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Celebrating local wilderness: Dufferin?s Bruce Trail Day sees record turnout

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The Dufferin Hi-Land Bruce Trail Club celebrated Bruce Trail Day with true outdoor spirit, bringing in nearly 170 visitors to explore the local forests, enjoy live entertainment, and learn about local conservation efforts on Oct. 5.

The turnout marked a record for Bruce Trail Day in Dufferin County.

Don Stewart, community outreach director for the Dufferin Hi-Land Bruce Trail Club, said the turnout had matched his club's expectations, nearly hitting their anticipated turnout and surpassing it with extra trail-goers.

?We were aiming for 150 people, and we ended up with 147 attendees - plus another 20 or so who came through on their own and didn't know about the day,? Stewart said. ?All told, about 169 people came out.?

Stewart said the atmosphere was extremely positive, and attendees were very responsive to what the club had planned, buying much more merchandise than expected.

?Split Rock Narrows is a very popular and picturesque part of the trail,? he said. ?It's an easy walk, relatively speaking, people were very happy with the day. We had a record merchandise sale; people were bellying up and buying everything. [It] kind of surprised us, because we have a couple of other events coming up, and now we have to restock our inventory.?

The highlight of the experience, however, was the musicians dispersed throughout the trail loop. Local artists were brought on to give a little extra life to hikers passing through, and the forest echoed to the sounds of guitars and drums. The Fitzees, Sandy Harron, Dean Woods, Break Even Boys, and Carl Tafel were among the local musicians in attendance.

Bruce Trail Day is an annual, trail-wide event organized by the Bruce Trail Conservancy and its local clubs to celebrate the Bruce Trail, which runs from Niagara to Tobermory on the Huron Lakefront. The event also introduces people to nature, conservation, and outdoor recreation.

Held each fall, the public is invited to explore sections of the trail through guided hikes, educational displays, and family-friendly activities. Its purpose is to raise awareness of the Bruce Trail's environmental and cultural importance, promote conservation of the Niagara Escarpment, and encourage community involvement through volunteering, membership, and stewardship.

But the work the Conservancy does goes above and beyond maintaining what's there ? they are also actively working to restore ecosystems to their natural state before human interference.

?We're preserving a very unique, bio diverse area, which has been recognized as a UNESCO biosphere,? Stewart said. ?We're just not building a trail. We're trying to get rid of the invasive species and replant the natural species that should be in the area, some of which have just disappeared. All the clubs are finding, you know, what is indigenous to their areas, and replanting and removing.?

This is no easy undertaking. It requires a dedicated team of workers to maintain the trails on a consistent basis and to respond to damage. They rely on a small but dependable team to see the work done.

?You have to have certification through a course to go out and remove or clear out trees, so I couldn't do it,? Stewart said. ?So what the rest of us can do is identify the areas that need to be worked on or cleared, and then arrange for the guys to do it. It's got to be a minimum of a three man team, usually four men, because you need people on watch, making sure a hiker isn't coming through as a tree comes down. They are an amazing team.?

Another ongoing challenge, Stewart said, is land development. As human settlement pushes farther north out of the Greater Toronto Area, developers are also eyeing tracts of land the Conservancy hopes to acquire or protect.

?We're fighting against developers, of course,? he said. ?They want the same land we want, with all the beautiful views and vistas and whatever. So we need money, yes, because the developers have got deep pockets, and they want to buy the same land that we want to buy.?

Fortunately, the club maintains a good working relationship with local landowners who allow trails to run through their properties in support of the Bruce Trail.

?We are very fortunate that most of the people whose property we either walk on or walk close to, they're very supportive of the Bruce Trail and its concept,? he said. ?When land comes available, typically they will contact us first and say, ?do you want to talk to me?' so we have an opportunity first. And then, you know, it starts getting down to dollars and cents.?

With a supportive community and a record-breaking Bruce Trail Day, the Dufferin Hi-Land Club is going into the fall with spirits high. But there is always more to come. Their next trail event is the 25-kilometre challenge hike on Oct. 18, and they are currently looking for volunteers to join their biodiversity team to remove invasive Buckthorn plants from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Oct. 25.

For more information on the Bruce Trail, anyone interested can visit www.brucetrail.org, and for more information about the Dufferin Hi-Land Bruce Trail Club, visit www.dufferinbrucetrailclub.org