

Saving the Cup and Saucer Trail

By Bob Barnett

Over the May long weekend the first email and Facebook messages told me we had a problem on Manitoulin Island. There was a pile of gravel across the Bidwell Road entrance to the Cup and Saucer and a big red sign saying “CLOSED”.

The CBC phoned a few times and we confirmed that, yes, the Cup and Saucer Trail had been blocked off. The local Expositor and Recorder papers wrote articles about how one of Manitoulin and northern Ontario’s top tourist draws was suddenly shut down, right on the first big tourist weekend of the year. Just weeks before we’d heard the trail was open for 2017.

We’d heard rumblings that the Trail might be closed in 2016, so we’d made contingency plans to open it again, using land coming right up to Highway 540 which Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC) purchased in 1999. Years ago we’d flagged out a route and

even cut a new trail to the summit, but never “opened” it because the highway access was at a place where traffic between M’Chigeeng and Little Current goes too fast to have kids getting out of cars on the side of the road. We could have parked at Cold Springs Cemetery and crossed the highway, but that was several hundred metres away and again dangerous for kids and pets.

A Top Attraction

The closure raised a sleeping giant. Not only EBC, but Town of Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands (NEMI) cared and so did Manitoulin Tourism Association (MTA). This was billed as the fourth most important tourist attraction in northern Ontario and perhaps top of the bill for Manitoulin. We knew from studies that more than 10,000 people every summer parked here and walked to the top for a panoramic view over Lake Manitou, first from the Saucer and then after another steep scramble up the rocks, from the Cup over

Lake Huron. One weekend we logged 857 visitors, most of whom had come a day’s drive and 20 per cent of whom had crossed an ocean.

People have placed a myriad of images and videos on a few dozen websites. Just google “Cup and Saucer” to see them. Our own website has many. EBC has published hiking maps for a decade and distributes 10,000 a year which feature this as a highlight of Manitoulin, right on our own nature reserve. Tourist operators on Manitoulin recommend a visit to their guests.

This trail had been a collaboration between Eadie Construction which owns the parking lot and the first climb, Randy and Meredith Noble who own most of the “Saucer” and the north tip of the “Cup,” and EBC which owns most of the Cup or highest part and most of the Adventure Trail with the crevice cave and ladder at the base of the Cup cliffs. MTA maintains insurance while NEMI maintains portapotties and garbage removal from the parking lot. This handshake agreement has been going on since EBC bought the land almost 20 years ago.

So, the giant was now awake. NEMI got an emergency permit from Ontario’s Ministry of Transportation to put a culvert across the ditch at the highway. EBC’s Roy Jeffery gathered a dozen old-timers from EBC and Stan Ferguson from MTA who have helped EBC in the past and with three chain saws and seven big hand cutters, they cleared the trail. Two trail obstacles remained. Both the Saucer and Cup required a tougher scramble than most people could do. We debated permanent stone

and steel steps, but opted for a wooden ship’s ladder which is safe enough to get us through a decade of use.

An even greater obstacle was the parking lot. We couldn’t let people park beside or across the road. NEMI and EBC agreed to allow parking right by the Town’s boundary road allowance with Billings. Fortunately the land here is at the same grade as the highway. Across the new culvert we could remove enough trees (yes, it hurt) and scrape away the topsoil enough for gravel to be set down. NEMI and CAO Dave Williamson, with what seemed like overnight approvals from Council and Mayor Al MacNevin, stepped in. Their works crew had it done in just a few days.

Open Again

On June 8, only three weeks after the big red sign appeared, the new trail was opened officially. Only a week after the closing, The Gosling Foundation offered us a matching grant of up to \$5,000 to replace the signage and build the emergency ship’s ladders. Phil Gosling is a Bruce Trail pioneer who once ran Wellington Brewery. We suggest that you enjoy a beer as you plan your trip to see the new entrance to the Cup and Saucer. If you can spare a few dollars they will provide signage so visitors can appreciate the Cup’s natural and geological significance. We owe Roy, Stan, Dave, Al and others, a big round of applause. People make the world go round. The Cup and Saucer is open again.

Reach Bob Barnett of Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy through www.escarpment.ca or at 888.815.9575.



The new parking lot and sign for the Cup and Saucer Trail. EBC is raising funds to pay for their costs of creating new access to the trail. See their website, Facebook page or send a cheque to 503 Davenport Road, Toronto ON, M4V 1B8.