



Cypress Provincial Park Visitor Information and Signage for Backcountry Access

Introduction

Park visitors wishing to access the winter trails and backcountry of Cypress Provincial Park are required to travel on a corridor through the controlled recreation area (CRA), which is operated by Cypress Mountain Resorts (Cypress Mountain) under a Park Use Permit. The Federation of Mountain Clubs of British Columbia (FMCBC) believes that improving visitor information and signage for backcountry access will benefit both park visitors and Cypress Mountain. This report provides recommendations that the FMCBC believes will allow visitors to travel safely and efficiently through the CRA to access the trails and backcountry of Cypress Provincial Park.

Recommendations

Visitor information and signage that clearly communicates requirements and directions are essential for voluntary compliance with the operational and safety requirements of BC Parks and Cypress Mountain and for efficient operations and effective risk management. To increase the experience of park visitors and to allow safe and efficient access to the backcountry and trails outside the CRA, the FMCBC makes the following recommendations:

1. The requirement for a backcountry access pass and where it can be picked up needs to be clearly communicated on the BC Parks website, along with strategically positioned signs that park visitors will encounter between the parking lots and trailhead. To avoid duplicating information, Cypress Mountain should have an easy to find link to the BC Parks website for visitors looking for backcountry access information.
2. Maps with sufficient detail to orient and guide park visitors to the location where the backcountry passes are available and the location of the access corridor and winter trailhead should be available (and downloadable) on the BC Parks website, as well as strategic locations within the CRA.
3. Critical information and directions need to be conveyed more effectively through a combination of maps, images and words, taking into account the wide range of park visitors' English language abilities and winter backcountry skills and experience.
4. Directional signs and corridor markers need to be visible and strategically located to allow visitors to travel safely and efficiently from the parking lots to the winter trailhead, picking up the necessary backcountry pass along the way.

5. Overnight parking information, including how to park to optimize the number of parked vehicles and to allow snow removal, should be available on both BC Parks and Cypress Mountain websites, as well as at the overnight parking lot.
6. Backcountry signage is required at strategic locations to allow park visitors to make informed decisions about the terrain being accessed, given their skills, experience and equipment and current conditions, and to remind them that they are recreating at their own risk and need to be prepared for self-rescue.

Background

Cypress Provincial Park is a popular winter destination for snowshoers, hikers and backcountry skiers from Greater Vancouver. The winter trails and backcountry are accessed by travelling through the CRA on a backcountry access corridor (BAC) that is approximately 150 metres in length. To access the BAC, a free backcountry access pass/waiver is required, available only in the “Brown Bag Room” of the old Black Mountain Lodge, which is located on the east side of the Parking Lot 1 of the CRA. Washrooms for park visitors are in the Black Mountain Lodge, the Cypress Creek Lodge being reserved for downhill pass holders.

To safely and efficiently access the winter trailheads and backcountry outside the CRA, park visitors require easily accessible information and informative signage. Based on a visit to Cypress Provincial Park on December 20, 2016, visitor information and signage for backcountry access needs to be improved:

- Website information is too general, with no helpful maps or directional information to allow visitors to navigate their way from the parking lots to the Black Mountain Lodge and from the Lodge to the winter trailhead and backcountry.
- Front country signs are inadequate in terms of information, directions and locations for visitors to comply with the operational and safety requirements of BC Parks and Cypress Mountain.
- Signage for visitors is insufficient to locate the Black Mountain Lodge, the BAC or the winter trailhead for the Black Mountain Plateau and Bowen Lookout winter trails.
- Backcountry signage is insufficient to allow visitors to make informed decisions about trails and terrain, given their skills, experience and equipment, and current conditions.

Website Information

The information available on the BC Parks website is far too general to guide visitors. The website informs visitors that a Backcountry Access Tag is required to access the BAC; that the Backcountry Access Tag can be picked up from the Brown Bag Room in the Black Mountain Lodge; and, that there are BAC time restrictions. The information, including the printable “winter trail and backcountry corridor map” and the Park Map, is insufficient to orient and guide park visitors to the Black Mountain Lodge, the BAC, and the marked winter trails. All information is in English only, despite the wide range of park visitors’ English language abilities.

There is no information on the Cypress Mountain website regarding Cypress Provincial Park, the Backcountry Access Tag, the BAC or BC Parks marked winter trails. The Cypress Mountain website does have a link to the BC Parks website but it is difficult to find (see “Friends of Cypress Mountain” under “Community, Partners & Links”). To avoid duplication of information, the link to the BC Parks website needs to be much more prominent because many people visit the Cypress Mountain website to find out about backcountry access and trails.

Signage Observations from Recent Trip to Cypress Provincial Park

A visitor to Cypress Provincial Park would be lost without prior knowledge of the Backcountry Access Tag, the BAC, the location of the marked winter trails and some familiarity with the Cypress Mountain base area. Without such knowledge, a visitor would likely first learn about the need for a Backcountry Access Tag from Cypress Mountain staff at the access gate by the Cypress Creek Lodge. With the poor directional signs, backtracking to the Black Mountain Lodge becomes an exercise in frustration, spoiling what should be an enjoyable day.

The following are our observations and feedback on the signage encountered during a trip to Cypress Provincial Park on December 20, 2016:

- The first sign observed regarding the Backcountry Access Tag was a sign on the right hand side of the entrance to the Cypress Creek Lodge parking lot. It is a yellow sign, with Backcountry Pass & Washroom in black letters and an arrow pointing in the direction of the Black Mountain Lodge. The sign is located below a large Cypress Mountain welcome sign. Unless a visitor knows where to look, the sign is easy to miss. The sign is overshadowed by the Cypress Mountain sign and is located beside a busy intersection where Cypress Mountain staff are directing pedestrians, vehicles and buses traveling in multiple directions. Two large overhead signs along the road to Parking Lot 1 would help direct visitors to the Black Mountain Lodge. The first sign could be posted between Parking Lots 2 and 3A, followed by a second sign between Parking Lots 2 and 1.
- The next sign observed was a sandwich board sign positioned in front of the Black Mountain Lodge. The sign directs visitors inside to pick up the Backcountry Pass. Since there are two entrances to the Lodge, a sign at each entrance with appropriate directions to the Brown Bag Room would help. The outside signs use the term, “Backcountry Pass”, while the BC Parks website and indoors signs use the term, “Backcountry Access Tag”. Consistency in labels would avoid possible confusion.
- Inside the Brown Bag Room, there is a roll of Backcountry Passes and a collection of wordy signs in English. The only maps are a large Cypress Mountain map of the Hollyburn Mountain snowshoe trail network and a BC Parks map on an 8 ½” x 11” sheet of paper in a plastic sleeve. Both are wall mounted. Although the BAC and the two BC Parks winter trails are marked on the BC Parks map, the information is insufficient to orient the visitor to the BAC, the Black Mountain Lodge, the Cypress Creek Lodge or the winter trailhead. In addition, the trails depicted are inaccurate. For example, the Bowen Lookout trail has switchbacks, which are not shown on the map.
- There are too many signs in the Brown Bag Room, with repetitive information. The sense one has is that signs were added over time to address missing information or provide

clarification. Even after studying the signs and maps, a visitor would still be uncertain about the location of the BAC and winter trailhead. Without prior knowledge of how the BAC is marked or where the BAC is located, visitors leaving the Black Mountain Lodge would not know that they should look for green markers with “BAC” on them or in which direction to go.

- The Brown Bag Room should have a large map of the Cypress Mountain base area, showing the location of the BAC and the winter trailhead in relation to the Black Mountain Lodge, the Cypress Creek Lodge and the Eagle Express Lift. The location of the first BAC marker should also be shown on the map, along with a sample BAC marker. If the map were available on the BC Parks website, it could be referenced on visitors’ handheld devices as they make their way to the trailhead. Pictograms would be preferable for the signage to the lodge, to the BAC and through the BAC, as such signs are easier to follow, particularly for visitors with limited to no English. See for example the pictograms used by Parks Canada, in the Spray River Winter Trails brochure, which can be found at the following link: <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/banff/visit/brochures.aspx>
- The signage should allow non-English speaking/reading visitors to figure out what is required and where to go to access the winter trails. A wall-mounted monitor inside the Brown Bag Room with a multi-media / PowerPoint presentation that relies more on images and maps than words would be more effective to convey information to park visitors, particularly non-English speaking/reading visitors. Also, given the range of winter backcountry experience and skills of visitors, the presentation should remind visitors about the essentials for backcountry travel. The presentation should be available on the BC Parks website for easy reference on handheld devices.
- On leaving the Black Mountain Lodge, the first green BAC marker encountered was just past the yellow sign described earlier. This was followed by two more green BAC markers along the walkway, leading to the Cypress Creek Lodge, on the right side of the Lodge parking lot. There were many distractions in front of the Lodge, with competing signs, people and activities making it difficult to spot the next BAC marker. A search located it at about the mid-point of the Cypress Creek Lodge. The marker was hard to see because it was facing the Olympic rings, not the visitor. There were no more BAC markers until well passed the Cypress Creek Lodge. Without knowledge of the location of the winter trailhead, a visitor would not have known where to go. The next BAC marker was barely visible. It was posted near the mid-point of the small stand of trees, just past the access road linking the Black Mountain and Strachan Mountain downhill areas. The marker was facing the Eagle Express Lift, not the visitor, making it difficult to spot. Two or three more green BAC markers guided visitors to the winter trailhead.
- Many more green BAC markers are required to guide visitors through the BAC. The green BAC markers would be more visible if there were two green markers on each bamboo pole, facing in opposite directions so that visitors can see the face of the markers coming and going from the trailhead.
- Directional signs are also needed to locate the winter trailhead and backcountry. Without better signage, park visitors are left to guess what they need to do and where they need to go to access the backcountry. FMCBC members have reported that backcountry users new to

the area have asked them for directions to find the trails and usually are unaware that they need Backcountry Access Tags or where to find them.

- Although there is a BC Park kiosk located near the First Aid Patrol Station, the information is insufficient to guide park visitors. The 8½” x 11” BC Parks map described earlier was posted but as noted previously, it is too general to be helpful.

Responsibility for Signage

According to paragraphs 3.062 and 3.064 of the Park Use Permit, the BAC markers, their installation and the monitoring of the BAC are the responsibility of BC Parks. Paragraph 3.062 requires the Province to install and maintain poles and markers to delineate the BAC “in a manner acceptable to” Cypress Mountain, “having regard to safe passage along such corridors and minimal interference with General Operations”. From the observations made on December 20, the General Operations of Cypress Mountain appear to take precedence over the safe and efficient passage of park visitors through the BAC because visitors are left to guess where they need to go. While the BAC markers are supplied by BC Parks, it appears their installation has been delegated or contracted to Cypress Mountain. It is unclear whether Cypress Mountain is contracted or delegated as CRA operator, whose primary interest is the paying downhill pass holders, or as Park Facility Operator, whose focus should be park visitors, park facilities and services. It is also unclear whether performance standards or directions have been specified in the contract or delegation. The haphazard positioning of the signs suggests performance standards or directions are either not specified or not enforced. Without improved signage, it is difficult for park visitors to be compliant with the BAC instructions.

Lot 3B Signs

There is one sign at the west end of Parking Lot 3B with a request for vehicles to park facing the sign. That sign is not very high and is often covered by snow.

Given Cypress Mountain’s complaints about vehicles left overnight at Lot 3B, it would be helpful to have more visible signs at Lot 3B, with instructions on how people should park vehicles to optimize the number of vehicles that can be parked in Lot 3B and to allow snow removal. Furthermore, the BC Parks and Cypress Mountain websites could add information about where to park for various activities and how to park in each lot.

Backcountry Signs

Proper signage is critical for effective risk management. Proper signage allows park visitors to make informed decisions about trails and terrain, given their skills, experience, risk tolerance and current conditions. Parks Canada’s avalanche terrain classification and avalanche terrain exposure scale for Mountain National Parks provides a classification system, which is available at the following link: <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/bc/glacier/visit/visit7a1.aspx>. Parks Canada provides both a technical and public communications model, which are designed to assist backcountry users to make informed decisions about their intended route, by measuring their skills, experience and risk tolerance against the terrain through which they will travel.

Although BC Parks does not recommend use of the Howe Sound Crest (HSC) trail in winter, the lack of proper backcountry signage ignores the fact that the HSC trail and other backcountry areas are used in winter, not only by experienced backcountry users, but those that blindly follow tracks, lack knowledge of the terrain, are unprepared for the backcountry, and have limited or no skills, experience and equipment to navigate avalanche terrain and to self-rescue. While visitors can always choose to ignore signs, reasonable efforts can and should be made to inform those visitors that look for guidance about possible risks and hazardous terrain. Proper signage at the winter trailhead, trail junctions (for example, where the HSC trail branches off from the Bowen Look Out trail) and other strategic access points would inform visitors about the terrain and remind them that they are recreating in the area at their own risk and must be prepared for self-rescue. An example of a sign that helps the backcountry user make an informed decision about the terrain being accessed are the signs developed for the 21 Mile Creek/Rainbow Lake area by Scott Nelson (FMCBC) (see image on next page). The sign provides information about the nature of the terrain, exposure risks, approximate distances, and other relevant information.

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FMCBC Sign developed for the 21 Mile Creek/Rainbow Lake area in Sea to Sky Corridor