much remains to be accomplished, and this requirement becomes the purpose and intent of this strategic plan.



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Vision

The Great Divide Trail Association exists to advance our vision for the Great Divide Trail. The vision reflects the type of trail we strive to steward and the future we hope to secure for it. The Association prioritizes activities and measures successes by this vision.

The Great Divide Trail provides a wild and inspiring experience along the spine of the Great Divide. It is formally recognized and protected for future generations as a treasured Canadian hiking route.

Mission

The Great Divide Trail Association strives to realize its vision for the trail through action. Volunteers and staff work together in support of our mission.

Our mission is to collaborate with partners and communities to build, maintain, and protect the Great Divide Trail for the public's benefit. We educate, promote, and encourage use of the trail in a manner consistent with the conservation and preservation of its scenic and wilderness value.



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Values

The Great Divide Trail Association strives to maintain the following values in all of its endeavours and interactions. When you engage with us you will find us to be:

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| Collaborative | We value the dedication and hard work of our volunteers and embrace the diverse perspectives and contributions of our supporters. Working together, we can increase our effectiveness, achieve our common objectives, and fulfill our mission. We celebrate our successes and build and nurture long-standing relationships. |
| Respectful | We demonstrate integrity and respect for each other, as well as for the trail users, volunteers, stakeholders, supporters, wildlife, and wilderness environment on the Great Divide. |
| Stewards | We are dedicated to our ongoing responsibility to steward the resources of the GDT and the Association for the benefit of all, including future generations. |



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Guiding Principles

We hold the following as foundational to our association and look to these to guide our every action:

Reconciliation

The Great Divide Trail Association acknowledges and honours the lands of the GDT as the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples. We recognize the Blackfoot Confederacy, Tsuut'ina, Stoney (İyãhé) Nakoda, Cree, Lheidli T'enneh, Ktunaxa, Secwepemc, Sinixt and Métis who have called the Rocky Mountains home since time immemorial. We are grateful for the opportunity to live, work, and play here and thank all those who have served and continue to serve as stewards of the lands and waters of the Great Divide. As we continue our journey, we pledge to actively engage in reconciliation efforts. We will strive to learn, listen, and collaborate with Indigenous communities. By taking respectful action and fostering understanding, we aim to contribute to positive change.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The Great Divide Trail Association is committed to protecting the Great Divide Trail for everyone. To make that a reality, we must do all that we can to help make the GDT and our organization a welcoming and inclusive space. We value and welcome diversity and aim to be an accessible and inclusive community that honours, respects, and reflects the various ways people connect with the GDT and the Great Divide Trail Association.

Legacy

We honour the past visionaries and builders of the GDT and continue to embrace and share their dream. With passion and purpose, we persevere to have the Great Divide Trail completed and the route protected.

Connectivity

The GDT embodies a connection to each other and to nature through the passion of hikers, equestrians, volunteers, supporters, and government organizations. Common purpose unites us and creates a community of individuals and organizations, all pursuing the vision of the GDTA. On the Great Divide, we are all connected by the GDT.



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Strategic Priorities

The key finding from our Strategic Planning effort is that the GDTA undertakes a lot of work and is succeeding in its mission – There is a lot of great work going on, and it needs to continue. At the same time, we have identified a handful of key foundational areas that the GDTA needs to prioritize in the coming years. The areas that the GDTA will focus on can be grouped into three themes: **The Trail, The Association, and Our Partnerships.**



**The Trail /
Trail Experience**



**The
Association**



**Our
Partnerships**

Under each of these themes, we identified three priorities and developed specific and measurable goals for each of these priorities. The GDTA is and always has been working towards these priorities. In highlighting the specific priorities below, the GDTA is focusing attention on them and working to track and increase momentum towards their completion.

Trail Priorities

Trail Priority: Trail Maintenance and Development is guided by a Long-term Trail Plan

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- An inspiring long-term plan guides GDT development; priorities are clear and have been informed by community and partner engagement.

The GDTA has, throughout its history, devoted the bulk of its volunteer and financial resources to building and maintaining the trail itself. Our Strategic Plan recognizes this fact and puts continued focus and momentum towards these activities. Pairing these activities with a robust and well-articulated long-term trail plan will be important as we communicate with partners and stakeholders. The trail plan also helps to steer future activities and investments.



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Trail Priority: Advance Solutions that Improve Ease of Access

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- Prospective hikers face fewer logistical barriers in accessing and completing the trail.
- Opportunities exist for hikers to disperse throughout the GDT trail network to eliminate physical bottlenecks

The GDTA recognizes that hiking the GDT, particularly as a thru hiker, continues to be daunting endeavour due to the logistics of planning and the difficulties in securing the numerous permits required. The GDTA provides numerous resources to prospective hikers and works tirelessly behind the scenes to remove or lessen these barriers. While we will continue to pursue a “GDT Permit”, we will also continue to identify other ways in which the trip planning and hiking experience can be improved.

Trail Priority: Improve Awareness and Trail Recognition

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- The Canadian public has awareness of the Great Divide Trail and shares a sense of national pride in its existence.
- The GDTA and all land jurisdiction agencies, including Parks Canada, have a shared vision for the trail.
- The GDTA and all land jurisdiction agencies collaborate with GDTA on the formal protection and integrity of the GDT corridor.
- The GDT is officially recognized as a national long distance hiking trail.

The Great Divide Trail is truly a national treasure which deserves to be as well-known and highly-regarded as other areas of natural beauty. A public that knows and cares about the trail is a public that will help the Association in the protection of this public amenity. Increased awareness will result in an uptick of interest in hiking some or all of the trail; however, this can be kept to ecologically responsible levels through collaboration with the Parks and other land managers.

Partnership Priorities

Partnership Priority: Demonstrate a Commitment to Reconciliation

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- The GDTA has taken meaningful steps towards Indigenous reconciliation.



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- GDTA members understand how the GDTA's reconciliation action plan has influenced change and is impacting the way we work.

The GDTA believes in the importance of reconciliation and is committed to taking tangible steps on this journey. The GDT travels through land that belongs to, and has been used by, indigenous communities for time immemorial. The GDTA is committed to building partnerships with these communities and heeding their guidance as we pursue our vision.

Partnership Priority: Strengthen our Community Relationships

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- Important communities see the GDTA as credible stewards of the land through which the trail runs, and the GDTA brings benefits to the community.
- Communities and GDTA experience mutual pride in their relationship.
- The GDT has strong allies and advocates within Government of Canada, Parks Canada, the Governments of AB and BC helping to work for the protection of the whole trail.

The GDT passes through many traditional territories, communities, parks, protected land areas, and other areas. It is our desire to build relationships with the stakeholders of these areas such that we take mutual interest in one another's plans and desires.

Partnership Priority: Expand our Outreach

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- The GDTA has a larger, more diverse, and more engaged community behind it.

The GDTA continues to be almost exclusively a volunteer-driven Association, and membership contributes a large portion of the Association's unrestricted funding. We will work to maintain our existing community while we seek out new ways to engage with the public. We will identify opportunities to reach new audiences, both to spread awareness of the GDT and the Association, and to attract new volunteers and members of different backgrounds.

Association Priorities

Association Priority: Increase Staff and Volunteer Capacity

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- Volunteer numbers and skills are sufficient to meet the demands of the Association.



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- Staff numbers are reflective of the workload and adequate to accomplish the GDTA's goals.

The work and ambitions of the GDTA are currently being held back by a lack of capacity in both volunteers and paid staff. All GDTA committees need additional volunteers both to complete important projects and to ensure sustainability of their activities. Our one paid full-time staff member (our Executive Director) is relied upon to advance far more mission-critical activities than is sustainable. With more volunteers and more paid staff, the GDTA stands a better chance of realizing its vision.

Association Priority: Increase Unrestricted Funding

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- The GDTA has sufficient unrestricted funding to ensure the sustainability of the core activities.

A large amount of the funding for GDTA activities comes from grants, and this money is often tied to physical objectives on the trail. Furthermore, these grants often require that the Association provide its own matching funds toward those same projects. At the same time, a lot of key activities for the Association happen behind the scenes and away from the trail. For example, building relationships with land jurisdiction agencies, and other land use stakeholders. Access to more unrestricted funding will provide the Association with the ability to ensure staffing numbers are sufficient to meet our objectives, and to fund other trail projects that are not tied to grant funding.

Association Priority: Improve on how the GDTA Delivers on its Mission

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- Projects/work is being managed effectively by an overall master project list.
- Projects/work is being managed effectively and strategically and fully leverages the staff and volunteer capacity.
- The organization has clear roles and accountabilities.

Like any organization, the smooth operation of the Association and the efficient execution of its mission are dependent upon our organizational structure and the processes and policies we have in place. Thanks to great foresight and thorough work by its founders and past stewards, the GDTA has a very strong organizational foundation. Opportunities to build on this foundation have been identified mainly in the areas of project management, prioritization, and internal collaboration.



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Implementation Plan

Equally important to identifying and setting priorities is ensuring that we set ourselves up to meet our goals. As a starting point, the GDTA Board of Directors and our Committees have been:

- mapping existing activities against these initiatives; and,
- brainstorming new actions that could advance towards each objective.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The GDTA is implementing processes that will ensure that we keep the momentum up over the duration of this plan. For the Strategic Plan to guide us, it needs to be kept front and center throughout our planning. To achieve this, the GDTA has:

- implemented a centralized Major Activities Plan (MAP) showing the status of every activity mapped against the Strategic Priorities;
- provided guidance and tools to committee Chairs to leverage the Strategic Plan when prioritizing activities;
- directed the Executive Director to use this Strategic Plan as a guide in the prioritization of their activities and to provide regular updates to the Board of Directors on progress and blockers.

Furthermore, the GDTA Board of Directors will ensure the implementation of the following:

- communication to all volunteers the mapping of committee activities against the Strategic Priorities; and,
- a quarterly Strategic Plan Check-in meeting to review progress in depth and propose changes to activities or prioritization.

Budget and Resources

To ensure progress against our Strategic Priorities, the GDTA will ensure that sufficient funding and human resources (staff and volunteer time) will be available. This will be accomplished by:

- mapping expenses against the strategic priorities during the annual budget discussions and consciously allocating available financial resources accordingly;
- allocating staff time towards these priorities over others; and,



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- providing committees with direction related to the progress of these priorities. This may result in asking committees to prioritize certain activities over others to keep momentum up on all of these objectives.

Risk Management

The major risks to the GDTA achieving the objectives set out in this plan are external factors such as environmental, financial, stakeholder, operational, and regulatory challenges.

These are the same external factors that our Strategic Priorities are set out to mitigate.

Mitigations to external factors that could put our plans at risk include:

- conducting a quarterly Strategic Plan Check-in meeting to review progress in depth and propose changes to activities or prioritization; and,
- engaging stakeholders early and often, incorporating their feedback into our actions and plans.

Beyond the external risks, the major risk associated with this strategy is staff and volunteer burnout. Our ambitions vastly exceed our current staff and volunteer capacity and therefore we need to ensure that we do not over-stress our people in the pursuit of this plan. Mitigations to combat burnout include:

- setting realistic one-year objectives for the board and committees during our annual SMART¹ goal planning (October);
- developing a volunteer coordinator role to assist with attracting volunteers to fill specific roles;
- board discussion about board-level commitment, expectations, and capacity for volunteer activities – annually in advance of the AGM; and,
- directing committee chairs to check in with committee members annually (September/October)

Communication Plan

Progress towards the priorities in our Strategic Plan will be communicated:

- to our staff and volunteer community;
 - via direct access to the Major Activities Plan
- to our membership; and,
 - at the annual general meeting each year

¹ SMART refers to: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Annually each committee identifies a set of SMART goals they will pursue that year.



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- to our followers.
 - Via quarterly blog posts on the GDTA website

Conclusion

This Strategic Plan ensures that everyone involved in the building, maintaining, and promoting of the Great Divide Trail is aligned in vision and action. It recognizes the great work that the GDTA is doing and has done, while highlighting key foundational areas to prioritize in the coming years.

The Board of Directors of the Great Divide Trail Association invites all members, hikers, and fans to actively participate in the realization of this plan.